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CULTIVATE

by

KATIE KEARNS

Under the Direction of Jessica Jones, MFA

ABSTRACT

Our surroundings are integral facets in the makeup of identity. Living spaces become curations of personality that simultaneously hold and comfort their creator. Just as one can cultivate a garden to ensure healthy and abundant growth, it is equally valuable to apply that same approach to the places where we spend most of our time. *Cultivate* explores this relationship between self and space by reimagining domestic objects as expressions and outcomes of human experience. Within the exhibition the viewer is confronted with objects often seen as intimate and personal. To be invited into someone's environment gives us the chance to understand and relate to the nuances of their lives.

INDEX WORDS: Queer, Gender identity, Lesbian, Tomboy, Non-binary, LGBTQIA+, Seeds, Flowers, Dandelions, Gardens, The domestic, Bedroom, Bed, Living room, Furniture, Surreal, Surrealism, Realism, Trompe l'oeil, Construction, Material, Identity, Community, Environment

CULTIVATE

by

KATIE KEARNS

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

2023

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2023

CULTIVATE

by

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Office of Academic Assistance

College of the Arts

Georgia State University

May 2023

DEDICATION

I would firstly like to dedicate this work to LGBTQIA+ community. I hope it allows you to feel seen and helps you to rediscover all the beauty amongst the chaos of our world.

Secondly, to all of those who have allowed me to feel seen and helped me to rediscover all the beauty in this world.

To my family – I wouldn't be where I am today without your unconditional love, direction, and encouragement. You have instilled hard work and humility in me that I trust will continue to carry me far.

To Katie Swango – My best friend of 16 years. You have been there for every accomplishment, every heartbreak, every move in my nomadic life. Thank you for continuously being an open ear, a great big hug, and a genuine laugh for the better half of my life.

To my MFA cohort – It has been a wild ride, but I am forever grateful to have done it by your side. I have learned so much from you all and have wonderful memories that will last me a lifetime.

And last but not least – To Em. Your acceptance, understanding, support, pride and love this past year has encouraged me to be the best version of myself, even when I didn't want to be. I know this work would not be what it is if it weren't for you by my side.

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I would also like to extend my gratitude to former ceramics instructors at Louisiana State University and Florida Atlantic University. Andy Shaw, your level of genuine compassion and immense knowledge introduced ways of being an artist that I previously didn't know possible. Thank you to Joe Bova for instilling hard work and craftsmanship and fostering a sense of community at FAU that had previously felt lost.

Thank you to the Morean Center for Clay for giving me a place to land, and for forcing me to fly. The many people I crossed paths with during my time that changed my life, and inspired my growth, not only as an artist.

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1 INTRODUCTION

There are so many factors that mold us into the people we become. The forces of nature and nurture often work in tandem, but how much is left in our own hands to decide? For much of my life I was devastatingly shy, filled with so much anxiety that I would go days without speaking at school. As a kid I was innately tomboyish; long cargo shorts, oversized t-shirts and an eagerness for sports and getting dirty. But once faced with the puberty-filled halls of middle school, I felt forced to conform to the heteronormative restraints of young womanhood.

As so often goes, the freedom of college allowed me to come to terms with what I had known since elementary school. Or at least a facet of it: that I wanted to date women. After so many years of anxious repression and incompatible relationships, I felt as if I was given a second chance at life, and I was adamant about living it as my truest self.

At the start of 2020 I truly felt like I was in my prime. I just turned 30, had been openly lesbian for several years, and was coming to realize that the situations that previously seemed like failures, had instead led me to exactly where I needed to be: Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I was balancing my time as baker, gardener, and post-baccalaureate student at LSU, and although I was busy, and honestly still quite poor, I was genuinely happy.

When COVID abruptly forced us all to reassess our lives, I felt fortunate that I was still able to spend my days in the lush, exotic gardens. I would send my partner photos of a “Flower a Day” to boost morale and a constant supply of fresh bouquets filled my house. In a time of chaos and uncertainty, I was grounded by the life that continued to thrive around me.

What better time to start graduate school than in the middle of a pandemic?! I had just accepted my offer to GSU when lockdown began. No one could anticipate how long it would last, but knowing I had a direction gave me purpose. Adapting to online learning and the

isolation of a new, but inaccessible city, had its own unique set of stressors, but my time in those gardens continued to be a source of meditation and a reminder of how beneficial flora is to my mental wellbeing.

As we pass the three-year mark since COVID began, it is evident how much the world has changed. While I can rejoice in the resolutions and progress our society has made, I am continuously enraged by the growing divide perpetuated by conservative extremist regulations. As bills and bans continue to stack heavily against the LGBTQIA+ community I am reminded of how I gave myself a second chance at life. Each time I look in the mirror, I see the person my elementary-school-self wanted to be. The confidence and pride I feel in that person, who I was afraid could never exist, gives me the reassurance that it is possible to build the life I want for myself. That I, and every person within the spectrum of queerness, deserves a life in which they can thrive.

2 THE SEED

Deep inside us all are innate traits that can play an unavoidable role in our identity. For some it can be as harmless as being left-handed, while for others it is as controversial as being attracted to the same sex. Each of these characteristics can be symbolized as a seed and what we do with these seeds determines the unique person we become. Do you plant it? What if everyone tells you your seed is poisonous? Does your rebellious curiosity tell you to test it out anyways or bury it in the depths of your uninhabitable closet? Naïve of us to think that those resolute, unwanted seeds will not find a crack in our floorboards, and with a little help from a discarded wet towel, begin to sprout.

The innocent, carefree attitudes of children allow them to be exemplary models of the exploratory personality-horticulturist. Their pockets are full of seeds; they are eating them,

throwing them, running so fast that they are scattering them all over the ground without even noticing. When they find a seed that holds their attention, they don't hesitate to plant it. Inevitably there are seeds that don't get enough attention and wither away, but the excitement lies in the deep pockets of possibility.

My childhood was a combination of soccer fields and beaches, Girl Scout camping trips and bike rides to friends' houses. Growing up in the then quiet, suburban city of St. Petersburg, Florida catered to my adventurous, tomboy persona. Fueled by year-round sunshine, most of my days were spent outside where boys and girls alike were exploring and getting dirty. I was too distracted to notice my sprouting seed. At that point none of us thought twice about personal identity or the opinions of others. We were flourishing.

Behavioral studies show that children begin to respond strongly to social norms around the age of eight years old. These norms shape our behavior by changing our social expectations. Beginning to understand what is regulated as right or wrong brings a cognizance to how your behavior compares to others. Descriptive norms reinforce that individuals only want to conform *on the condition* that most other people also perform the behavior. Especially within the vulnerability of realizing that you're required to create your own identity, no child wants to be seen as an outcast. My peers and I had always felt like equals, but towards the end of elementary school it was becoming increasingly apparent that my growing seedling was a different variety than everyone else's.

What I can now confidently diagnose as internalized heterosexism,¹ perpetuated an immense amount of fear and anxiety for adolescent me. At this point I don't think my queerness was as obvious as it was in elementary school, but I had built up so many conspiracies in my head that I chose to isolate myself from my peers, despite not actually being bullied. For years I stomped on that seedling. I hid it in dark school hallways and the back of classrooms. I trimmed it to look more like close female friendships and heteronormative desires. The early 2000's was still such a time of anti-gay prejudice, that even curiously attending a Gay-Straight Alliance meeting in high school was unfathomable to me.

By college, I was aware of my attraction to other girls. I played into the experimental college phase trope, but still didn't feel comfortable labeling myself as anything other than that. As time passed and I found myself 5 years into a heterosexual relationship, I knew my life would go one of two ways: I would end up married, unhappy, and eventually divorced. Or I would leave it all. The house we shared with our three dogs, the town I had lived in since I began college 7 years prior and all the friends I had made along the way. For so long the anticipation of making this decision had built up inside of me that one day I just exploded into a sea of tears. But as those tears dried, and the words came out of my mouth, I experienced a feeling I will never forget: true freedom.

Allowing myself the opportunity to start over completely altered my perspective on life and what I am capable of. I have worked incredibly hard to be able to follow my dreams, I have

¹ Zawn Villines and Medically Reviewed by Emelia Arquilla, DO, "What to Know about Internalized Homophobia," *Medical News Today*, last modified March 15, 2021, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/internalized-homophobia>. (Internalized) Heterosexism is the amended term for (Internalized) Homophobia. The word homophobia places emphasis on the irrational fears of an individual rather than the systems in place that affect a person's health. Heterosexism is a broader term that encompasses a range of behaviors such as overt hatred of non-heterosexual people, as well as more subtle biases, such as the belief in stereotypes based on sexual orientation.

accepted opportunities that took me out of my comfort zone, and I have had the self-worth to reject the things that don't feel right. When I look back on my life, and I acknowledge the treacherous path I took that seedling on, I can't help but feel an immense sense of gratitude for how strong its roots were.

3 I HOPE YOUR FLOWERS BLOOM

As a mostly confidently queer adult, I feel a responsibility to be the positive representation my younger self didn't have. With each bill or ban introduced against LGBTQIA+ youth in America, I am fraught with anger, confusion, and despair. How can my home state of Florida, the queerest place I have ever lived, approve laws as discriminatory as *Don't Say Gay*? The newly expanded bill, veiled as "Parental Rights in Education" now bans lessons on sexual orientation and gender identity in all grades, K-12, unless required by existing state standards or as part of reproductive health instructions, that students can choose not to take.² DeSantis-appointed Education Commissioner, Manny Diaz Jr., attempted to clarify by stating that "this rule basically says that we're sticking to the standards, and when you're talking about K through 12 instruction, all the way to 12th grade, these standards don't incorporate gender ideology or any of these theories in math, social studies, reading or anything else."³ Are these standards up to date with contemporary society? Aligning social studies and reading with math acts as a form of gas lighting that falsely represents education as something that should be rigid and strict. Social studies, the literal study of human society, should absolutely include every facet of culture and identity that exists today, whether some groups of people fail to recognize them as valid or not.

² Anthony Izaguirre and Brendan Farrington, "Florida expands 'Don't Say Gay'; House Oks anti-LGBTQ bills", *The Associated Press*, last modified April 19, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/desantis-florida-dont-say-gay-ban-684ed25a303f83208a89c556543183cb>

³ Andrew DeMillo, "Other states are copying Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' efforts," *The Associated Press*, last modified March 23, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/huckabee-sanders-desantis-dont-say-gay-lgbtq-702fd5dc9633a7c93432f582de51a5fb>

Regardless of the curriculum it regulates, critics argue that its vague terminology results in self-censorship from teachers and increased discrimination against LGBTQIA+ families.⁴

The idea of not even being able to utter the word “gay” throughout the entirety of grade school immediately draws me back to the painful repression I felt growing up. As a society we had come so far in the understanding and acceptance of sexuality and gender-identity, and now it feels as if we have taken an innumerable number of steps back. Conservatives throughout the country continue to introduce and pass their own sets of anti-LGBTQIA+ bills, perpetuating an extremist ideology that refuses to separate church from state or accept the validity of any reasoning outside of their own.

Just two months ago at the 2023 Conservative Political Action Conference [CPAC], Michael Knowles, a conservative news podcaster, declared in a speech that “For the good of society [...] transgenderism must be eradicated from public life entirely – the whole preposterous ideology, at every level.” It didn’t take long for news sources like Rolling Stone and The Daily Beast to draw attention to his genocidal remarks, which left Knowles back tracking on his words, despite the entire speech being caught on video. He later explained on his podcast that he merely meant the concept of “transgenderism” should be eradicated, attempting to differentiate that from Transgender people. Knowles believes that that erasure would lead to “behaving as American

⁴ Abbie E. Goldberg, “Impact of HB 1557 (Florida’s Don’t Say Gay Bill) on LGBTQ+ Parents in Florida,” *The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law*, January 2023: 2. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Dont-Say-Gay-Impact-Jan-2023.pdf>. “LGBTQ+ parents reported that their children had already experienced a variety of impacts of the bill. This included harassment and bullying at school because they had LGBTQ+ parents, not being able to talk about their parents or their own LGBTQ+ identities at school or outside of school, and fears about continuing to live in Florida. LGBTQ+ parents reported on their experiences over the 3–6 months prior to the survey in a variety of areas: Almost one-quarter feared harassment by neighbors because of their sexual orientation or gender identity or expression. Twenty-one percent of LGBTQ+ parents had been less out in their neighborhood, workplace, or community.”

society did before, say, 2015. Before 2015 we did not have any acceptance of Transgenderism in Public life.”⁵

A quick google search will show you that Transgender people have existed, been accepted, and in many cultures celebrated, around the world since ancient times. The entire spectrum of queerness has, for that matter. And deep down, people like Michael Knowles know that, just like they know the effects of fearmongering. Conservatives need to build an army, so they target a rural, evangelical audience that has been sheltered from much of societies progress on these issues. I have been lucky to have lived in many diverse cities, and it’s evident to me how the acceptance and respect of people with varying experiences is critical in creating a successful and harmonious world. Queer people will continue to exist despite the opinions of small-minded radicals, but perpetuating irrational fears like Knowles, DeSantis and the like do, will leave a lot more blood on their hands.

The series *I Hope Your Flowers Bloom* was created as a response to the flood of anti-LGBTQIA+ regulations that have been introduced within this last year. I could not go a single day on social media without a new discriminatory law being plastered to my feed. To mentally cope, I would find myself daydreaming about the month I spent in Ireland this past summer. It was June and so much of the country was in bloom. As we explored the Burren Region off the West Coast, an area marked by its abundant limestone formations, I was amazed at the amount of flora that precariously grew from the sheer rock. Back in Atlanta I began to recognize how many dandelions would find their way through cracks in the sidewalks and curbs, like an urban Burren.

⁵ Michael Knowles, host, “Fake News Must Be Eradicated from Public Life.” The Michael Knowles Show (podcast), March 6, 2023, accessed April 17, 2023, <https://soundcloud.com/michaelknowlesshow/ep1196>. Trigger Warning: Michael Knowles’s ignorance is difficult to listen to.

Before the invention of lawns, people would praise the golden blossoms and lion-toothed leaves of the dandelion as a bounty of food, medicine, and magic. For centuries dandelions were prescribed for every ailment from warts to the plague. Sores, rotting gums, depression and even dandruff, which we now realize are symptoms of vitamin deficiencies, were alleviated by the highly nutritious plant. Data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture revealed that dandelions have more vitamin A than spinach, more vitamin C than tomatoes, and are a powerhouse of iron, calcium, and potassium.⁶ What is more impressive is that they can exist anywhere. They are found throughout the entire northern hemisphere. They can grow from sea level to alpine elevations and tolerate every soil type.⁷ But now some people would rather inject their yards with toxic chemicals than look at another one.

The apparent correlations between the dandelion and queerness act as the catalyst for the *I Hope Your Flowers Bloom* series. The desire to eradicate both is fueled by misleading propaganda that solely benefit its creators: Conservative Republicans and Big Pesticide⁸. Despite all the actions and millions of dollars dedicated to these exterminatory actions, dandelions and queer people alike still find a way to shove their way through the gravel and cement, to exist in even the most barren of habitats.

Each fragmented environment within the series is a nod to my own personal queer experience. In the piece *Don't Say Gay* (Figure 3.1) the beach landscape, created with sand from

⁶ Anita Sanchez, *The Teeth of the Lion* (Newark, OH: McDonald & Woodard Publishing Co, 2006), 11.

⁷ Beata Olas, "New Perspectives on the Effect of Dandelion, Its Food Products and Other Preparations on the Cardiovascular System and Its Diseases," *National Library of Medicine*, last modified March 24, 2022, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9002813>

⁸ Pesticide Action Network (PAN). "Public Interest Group Outlines Influence of the "Big 6" Pesticide Manufacturers on Laws & Elections." Pesticide Action Network press release, December 21, 2011. <https://www.panna.org/press-release/pesticides-and-politics>, accessed March 12, 2023. In fact, large pesticide manufacturers lobby elected officials on a regular basis, paying them millions of dollars to help hide information that proves these products cause cancer, reproductive harm, developmental delays in children and water contamination. Conservative politics and corporate greed go hand-in-hand.

my hometown of St. Petersburg, FL, demonstrates an interaction between a group of adolescent dandelions and the threatening spikes of a sandspur patch. As a kid, the demise of many a beach trip was caused by getting one of those suckers lodged in my foot. Just the thought of walking barefoot through the dunes makes me cringe with anxiety. A feeling that (almost) equally represents my reaction to the Don't Say Gay law. Obviously, the sting of a sandspur in your foot is nowhere near an accurate representation of the threat this bill holds against Queer People in my home state, but aims to show the looming anxiety, that I, and so many others, feel about traversing its land, wary of an unexpected assault.



Figure 3.1: Katie Kearns, Don't Say Gay
Sand from my hometown of St. Petersburg, FL, foam, wood, hot glue, crepe paper, wire, paint.
24 x 24 x 6 inches. 2023.

The late First Lady and Environmental Activist, Lady Bird Johnson once said, “Where flowers bloom, so does hope.”⁹ The next two pieces in the series capture my own sense of hopefulness. In *I Gotta Take My Love Down to Baton Rouge* (Fig. 3.2), a thriving dandelion emerges from the foundation of a pink, corrugated steel wall, all covered in the sheen of what appears to be fresh rainfall. This scene takes me back to a pivotal time in my growth as a queer individual. When I moved to Baton Rouge in 2019, it was the first time since coming out as a lesbian, that I was truly living on my own. After the breakup with my long-term boyfriend, I moved back to my hometown where I stayed for four more years. I was so fortunate to have the support of my family and friends, but even though I was living on my own, there was still this innate desire to fit within certain expectations of the people that knew me. Baton Rouge offered me the freedom and community to openly explore myself and realign my identity. One of my many jobs there was working as a gardener. Within the land that I tended, there was a *secret garden*. Along a path shaded by the canopies of Candy Stripe Camellia trees, through an old wooden fence with an ornate door, the hidden plot was littered with fallen lemons and broken terra cotta planters, complete with an almost ephemeral, clear corrugated plastic greenhouse that glowed when the sun cast through it. And a two story, rusted pink, corrugated steel shed. This scene (fig. 3.3) encapsulated the beautiful, mystical abandon of Louisiana for me. I look back to this time with so much fondness and recognition of how it allowed me to be a more genuine representation of myself.

⁹ “Quotes” Lady Bird Johnson, accessed April 29, 2023, <http://www.ladybirdjohnson.org/quotes>.



Figure 3.2: Katie Kearns, I Gotta Send My Love Down to Baton Rouge
Corrugated steel panel, wood, foam, soil, resin, hot glue, crepe paper, wire, paint. 27 x 12 x 6 inches. 2023.



*Figure 3.3: View from the entrance of the "Secret Garden".
Baton Rouge, LA. 2020. Photo by Katie Kearns*

Brick by Brick (Fig. 3.4) brings me to my current state: living in Atlanta. Moving to a new city during a pandemic has been a challenge, only heightened by the stress and unpredictability of attending graduate school during a pandemic. As time went by, things opened a bit more, and I was able to interact in person with my cohort. I began to feel that same sense of support that I experienced in Baton Rouge. That, coupled with the COVID-spurred realization of how fickle life is, fueled my courage to explore my gender identity. Having to stare at myself for hours on a computer screen during online classes forced me to anxiously pick apart my appearance. I hated the way my shoulder length hair was beginning to look, and even though I had sported that style for most of my life, it no longer felt like me. So, I said, “fuck it” and with the support and scissor of my dear friend Cherylle Anne, cut it all off. Well, little by little. As the years have gone by, and my hair has gotten even shorter, I began to recognize myself more. I have embraced my more masculine side, while still honoring my feminine side when it feels right. The confidence I feel from being able to fluidly express my gender identity has fed into so many more aspects of my life. The faux brick façade of *Brick by Brick* depicts the multitudes of feelings I have towards my personal, queer growth in this time of my life.



Figure 3.4: Katie Kearns. Brick by Brick
Aqua Resin, foam, wood, hot glue, crepe paper, wire, paint. 28 x 24 x 8 inches. 2023.

The elevation of the wall is insinuated by the presence of a faded ghost sign, which is typically placed several feet up the wall for optimal visibility, yet the dandelion has still managed to find its way to exist at such great heights. At first glance the brick looks real, but as you travel around to the right side you see it is lifted from the flat surface to reveal layers of wood, foam,

and the brick façade no thicker than a few sheets of paper. This recognition is an example of how so many obstacles in our lives are based upon misinformation. Whether it is our brains telling us we are incapable of a being the people we are meant to be, or the laws created by conservative politicians attempting to regulate the lives of people they refuse to understand; when we give ourselves the chance to grow and learn, we realize that we can overcome so much.

4 IDENTITY : COMMUNITY : ENVIRONMENT

I lived in Baton Rouge for exactly one year: August 1, 2019 – August 1, 2020. This is the shortest I've lived in any one place, but I look back at it as one of the most impactful times in my life. The year prior, I was an Artist in Residence at the Morean Center for Clay, which just so happened to be in my hometown of St. Petersburg, FL. As a resident, I struggled to find my artistic voice. I had gone in making functional pottery decorated with hand-painted, geometric patterns and even though some of my fellow residents were successful sculptors, I believed I needed to make utilitarian work if I were going to be able to make a living off my art. I attempted to incorporate my interest in architectural themes, but ultimately the need for functionality weighed me down, and when application time rolled around, I wasn't accepted for another year.

I then had two months to create an entire solo exit show. I was determined to show them all what I was capable of. Knowing that my time in St. Pete was coming to an end, I decided to make my exit show inspired by the buildings that I grew up with, that now brought me a comforting sense of nostalgia. I threw out all my previous misconceptions of what my art should be and created an entirely sculptural exhibition. This series jumpstarted themes that I still carry in my work today and gave me a sense of direction as I nervously re-entered school as a ceramics Post Baccalaureate student at Louisiana State University.

Crossing the Louisiana border, I already felt like a new person. Although it had been my intention to prove my potential to those whom I didn't think believed in me, in creating that exit show I ultimately proved to myself that I am capable of anything I set my mind to. The heartbreak of being denied for a second year, was quickly washed away as Baton Rouge became exactly where I needed to be. It was here that I began to recognize the relationship between identity, environment, and community. Each element informs the other, building an entity that can almost feel superhuman. But even superhumans need to be tended to. This is where the thread of cultivation begins.

Deciding which factor comes first feels like the debate of the chicken or the egg. When I visualize the three concepts together, I imagine a balanced wheel, divided into sections; any unevenness resulting in a bumpy ride. At LSU, the identity I confidently held as an openly queer artist, was supported by a community of freethinkers who could understand and celebrate the nuances of sexuality and gender, and the importance of self-expression, whether through art, appearance, or both. School, which had for so long been a source of anxiety, was now the environment where I felt most comfortable. These notions were only strengthened when COVID came. When we were forced out of our studios at school, the garden became my primary environment. As I would pluck the dying leaves or pull the invasive weeds, it was easy to align myself with the vegetation. How it was just as important to pluck and pull the things robbing me from living my best life. Being surrounded by this abundant flora demonstrated how even in the darkest and most uncertain of days, there is still so much beauty and life around us.

It became evident that this superhuman entity is simply well-balanced mental health. Psychotherapist, Author, and self-proclaimed Highly Sensitive Introvert, April Snow, explains that the most impactful factors to our mental health are Aesthetics, Sensory, People, Culture and

Values, and Familiarity.¹⁰ Each of those elements can be funneled into the categories of Identity, Community or Environment. As COVID continued longer than anyone could have ever imagined, I became more intentional with how I nurtured my mental health. Anxiety and Depression had ebbed and flowed through my entire life, but now in a time that was so unpredictable, I was adamant about having those emotions under control. I kept my home tidy and organized to invoke a sense of calm. I surrounded myself with meaningful objects like art or mementos from friends, colorful plants, and fragrant flowers. I opted for natural light instead of lamps as often as I could and made sure to catch as many sunsets as possible when I walked my dog. I'd take the long route home just to smell the blooming gardenias or to sneak a peek at species I'd never seen before, like the Flowering Maple or endless varieties of Ginger. My ceramics cohorts were my "Social Bubble"¹¹ and I made sure to call friends and family often. I was even able to maintain my artistic identity with a makeshift studio in my partner's backyard shed. To be honest, I really felt like I was thriving.

When I moved to Atlanta to start graduate school, I tried my best to maintain this lifestyle. I harmoniously filled my home with art and mementos from friends. I made bouquets from assorted Trader Joes flowers as often as I could afford. I found parks and trails to take my dog. I was making art that continuously challenged me. But life was never the same as it was in Baton Rouge. The stress of grad school, a now long-distance relationship and the still persistent COVID, made any type of emotional balance almost unattainable. We might as well throw in the

¹⁰ Sara Lindberg, M.Ed., Medically reviewed by Akeem Marsh, MD, "How Does Your Environment Affect Your Mental Health?", last modified March 23, 2023, <https://www.verywellmind.com/how-your-environment-affects-your-mental-health-5093687>

¹¹ Jason Howland, "Create a social bubble, stay safe over the holidays", last modified November 5, 2020, <https://newsnetwork.mayoclinic.org/discussion/create-a-social-bubble-stay-safe-over-the-holidays/>. A social bubble refers to having a small, clearly defined group of people that agree to limit their close social contacts to only those within the bubble. Everyone is aware they are part of the bubble, and they agree to minimize social contact with people outside of the bubble.

tumultuous US government, the bevy of anti-LGBTQIA+ legislations, and attempting to be a good friend and family member, into the mix. After just two years, I was emotionally exhausted. We all were. But I knew Ireland was coming.

The summer before this thesis year, our third-year cohort spent a month together in Ireland. An international vacation veiled as an artist residency, all on the school's dime: what more could I ask for?! It was impossible to even fathom what to expect for such rare and peculiar circumstances. But I think Ireland saved me. Not that I was planning on doing anything drastic, but I undoubtedly felt lost. Ireland gave me a sense of direction. Ireland was slow and lush. Full of excitement and discovery. Love and self-exploration. Ireland was Baton Rouge. At least just a piece of it; A reminder of what's important. A seed.

5 CULTIVATE

I came back to school in the Fall with that seed in my pocket, unsure of what it would become. I knew I wanted to base my thesis around the development and acceptance of my queer identity, but attempting to tell that story before all the characters, the artwork, existed, was difficult. We traverse so many paths in life that lead us to where we are today, it can be daunting trying to decide which ones feel most important. I found myself scrolling through the "flowers" album in my phone for any semblance of inspiration when I stumbled upon a photo from March 1, 2022 (Fig. 5.1). The image is a bouquet that my partner had sent me on Valentine's Day, three weeks prior. I recalled taking the photo of the dying bouquet, admiring how beautiful the flowers still were, despite their decay. As I looked back at that photo, my partner was now my ex, having broken up just weeks before Ireland. It had been a few months at that point, but my heart still immediately sank at the thought of her. We both moved on to new relationships and were no longer talking to each other, which carried its own set of emotions. My new relationship showed

me the ways in which my ex and I were incompatible, but she still held some of my fondest Baton Rouge memories. She was my biggest support and confidant my first two years of grad school. Missing someone and knowing you're not right for each other isn't mutually exclusive.



Figure 5.1: Bouquet of dying flowers.
Photo by Katie Kearns, 2022.

Creating *Weight on My Chest (of Drawers)* (Fig. 5.2) acted as therapy as I simultaneously worked through the lingering emotions of that breakup. The piece depicts the façade of a tall, slender wooden dresser that just barely reaches the height of my chest as it buckles under the weight of a dying bouquet. The flowers, made from distressed crepe paper and wire, limply dangle off the rim of a clear glass vase, evidently depleted of the last of its moldy water. The absurdity of these delicate objects collapsing a wooden structure emphasizes the hold

relationships, romantic or otherwise, can have on us. I found it important that the structure still retain a sense of composure, not to deny the emotions of heartbreak, but rather to demonstrate that even in our softest moments we can have the strength to work through it. Each unsuccessful relationship I have come out on the other side of has shown me that I still hold all of the elements necessary to flourish. As you approach the dresser you are able to peek into the bottom drawer, left partly opened. Full of fresh soil, it encourages us to try again. To plant a new seed.



Figure 5.2: Katie Kearns. Weight on My Chest (of Drawers).
Aqua Resin, foam, wood, found glass vase, crepe paper, wire, paint. 58 x 18 x 18 inches. 2022.

This work directed my focus to the domestic objects that reside in the spaces we spend much of our time. Our intimate and personal spaces tend to be accurate reflections of our personalities as we interact with and in them throughout our lives. Bedrooms can be the one place where we are able to close our door to the rest of the world and express our truest selves. They also house our most important and personal piece of furniture. The comfort of our bed offers us rest when we're tired, consoles us when we're upset, supports us when we're unsure. It experiences every nightmare and dream come true. It encourages self-care and welcomes lovers with open arms. It lays the groundwork for us to start each day on our best foot. Our beds experience so much of our mental and physical growth, but still manages to cradle our everchanging forms.

In the ancient marble sculpture *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* (Fig. 5.3), the listless figure lay strewn across an enticingly soft, tufted mattress that was quite literally made for them¹². The mythological Hermaphroditus, offspring of Aphrodite and Hermes, possesses both male and female features, making them¹³ one of the earliest depictions of existing beyond the gender binary. Numerous iterations of Hermaphroditus found in Hellenistic artifacts points to a destabilization of sex and gender polarities that stretches far back into antiquity.¹⁴ “The divine Hermaphroditus is worshipped precisely because s/he is seen for what s/he is, neither male nor female, nor indeed a body in the process of alteration, but a fusion of both sexes.”¹⁵ In a more

¹² R.J. Barrow, *Gender, Identity and The Body in Greek and Roman Sculpture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.) 82. “The Sleeping Hermaphrodite is only known through Roman copies of a Greek original that likely dates back to 100/200 BC. The copy on display at the Louvre in Paris was unearthed in the grounds of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome around 1608. In 1620 Gian Lorenzo Bernini carved the marble mattress upon which the figure now rests.

¹³ “Gendered Pronouns and Singular “They” Purdue University Online Writing Lab, accessed April 19, 2023, https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/pronouns/gendered_pronouns_and_singular_they.html. I refer to the figure of Hermaphroditus using “they/them/their(s)” pronouns as they do not fall into the gender binary. The use of “s/he” in text is outdated and can be seen as disrespectful, even when speaking of a mythological being.

¹⁴ Barrow, 79.

¹⁵ Barrow, 82.

contemporary context, philosopher and gender studies writer Judith Butler, seemingly agrees by suggesting that instead of seeing transgender as a decision that results in either male or female, it is possible to resist gendered and sexual categorization and recognize the transition itself as a new, fluid identity.¹⁶ These thoughts resonated with me as I examine my own gender identity. I have both celebrated and despised the masculine and feminine facets of my persona so much that

I find it impractical to choose one over the other.



Figure 5.3: Sleeping Hermaphroditus
Front view. Carved marble. Louvre, Paris (Inv. MR 220). Photo by: Erich Lessing/ Art Resource, NY.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 57-74.



Figure 5.4: Sleeping Hermaphroditus

Front view (detail). Carved marble. Louvre, Paris (Inv. MR 220). Photo by: Erich Lessing/ Art Resource, NY.

When I first saw images of the Louvre's copy of *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*, I found myself most drawn to their peaceful expression (Fig. 5.4) and unbothered body language. It seems evident that they lived a life without threat to their non-traditional existence. Bernini's delicately voluminous mattress and pillow contour to the figure so effortlessly that it is easy to question if they are actually carved from marble. It left me contemplating the creation of personalized objects intended to cradle their owner.

In the piece *Sleeping Enby/ (Nightshade Plastisexum)* (Fig. 5.5) I recontextualize Bernini's mattress as a way of empowering my own gender identity. In my iteration, the figure is removed, revealing an indentation in the mattress of where it once lay. The depression implies a period of transition; that, even though the mattress supported the figure long enough for it to leave a mark, allows them to still be able to remove themselves from this place of comfort to

discover something new. In its stead emerge numerous flowering plants: *Solanum Platisexum*. Derived from the Greek “plastikos/plasticos/plasticus” for “able to be molded, changeable”) and the Latin “sexus” for sex, this recently discovered variety of nightshade exhibits elements of all three possible breeding systems for plants. The name is not just a reflection of its diversity of sexual forms but is also a recognition that this species could prove to be a model for the sort of sexual fluidity that is present throughout the plant kingdom. It evidences that attempting to recognize “normative” sexual conditions amongst the planet’s living creatures is problematic. “When considering the scope of life on Earth, the notion of a constant sexual binary consisting of distinct and disconnected forms is, fundamentally, a fallacy.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Angela J. McDonnell, Heather B. Wetreich, Jason T. Cantley, Peter Jobson and Christopher T. Martine, “*Solanum Platisexum*: An Enigmatic New Bush Tomato from the Australian Monsoon Tropics exhibiting breeding system fluidity,” *PhytoKeys*, 124 (2019): 49-52, <https://doi.org/10.3897/phytokeys.124.33526>. *S. Platisexum* exhibits multiple reproductive phenotypes, with solitary perfect flowers, a few staminate flowers or with cymes composed of a basal hermaphrodite and an extended rachis of several to many staminate flowers.



Figure 5.5: Katie Kearns, Sleeping Enby/(Solanum Plastisexum). Aqua Resin, foam, fabric, Apoxie Sculpt, Crepe Paper, Wire, Paint, Soil. 75 x 55 x 18 inches. 2023.

The multiple flowering *Solanum* sprouting from a bed designed for humans (or mythical beings) become a representation of sexual diversity throughout the entirety of natural life. If one can understand the multitudes of identity and function for a plant, it shouldn't be so difficult to imagine for humans as well. The mattress, which rests atop a bed of soil, proves the importance of a supportive environment to the development of all species, despite the complexity of personal needs. The piece as a whole emits a sense of calm, much like laying in a quiet garden bed,

inviting the viewer to contemplate the nuances of sexuality while investigating their own needs and desires.

6 CONSTRUCT

I imagine the living room as an inverse of the bedroom. Ever since I was a kid, the idea of hanging out in my room during the day just felt lonely and depressing. I'm not sure if it's because I spent so much time alone at school, but once I got home, I wouldn't leave the living room until it was time to go to bed. In both my home in Baton Rouge and my current house in Atlanta, natural light will dance along the walls as it fights its way through the wind-fluttered foliage outside. Shades of amber fade in and out as the sun makes its way across the sky, traveling from room to room in an almost sundial fashion. The light creates an aura of life, even when no one else is around. Along the main wall of my current living room, we created a salon-style gallery of art, comprised mostly of works made by friends, that gives the space an innate, warmhearted sense of community. This room has hosted game nights, dinner parties and sleepovers. Watching movies cuddled on the couch with my partner and hours of studying with a dog asleep on either side of me.

As I contemplated the layout of my thesis exhibition, I wanted to play on the idea of the bedroom and living room as opposing forces, as different as night and day. With *Weight on My Chest (of Drawers)* and *Sleeping Enby* alluding to a bedroom scene, I needed something that could represent the living room with equal magnitude. The couch felt like an obvious choice. It shares many commonalities with that of the bed but seems to lack the same sense of ownership. It can be shared with numerous people in numerous circumstances, without the same trepidations one might feel towards the personal boundaries of a bed. It can have its own personality and distinct form. The couches I have in my living room now are elegant red and gold Victorian with

intricately carved wood details. My roommate found them at a thrift store when searching for seating to have in the photography area of her wedding. They're creaky and well worn, but for me, it was love at first site.

I grew up watching *This Old House* and *Bob Vila's Home Again*, instilling an appreciation for restoration and antiques at an early age. In the 2000's, HGTV and TLC were my go-to channels. When *Trading Spaces* premiered, I was immediately drawn to the carpenter, Ty Pennington. I remember blabbering about how *hot* he was, but in hindsight I really just wanted to be like him. My dad has always been quite handy and taught me so much of what I know about tools, but I could sense his hesitation when I would offer to help with projects around the house. I knew I was just a kid, but I often wondered that if I were a boy, would he still feel apprehensive to let me try new tools or insist on doing it himself? I just wanted the chance to learn.

As my confidence in my abilities and in my identity have grown in tandem, I realize that many of my desires are based in the reclamation of my younger self to achieve what I was discouraged to do back then. This notion isn't meant to ridicule my dad, but rather our society that perpetuates these gender norms. When I went home this past Christmas, He and I watched several episodes of the *This Old House Makers Channel* which follows several different designers and artists, each having their own channel, as they create in their studios. One of the makers we stumbled upon was Laura Kampf, who I had actually been following on Instagram for years, not realizing she was on this show. Kampf is an ingenious craftswoman, who repurposes materials in a way that usually leaves me baffled. As she confidently traverses her workshop in effortlessly androgenous attire, I unconsciously exclaim "I want to be like her!". Making that admission in front of my parents made me a little nervous, like it was a preposterous idea that I could live a life as unabashedly masculine and empowered as hers. But it also felt like giving

myself permission and accountability to construct the things that I didn't believe I could. As we watched one last episode, she showed us all the tips and tricks of kerf bending – a process I had never seen before.

When I got back into the studio after the holidays, I sat down on a tiny couch I had started building and just knew that it didn't feel right. I thought back to the “bedroom” pieces, focusing on the aspects that helped them emit a sense of emotion. Recognizing that they both possessed elements of sinking, I realized what I needed. The new love I had been cultivating was the healthiest I had ever experienced. I felt so well supported and understood. Just the thought of it made me feel like I was floating. It still does. I wanted to be able to convey that feeling in a functional piece of furniture that people could experience.

Rollercoaster of Love(seat) (Fig. 6.1) is an arched loveseat that elevates the sitter to a height that allows their feet to dangle. Taking what I learned from my (future) pal Laura Kampf, and a bit of trial and error, I was able to utilize the kerf bending technique to create two, 9-foot long, wooden arches that would become the supports of the couch. From there, I let intuition carry me through the rest of the build, intentionally leaving parts of the construction materials exposed as a symbol of the deconstruction of gender norms. Inspired by the Victorian couches in my living room, I used Great Stuff expanding insulation foam to create faux-tufted cushions pinned with black, metal screws. Elements of Trompe l'oeil continue throughout the piece as apparent carved wood details intricately allude to themes of queerness. The use of life-cast hands within these details creates a surreal sense of intimacy that also symmetrically balances the ornamentation of the piece. On both arms of the couch opposing hands grasps identical “carved” bouquets of queer-coded flowers (fig. 6.2). Lavender for homosexuality, violets for lesbianism,

roses for transgender people¹⁸, dandelions for queerness, and gardenias for unity and love¹⁹. These bouquets, as well as the exaggerated length of the traditionally made-for-two loveseat, celebrate the importance of community, especially for queer people. Altogether, *Rollercoaster of Love(seat)* exemplifies the necessity of queer people to construct the elements of our lives, like identity and community, as they can often be inaccessible in a heteronormative world.

¹⁸ Sarah Bancroft, “Queer Floriography: The secret symbolism of flowers and pride” accessed April 29, 2023, <https://www.fleursdevilles.com/post/queer-floriography-the-secret-symbolism-of-flowers-and-pride>. Originally used to symbolize unmanly interests during the time of the Industrial Revolution, lavender has now been reclaimed by homosexuals and used to directly associate something with homosexuality. The symbolism of the violets for lesbianism originates from the Greek Goddess Sapho, who was said to have frequently used violets in her love poems to women. Because roses are a symbol of mourning, and transgender people are murdered at a disproportionate rate, the phrase “give us our roses while we are still here” has been adopted by the trans community.

¹⁹ Dani Rhys, “Gardenia symbolism and meaning,” accessed April 29, 2023, <https://symbolsage.com/gardenia-meaning-and-symbolism/>. “The gardenia is seen as a symbol of unity and strength. During Victorian times, when feelings of the heart weren’t often expressed out loud, gardenias were used to express admiration without revealing ones identity.”



Figure 6.1: Katie Kearns, Rollercoaster of Love(seat).
Foam, wood, Aqua Resin, Apoxie Sculpt, paint. 108 x 52 x 24 inches. 2023.



Figure 6.2: Katie Kearns, Rollercoaster of Love(seat), detail.

Accompanying the loveseat is an elongated representation of the gardenia bush that lay perfectly framed within the large picture window of my living room. The fragrant flowers have many times brought me a sense of serenity or hope as I navigated the hardships of COVID and grad school. It has been a privilege to be able to observe their immense growth from the comfort of my living room. *Tell Me You Love Me* (Fig.6.3) was designed to yet again balance elements of construction with realism, this time as an implication to the duality of gender, and how one can find equilibrium between the tough and delicate aspects of our personalities. Pulling from the symbolism of Victorian era as nod to the couches that inspired *Rollercoaster of Love(seat)*, in a time where feelings of the heart weren't often expressed out loud, gardenias were used to convey

secret admiration. In queer romance, secrecy can often be used as protection, either from the discrimination, or to save from embarrassment if the sexuality of your crush could potentially not lean in your favor. Whichever your association with the flower, the piece is intended to entice the viewer with subtle fragrances and convincingly real paper flowers, giving them the chance to stop and appreciate the beauty of life.



Figure 6.3: Katie Kearns, Tell Me You Love Me, detail.
Wood, Aqua Resin, Cement, Home Depot Buckets, Hot Glue, Crepe Paper, Wire, Paint.
96 x 65 x 12 inches. 2023.

7 CONCLUSION

The forces of nature and nurture are at play in shaping who we become but the seeds of our identity are planted deep within, and it is up to us to decide which attributes to cultivate. My journey through repression, self-acceptance and pride has shown me the importance of being true to myself, and how that acceptance leads to a future without bounds. We come to realize that our identities are shaped by the community and environments around us, and life is about finding the balance of all three.

Creating furniture allowed me to question our perceptions of the world, and the effects of our interactions in and out of the home. Highlighting the duality of delicacy and strength among different flowers makes us realize that we are all just small specs upon this earth, and that we should treat everyone with kindness, understanding and love so we all have the chance to thrive.

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