Queer in the Holler

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

My photographic work centers around the self and how identity is constructed through the concept of intersectionality: race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. Particularly, the work is about my own personal identity. I grew up in the “hollers” of West Virginia to a working class family whose primary income came from the coal industry. The imagery and text explores how I have come to my own contemporary understanding of my sexuality, gender performance (masculinity, specifically,) and work ethic is contrast to the traditional ideologies of my family.
Dedication

Dedicated to Papa Powers, Mom, Sergeant Rock, and Aunt Julie for the example of hard work and sharing the importance of education.

Also dedicated to Michelle, for diligently believing in the artwork and your unwavering encouragement.
Acknowledgments

Thank you to Robert Derr, my advisor, for all of the academic guidance. Thank you to the rest of my committee for pushing me to be a better artist. Thank you to Aspen Mays, Rebecca Harvey, and Alison Crocetta for being strong female artistic role models.
Vita

June 2007...............Franklin County High

2010....................A.A. Liberal Arts, Virginia Western Community College

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Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
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Chapter 1: Polaroid

I lost my favorite photograph of my mom.

A Polaroid. From the 80s.

She was dressed as a playboy bunny. Halloween.

It reminds me

That she was once the sinner

She thinks I am.
Chapter 2: Shit I’m Tired of Hearing About

Obama,
Guns,
Jesus,
Prayer requests,
Bein’ saved,
Bein’ a good Christian,
Bein’ blessed,
Sinnin’,
Coal,
Cum,
Pulling Out,
Dicks,
Fucking,
Anal,
Babies,
Money,
Military,
and
Making sandwiches.
Chapter 3: Words I am Tired of Hearing

Dyke,
Bitch,
Faggot,
Homo,
Lesbo,
Hick,
Hillbilly,
Incest,
White Trash,
Redneck,
Scissor Sister,
Carpet Muncher,
Bean Flicker,
Tranny,
He-She
Muff Diver,
Pervert
U-haulin’&
Turkey Bastin’
Chapter 4: After Loretta Lynn

I was born a coal miner’s gay daughter.
Chapter 5: Vile

Mom said she’s known people like me.

They are the most vile individuals she knows.
Chapter 6: Soft Butch

Dad watched me tie my bow tie after I put on a full suit.

He said I was the most beautiful daughter.
Chapter 7

The first thesis installation focused on several themes: family, labor, history, sexuality, landscape. I conveyed these themes on three walls, in a U shape style, and a vitrine than created the fourth wall. When a view enters the space they first encounter the vitrine. Inside of this vitrine were old family photographs from the 1980s and 1990s along with six ruby ambrotypes of my father’s and uncle’s coal mining helmets. This acted as a presentation of the past and gives context of where my family and I come from. On the furthest wall behind the vitrine were many photographs, set up in salon style, to reference the domestic nature of labor and family. The center piece was a vast landscape overlooking a creek. This piece is important to the exhibition and set up because it represents the importance and majesty of landscape to my community. The images that flank this landscape are depictions of working class labor by my mother and father and vast landscapes of a mountainous region, and portraits of lower class housing. The wall to the left of the exhibition is the shortest wall and featured two of the most important pieces; a portrait of my mother and a portrait of my father. I chose two separate portraits to show the lack of connection in their relationship. I printed the portrait of my father large to emphasize the importance of his relationship to the rest of the work, especially the work about labor and masculinity. The portrait of my mother is smaller because she plays a smaller role in my life. The fourth and final wall features the most important
aspect of the exhibition, a large portrait of my partner and I confronting the camera. In
the portrait, I, the masculine presenting person, stand in front with my partner, a very
feminine appearing individual, wraps her arms around me, with her head on my shoulder
also looking at the camera. Our collective gaze is a representation of our strength in our
sexuality, solidarity with one another, and a defiant gaze to the portraits of my mother
and father directly across from it. I chose to set these two walls up this way to create a
tension for the viewer and to create a narrative about family and sexuality.

Overall, the exhibition became more of a contextual narrative that perhaps, fed
too much information to the viewer. Since the work is so personal, it became extremely
hard to pull out and illustrate the complexities of sexuality, gender performance, and
family life. While this first iteration may not have been the most successful I believe it
was important for the viewer to become familiar with the place or type of community my
family and I are involved in.
Chapter 8

The second iteration of my thesis focused on one particular aspect of the entire exhibition, which was the tension that my mother and I have about my sexuality. I stripped away roughly 30-40 images and depicted this relationship with four images shown below:

Figure 1: “Mom Ashing After Dinner”
Figure 2: “Trailer Trash”

Figure 3: “Untitled 3”
One of my self critiques about the previous instillation was that there was no room for critical distance. I was too close to the work and giving away too much information to the viewer. It left little room for the viewer to draw their own conclusions. It also removed any tensions that I had hoped to create. With this second iteration I picked images that were powerful or interesting on their own but didn’t have strong direct ties to one another. This is how I created distance for myself. Each photograph was chosen with careful purpose.

Figure 1: This image is a photograph of my mother. I chose it because of its wealth of information. The space is very cluttered with various domestic items and the
composition of these items lead your eye in a circle until you arrive back at my mother’s face. The denial of her gaze is incredibly important because it does create a tension with the viewer. Why isn’t she aware? Is she purposely avoiding the camera? What does that mean for the relationship to the photographer? The color palette of this photograph is also incredibly important because of the contrast and tension between warm and cool tones. The blues in the image call out to blue-collar working class individuals just as some of the items in the scene do. This is the only photograph in the series where there is an action being performed explicitly: putting out a cigarette. This sense of an in-between moment is powerful because it is ambiguous and further creates questions for the viewer.

Figure 2: The second image above was chosen for two reasons; to continue to create visual ties to the other imagery (ie. cool tones vs warm tones) and to give context of community/space. The homes in the image are further away in the frame and prove that there is a physical distance but also a metaphorical one. It also stands in as a representation of the outside of the aforementioned interior shot of my mother. Inside/Outside is another tension being created in the work. Lastly, it shows the viewer a mobile home that isn’t wealthy. It is a gritty depiction of a tough reality for people of this certain community.

Figure 3: In the first exhibition, the image I used of my partner and I was intimate, but the relationship between us became obscure. Many viewers questioned whether or not it was a romantic relationship or perhaps a sibling/friendship. I decided to make this relationship far more explicit. This image exhibits two female bodies, naked in a bathtub, in an intimate embrace. It is very clear that the two individuals are in a same sex
relationship. Their gaze is also very important because its confrontation and direct. It is unforgiving about the moment they are in. I placed this directly across from the image of my mother to draw out that tension between my same sex relationship and her disdain for it. Also, the image is 65 inches tall and looms over top of the image of my mother, which strengthens my intentions of confrontation.

Figure 4: The fourth image, also printed 65 inches, is also an image for context. The dead ram stands as a metaphor for hardship and survival, two aspects of life in my community. The relationship between the two female bodies and this dead ram allows for the viewer to contemplate what the meaning of same-sex relationships could mean in this particular community. The formal colors of both the ram image and the image of the females create continuity in color palettes across all four images.

The four images were place in a three paneled room with the fourth wall all glass. I placed the image of myself and the female in the bathtub as the first image that you experience when you walk into the room. It is large, towering, and emotive. The gaze of myself and the girl in the bath looks directly across the room at my mother. I did this purposely so that the viewer can sense confrontation between the gaze and the denial of my mothers gaze. This aspect is most important to the iteration because it is the main content; tension between sexuality, mother, and daughter. After the viewer experiences the motherly figure, the context of place is set by the landscape featuring the trailers. The mood of the landscape also gives information about how the mother and daughter may feel about one another. Lastly, the viewer witnesses a dead ram. The ram is a stand in for
the toughness of this culture, a need for survival, but also stands in for the state of the relationship my mother and I currently have.

The main artists that I find inspiration from for both thesis iterations are Kelli Connell, Nan Goldin, Sally Mann, Stacy Kranitz, Alec Soth, and William Eggleston. I also drew inspiration from the political conversations going on around visualizations of Appalachia and the Looking At Appalachia Project headed by Roger May.

What most draws me to Kelli Connell’s work is her use of the personal. Kelli uses her own narratives of the past regarding her personal romantic relationships to create constructed photographic moments. She uses an androgynous model to depict both partners. This is aspect also interests me because she blurs the lines of gender and undoes gender roles.

Figure 5: Kelli Connell
Two other artists I have also drawn inspiration about the personal are Sally Mann and Nan Goldin. Both artists have very different approaches to the personal. Sally Mann’s approach to the personal is soft, poetic, and complex and she exhibits these qualities through snapshot like scenes of her family. Most of her images are of her children and are coming of age tales but another set of important works by her are her depictions of her husband’s illness and the proof of old age and degradation. Nan Goldin’s approach to the personal is less about blood relatives and more about the relationships that you create with your friends. Her project “Ballad of Sexual Dependency” is especially interesting to me because of the raw immediacy and complexity of humanity that is displayed in each individual snapshot. My Image 4 most closely references this in my own style.

Figure 6: Sally Mann
The final three photographers I draw inspiration from are Stacy Kranitz, Alec Soth, and William Eggleston. All three of these photographers approach the world in a more documentary style. Stacy Kranitz is an interest of mine because she focuses on southern individuals and give dynamic representations of individuals who are usually stereotyped and oppressed. Alec Soth, also gives representation to individuals of niche cultures. I also am particularly drawn to his landscapes of vernacular architectures. William Eggleston’s documentary approach is very much a “seek and find” style. My primary draw to his photographic style is his unique skills in color pairing and formal photographic qualities.
Figure 8: Stacy Kranitz

Figure 9: Alec Soth
Figure 10: William Eggleston
Conclusion:

Three years of artistic practice has taught me a lot about why I am a maker and have an artistic practice. I have stepped up to society with my art to give representation to myself, for myself, but also for individuals like me, so that I can challenge the canon of art with my queerness but also to engage in solidarity with individuals who share a story similar to mine. After this experience, I plan to continue making work about the personal, the intimate, the queer, and the self because those things will be perpetually be important to the climate of our times.