Self care is covering yourself in leaves and then running off to join the goblins and the tree people

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SELF CARE IS COVERING YOURSELF IN LEAVES AND THEN RUNNING OFF TO JOIN

THE GOBLINS AND THE TREE PEOPLE

by

Alexandra Grace Gabriel

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

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Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor TJ Dedeaux-Norris
This work is dedicated to all my ancestors; by blood, spirit, or thought. To the indigenous people of the United States whose land I have lived on, specifically to the Ioway, Sauk and Meskwaki peoples on whose ancestral land the University of Iowa campus occupies. To global queer ancestors, elders, kinfolk, and futures.
"Driven forth by the angel with the flaming sword, 
Eve and Adam lifted their sad heads and saw coyote, grinning"

Ursula K. Le Guin
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Deep Gratitude to my thesis committee for their support, critiques, and inspiration throughout the three years of graduate school and the process of researching and writing this essay. Deep Love to my friends, family, and extended kinship circles for their patience and care with me as I found the words.
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Our micro and macro connections, our ontological stories, and our phenomenological environment are how we make sense of the world around us. This aesthetic dimension of relationships is the network of communication that stretches into and between us and other. However, it seems as if even as much as love, connection, and community are deeply needed in living a human life, these are also consistently the spots where roots of trauma problematize the very things we seek. For some time I considered titling this paper “Who is Afraid of Falling In Love” for the very reason that all of my questions seemed to meander back to love and how it shows up or is withheld from us. If I started with questions of Ecology or Queerness or Colonialism, they eventually came back to the question of Self and Other, and navigating the in-between.

What do I propose? A Queer theory of Rest.
I call this theory Queer because it is based upon the foundation of research and understandings worked into me by those who have based their work on Queer understandings. They sometimes, though not always, compete with each other for vocabulary, but all act upon their embodied knowledge. I call this theory Queer because it comes from the phenomenological object of my queer mind, housed in my embodied queer brain. Not queer as in a homogenized image of the LGBT community that serves the interests of the powerful by obscuring the needs of the most marginalized, but Queer as in the specific phenomena and consequences of positionality must be reckoned with. Questions of ancestry, land relationships and health stemming from the process of making objects has led me to search for a Queer Rest envisioned through understanding the objects as place-holders and catalysts. “To build community requires vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways
that perpetuate domination.” said bell hooks in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. In order to build a Queer Theory of Rest I need to disrupt the oppression/domination narrative that haunts discussions of queer aesthetic. Art, the great communicator, can undermine social narratives that serve only aristocratic tendencies, and reimagine our landscape. This emphasis on pairing personal transformation with histories of liberation is especially important because in the context of my positionality, where I must reckon with the domination of the Settler-Colonial mindset. The roots of my investigation into Queerness and Rest come from my own art practice’s cyclical nature of making in response to emotional processing via multiple modes of research. My paintings push me to my own edge of understanding and my thesis explores Queer Rest as a phenomena outside myself in an object oriented ontological paradigm. One that occurs in reaction to transformative understandings the way gravity warps spacetime. I intend to further articulate the somatic responses to objects that pull this trick. The written thesis will name energies held by objects and how that affects the viewer, exploring the visual work as an object-entrance to a type of rest and healing that inhabits and eludes queer realities. Self-positioning from the work of Timothy Morton, Donna Haraway, José Esteban Muñoz, Demian DinéYazhi’, Alok Van-Menon, Bessel Van Der Kolk, and others, I will explore art practice as a teleological tool towards deep healing in regards to trauma held in somatic, cultural, and ecological bodies.
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QUEER REST

_I sit down and the anxiety begins already. It is as if the work resists my attempts to explain it directly._

I make work about rest because I am tired.

“For creatures such as we, the vastness is bearable only through love,” Carl Sagan. What does it mean to translate a human experience in order to share with an audience/viewer? Art is a universal occurrence across cultures and continents. While symbols and signifiers may change across time, medium, and paradigm—the impulse to create is the specter-voyeur of the human condition. As not only social animals, but by virtue of existing in a structured atomic state, humans thrive only through our relationships. Our micro and macro connections, our ontological stories, and our phenomenological environment are how we make sense of the world around us. This aesthetic dimension of relationships is the network of communication that stretches into and between us and other. However, it seems as if even as much as love, connection, and community are deeply needed in living a human life, these are also consistently the spots where roots of trauma problematize the very things we seek.

I make work referencing “the environment” because my relationship to, and even basic understanding of that thing called Place has been put into question the deeper I dig into this particular type of search for meaning. The recent studio work is an art practice as a teleological tool towards a deep healing in regards to historical trauma held in somatic, cultural, and ecological bodies such as described within traditions of self-cultivation.
The work has become a jumble through the process. Pulling in more and more from varied resources in what has become to feel like a cycle of translating metaphors. The German tradition of “Bildung” (as in the literary term “bildungsroman”) refers to a maturation that is described as “a harmonization of the individual’s mind and heart and in a unification of selfhood and identity within the broader society… In this sense, the process of harmonization of mind, heart, selfhood and identity is achieved through personal transformation, which presents a challenge to the individual’s accepted beliefs.”

It has been difficult to find the way to begin a written thesis about work that to me has often been about articulating something I do not have the “correct” words for. Aesthetics as a metaphor made sense as a person having grown up in an image-based culture. I make stuff in a studio because through playing with aesthetics in artistic modes I better understand the quantum soup that we experience as material reality.

The large landscapes hover like an illusion. They formally begin with the question of essence and appearance. If a painting is an aesthetic-based metaphor then, as Timothy Morton points out with his metaphor = translation reminder, they are easily understood as a translation. They are a translation of experience. Which of course becomes its own kind of thing. The paintings are an ongoing investigation of making an ontological object in response to phenomenological trauma.

I used to hate being dragged around to garage/yard sales as a kid. “Oh a yard sale” while driving down the road made me sigh dramatically. Now my studio is full of free or close to free stuff I’ve found/recycled/bought at the op shop. If my art had a smell it would be that strange musty attic smell I think. That hard packed dirt smell of a grassy field waiting for rain. My landscapes are not depicted spaces but are more interested in understanding a landscape as the

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bildung
ecological sense of self. The mountain or prairie that we gaze upon is not able to be chipped away at. Like the ontological table, a landscape is not a sum of parts nor is it a greater concept. It is both essence and appearance. A Hudson River School painting of the Oxbow River is distinctively NOT the river itself. Nor does the painting function as the river functions. The Landscape that contains the river itself also contains the performance of ecology within the space. Queering ecology asks us then what it would look like to perform a queering of landscape. And so the paintings are objects needing structures and armature. As a river functions, as mountains function— i.e. only in relationship to one another do the paintings truly function.

We are intimate with landscapes in ways it takes the uncanny, or queer, experience to remind us of. Queerness exists as an aesthetic experience because it breaks us from the aesthetic causality in the everyday. The change in seasons is uncanny as is a shadow behind the curtain as is the queer horizon. As certain queer aesthetics become everyday they can become coopted by the hegemonic power structures and so I want to emphasize Queerness as an experience—therefore causality- therefore an aesthetic as understood as a phenomenological event. Queerness as a hyper object because as it is rooted in the body, it also extends towards the liminal. Queer engages causality in its historical relationships and futuristic imagination (queer coding). Trauma therapy is queer in its rebellious forgetting of investments in generational commitments. Leaving toxic situations- forgetting our responsibilities to those ecosystems in the pursuit of a better life-shows forgetfulness as “rupture with the eternally self-generating present, a great with a self-authorizing past, and an opportunity for a non-hater-reproductive future.” as Judith Halberstam argues, forgetfulness as a delinking process of generation from the force of historical process as a queer project. Queer lives utilize change and kinship patterns different from the hegemonic forms of family and inheritance. Queer lives recover ecological patterns of resiliency and
intimacy by exploiting the potential in “difference in form”\textsuperscript{2} or the Rift of “essence and appearance”\textsuperscript{3}. The intimacy we have with the ecologies we are part of are Queer because they are in direct opposition to the dominant aesthetic of family kinships. There is no hierarchy of temporality in relationships in ecologies- rather it is the boundaries and borders of different-sized objects that inform shifts from one landscape to another. We walk out of the forest and onto the prairie with no regard to time but all regard to how the objects are touching. We know we are in the desert because we have descended from the mountaintop. It is a performance of boundaries that create our understandings of relationships and therefore of queerness. Healing the trauma around ecosystems might also be a process of forgetting one performance of touch in order to embrace a difference. Or rather using the moment of forcefulness in order to perform remembrance for a different tradition which then becomes the new thing, the queer thing. This not to say that forgetting is necessarily a wholistic strategy for queer survival, but rather it is an aesthetic rupture that has potential to function as a method to imagine futures. It has certainly been used as such by colonial powers. Decolonial methodologies necessitate consideration to the power of memory and forgetting. I am not sure ‘forgetting’ is even the proper word because of this relationship between power and forgetting. The colonial state project demands constant consideration and reification through imposing itself onto our memory via object relationships. The material conditions brought by European settlers imposed themselves unto the land, and traditions of land care- or the material memories- were replaced. In order to secure the land and resources, the state continues to force us to remember its presence and forget indigenous ideas. We remember the state to the point that it is an aesthetic of the everyday. It is an uncanny experience to feel your relationship to the landscape/ecology as it is counterintuitive to the

\textsuperscript{2} Judith Halberstam, \textit{The Queer Art of Failure} (Duke University Press, 2011), 70.
\textsuperscript{3} Timothy Morton, \textit{Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality} (Open Humanities Press, 2013), 56.
settler-state. A phenomenology through the landscape emphasizes the kinship bonds of spatial boundaries, whereas the state emphasizes the kinship bonds of temporal wealth (i.e. generational wealth/who owns what).

But in all this arguing I already lose the thread of my idea. My idea here is the love aspect of queerness and how it can intersect with ideas already present in decolonizing ecology and trauma therapy. The love through Queerness is the phenomenological Rest that I am trying to get to. These are the threads woven through the questions I asked myself to focus in the studio:

*What did your ancestors need but could not get to?*

*What healing evaded them but is available to you?*

*What do you know you need to make peace with in your lifetime so that their struggles, their mistakes, their misfortunes, need not have been in vain? Without meaning?*

These questions come from a copied note on my computer. Copying and pasting the questions and delving into them felt like touching the heart of the function of my studio. If the act of drawing, in a broad conceptual sense, is to record relationships we observe around us, then these questions allow us to focus on a theme. The questions give my making a purpose in their observations of relationships. If I present objects with these three questions in mind- I cannot evade the impact of the objects or my performance of creation through usual settler-hegemonic naïveté. The questions act as ruptures to internalized aesthetics of settler-mindsets through their open-ended nature. They simultaneously question the ontology of an object (in this case, me or my art) and the phenomenology of its position in spacetime. What is the thing and why is it like
that? The ancestral nature of the questions listed are important in this context because they have asserted themselves as such through a sense of decolonial ecology and queer intimacies. With a lived experience of queer and disability realities intersected with privileges such as White American, questions of human nature naturally evoked through any art practice necessitate an understanding of the positonality of the questioner (i.e. me, the artist) if they are to be answered successfully. Through the aesthetic understanding of objects’ relationships and intimacies, I am able to approach subject matter that otherwise has been forgotten or misremembered in order to survive the traumatizing forces of oppressive ecologies.

With the weight of these questions and threads of ideas, the act of making becomes a ripple that performs in multiple dimensions. Almost to the point of parody, the studio and artistic process is searching for healing in its production line— Taking to task the personal revelations of soul-searching. The slippage between personal and collective healing is intentional and learned through inspiration from Queer and Decolonial understandings of landscapes/ecologies.

Timothy Morton points out in his article “Queer Ecology”, there are many possibilities in exploring the queerness of ecocriticism if we embrace Queer Theory’s ability to embrace and celebrate difference multiplication (ecological kinship modes) and turn away from bioessentialist arguments of Nature that project the patriarchal cultural norms they are used to prove. Morton calls upon Judith Butlers understanding of the body as not simply an “impermeable, closed form,” but as a metaphor for a sort of ecological selfhood. With event-objects such as Climate Change, we are forced to face the reality that there is no impermeable Nature. The borders of environment do not exist- we are intimately connected with this aesthetic ecology in a way that can be easily seen through a simple thought experiment that is not even particularly “radical or revisionist. Just read Darwin. Evolution means that life-forms are made of other life-forms.

Entities are mutually determining: they exist in relation to each other and derive from each other.” and “life is… not organic, coherent, or authoritative.” We are reminded that this is not a question of semantics or poetic imagination but that even in biochemistry we are shown there is no strong boundary between life and non-life. There was an impossibly queer-sounding “‘preliving life’ made of RNA and another replicator.” This last boundary dissolution shatters the last ties to temporal hierarchy. Hierarchies become obvious in their struggle for power and oppressive propaganda if we recognize the paradox of the object-oriented ontology here. Objects such as non-human animals become strange strangers, Morton’s translation of Derrida’s arrivant. Objects are irreducible yet deconstructive all the way down. The thing in English called CAT is embodied yet is without a simplified essence we can point to (without choosing an individual personality as an everyman standing in for all Cats, which is, in that case, a placeholder image). An ecological environment is similarly irreducible. It is the praxis of the intimacy dreamed by Queer Theory that also works to situate the self.

I make the work I make to situate myself. Or better yet to orientate myself. The process of looking, analyzing, and reacting orientates my perception to the physical, emotional and psychic realms present and in relationship to me. The work needs the deep intimacies called up by queer and ecological theories as it moves to understand the effects of trauma. For the Earth itself will survive trauma. The timeline of the Earth—geologic time—means that the Earth will long outlive the human species even if it takes a billion years. But to come in our lifetime to kinship with the Earth gives us a future through an understanding via intimacies. The Earth is a generative being with whom intimacies enact other types of understandings.

6 Ibid. 276.
7 Ibid. 277.
“When I look at a movement that romanticizes colonialism calls it “progress,” and “equality,” and “love,” I remember that we are grieving.” Alok Van-Menon poeticizes. Alok expresses how Queer intimacies interacts with trauma responses from both personal and structural angles. Through both queer and trauma-informed intimacies, common vulnerability becomes mutual precarity. A trauma-informed perspective can trace histories of grief and healing through relationship structures and a Queer understanding of intimacy recognizes the political in the personal. Or rather a trauma perspective recognizes the political in the emotional and a Queer understanding traces phenomenological understandings of bodily relationships through structures of Self and Other. In Queer and trauma-informed communities, relationships are understood as within effects of systems yet not of those system’s essence. Back again to the ontological object of Timothy Morton and the mode of knowledge as that queer horizon. For in Morton’s object-oriented ontology, we may never know the essence of a thing. The thing is not to be understood or known, or be in relationship with to the point of knowing its essence because that essence is in some way withdrawn from us. A forest is not better understood reduced to a single tree, but neither are all the trees within it simply vessels for this larger thing. A forest is an ecosystem- an environment-object and phenomenological orientation for the objects contained within. Bodies have long been understood as sites of contestation and a trauma-informed perspective of that contestation is the link between analyzing systems of oppression. It speaks truth to the experience of existing in relationship to power. It names the coping mechanisms between individuals, which can be transferred to name the mechanisms of larger relationship networks.

9 Morton, Realist Magic. 44.
We have been conditioned into power structures where subordinated and marginalized identities are supposed to either not exist or only exist for the benefit of power structures—i.e. to be forgotten or to forget yourself.

My need for a type of rest originates in my body, and I intend my paintings/drawings/prints to empathize and alleviate that need. This work began with asking myself a series of questions, and although the paintings are not the answers I originally desired—they have instead become spaces where I intend us to be honest with ourselves about the aesthetic dimension we are living in. The questions I pose may never be fully answerable due to the inability to truly touch the horizon of Queerness, but in following the path they direct, objects continue the questioning into how phenomena elude and embrace us as individuals who not simply contain, but ARE multitudes. Art is the realist magic that allows for Queer Rest.
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The question then is what are the real, practical aesthetics of Rest? Of Queerness? of Landscape? of Ecology? of Love? These words tend towards specific visual linguistic trends, depending upon the viewer’s own intimacies and histories. The artist then must attend to their own hand. What are the traces left behind from the lineage of opposable thumbs and intention? How different are they from the traces left by accident? Searching for a merging point where I suppose, then, the art itself would become useless in its indistinguishable-ness from life. But being anchored in a discipline that is already regarded as excessive or luxurious by its critics, allows for my paintings to mine the indulgences of these phenomena. They gather the dust of philosophies and aura of experiences. The question of representing a Queer Rest comes to finding the queerness in objects and in exploring the causality around understanding action and rest. the world has always been global. Humans are social species. We decorate our bowers, invite other species inside our homes. Through the realist magic of art objects that twist spacetime, I attempt metaphors to understand the unknowable essence of things through creating. The objects, paintings, prints, and biological beings in this installation are all in relationship to one another- each informs and forms string figures that hold me in a quieting embrace. As with all work that seeks to understand a Mystery, this work fails and succeeds at the level of engagement. Like a true ecology, it is made up of kinship patterns and niche moments that can go unnoticed at first glance. The works held within the installation cycle as objects do with the passage of time, and the perception of them with familiarity. Just as the unpracticed stomp into
the forest instigates the flight of canopy birds, the work must be allowed to trust the viewer before they can reveal more than a surface of impressions.

The installation is meant to hold moments of excess and clear access. So a viewer moves through the space and their understanding of subject/content moves with them depending upon their gaze. Windows, seats, and beds slip between the crack of stage setting and utilitarian needs. The world has always been insular. Humans are not telepathic. I can only guess at what you are thinking, can only interpret what you tell me. These paintings become the leaves I cover myself in with the hope of fulfilling my own pastoral escapist fantasies. What they tell you is your own secret to find through your own intimacies. Everything will be alright, and whatever is not, we will mourn.
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“Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideal that can be glimpsed in the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educing mode of dwelling that allows us to see and act beyond the margins of the present. [...] Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the world proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-moving future. Both contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-moving future. Both are an assemblage of the utopia that the conceptual and the aesthetic can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness. Turning to the aesthetic in the name of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, nor is queer aesthetics an attempt to escape social relations. Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but also a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or queer possibility for a queer world.”

—Judith Butler

Dying Impure: The Anxieties of Queer Identity

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