

PLAYING HOUSE

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ABSTRACT

Playing House is a research-creation project that examines how masculinity and queerness are shaped through the aesthetics, objects, and spatial codes of the domestic interior. Stemming from memories of growing up in a home structured by traditional gender expectations, this thesis asks how an illustrative and material practice might negotiate masculinities and reimagine the childhood home as a site of softness, impartial play, and queer possibility. Drawing from feminist and queer theory, autotheory, object theory, and craft studies, it considers how objects and rooms orient bodies toward—or away from—ways of belonging.

This project reconstructs memory as a speculative environment through a series of three works: *Birch Vignettes*, a collection of laser-cut installations that reconstruct childhood rooms; *Tufted Troves*, hand-tufted objects which transform fragile decor into plush forms; and *Suminagashi Schematics*, a synthesis of ink marbling, floor plans, and textiles used to speculate on how gender can be reorganized within space. In the process of making, identity is understood as continually renovated, memory as re-codable, shame as capable of softening, and inadequacy as becoming a tool for heutagogy and play.

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As a research-creation project concerned with home, belonging, and the ways spaces shape identity, I remain mindful that this work was developed on lands whose histories of Indigenous stewardship long precede my own presence here. My family's relationship to the places we now call Canada, Ontario, Toronto, and Vaughan began through immigration, and I recognize that our ability to build a life here exists within an ongoing history of colonial displacement. I am grateful for the opportunity to live, work, question, and create on the Indigenous lands that I have the privilege to call home.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION—*WEIGHTS & COUNTER WEIGHTS*

Masculinity has always felt heavy.

Since boyhood, I have sensed masculinity like a hovering mass: an insidious, murky figure that was intent on tweaking, adjusting, and correcting the qualities of my personhood that did not align with social expectation.¹ I felt averse to being male because of a seemingly unbreakable pretense: to be masculine meant to be harsh and “he-ness was akin to an aggression that felt fraudulent in me.”² The social codes and cues that suggested an expectation of toughness were ever present without being explicit—a discreet orchestration that adhered boyhood to steeliness. My experience of boyhood aligns with how Ocean Vuong regards masculinity in his essay *Reimagining Masculinity*. Vuong notes that, “masculinity, or what we [allow] it to be in America, is often realized through violence. Here, we celebrate our boys, who in turn celebrate one another, through the lexicon of conquest: You killed it, buddy. Knock ‘em dead, big guy... my son’s a beast.”³ Unraveling the ways in which hegemonic masculinity was present in my upbringing is central to my thesis. I was not raised on the language of feminist and queer theory; this knowledge was far removed from my lived reality. It is only in recent years that I have developed the capacity to resolve and unlearn what was routinely accepted as normal.

Like many children of the 1990’s who grew up in Woodbridge, Ontario I was raised on the *traditional values* taught to me by my parents, who learned them from their parents, who originated from the fascist climate of 1930s Italy. Though I was born nearly 40 years after my

¹ Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Masculinity here refers to Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity as the culturally dominant form that signals authority and leadership.

² Ocean Vuong, “Reimagining Masculinity,” *The Paris Review*, 2019.

³ Vuong, “Reimagining Masculinity.”

family's immigration to Canada, the cultural ideologies did not evolve in time for my upbringing. Adherence to tradition was a sure method for fortifying the home and was not to be challenged. The 1990s and early 2000s saw a radical shift in acceptance and representation as heterosexual North Americans were increasingly introduced to identities they would have previously not experienced due to “the emergence of LGBTQ identities into the mainstream media on a larger scale.”⁴ My family, however (and, I imagine, many others families in our hive minded community) was not keen on having content that would challenge their worldview permeate the home. Progress was ignored willfully so that categories could remain uncomplicated, binary, and cleanly decided: male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/unspoken. Bearing a male, who exercised his *hegemonic masculinity*,⁵ was a boon of prosperity for the home: a proud carrier of the family name, an example of greatness in middle class suburbia, a step closer to “the good life.”⁶

The work of feminist and queer theorists such as Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler, Raewyn Connell, Michael Kimmel, and José Esteban Muñoz have been instrumental in prying gender apart from biological determinism, revealing masculinity as a cultural construct that is both rehearsed and policed rather than innate. Butler’s text, *Undoing Gender*, discusses gendered normativity and the need to perform gender for social acceptance, while Connell’s writing in *Masculinities* clarifies why deviating from dominant and hegemonic masculine norms is discouraged and socially consequential. My own queerness has opened the conversation about sexuality and

⁴ Will Wortman, “Closets and TV Screens: LGBTQ Representation on Prime-Time Network Television in the 1990s” (honors thesis, Indiana State University, 2022), 19.

⁵ Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 77. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as the culturally dominant form that legitimizes male authority and the subordination of women.

⁶ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

gender on small scales—within community and with family. I am grateful to the theorists who have challenged and expanded the conception of gender and sexuality as they have affirmed my self perception and have provided a framework to initiate conversation. I am fortunate to have family members who have been capable of shifting their worldview and are now receptive to learning. Despite my gratitude, familial support today has not neutralized the vexation that marked my adolescence, nor have these theories completely dismantled the binary logics that continue to structure what remains, in Canada and the United States, a predominantly white, heteronormative, and patriarchal social fabric. Within my home town, I continue to witness the *symptoms* of traditional values. My experiences working as an educator and tutor within my community's elementary schools, secondary schools, and in students' homes have revealed how deeply woven the legacy of tradition remains. The discrepancy between my lived experience in Woodbridge and visible progress that can be seen taking place over media or in larger metropolitan areas like Toronto, is sometimes so drastic that hope for a shift feels entirely out of reach. Only two years ago, the publicly funded school board I worked for expressed outward homophobia, fighting to ban pride iconography from being displayed any time of the year and especially during Pride season. Parents of the schools accused educators of "trans propaganda" for engaging in educational conversation about gender identity. Despite the changes happening on a macro scale, the effect of change in smaller communities is painfully slow. It is challenging to acknowledge that there are two realities I am caught between. There is the reality I mentally align with in which gendered identity is not binary and can be expressed in multitudes, where masculinity can present in variations far more wonderfully complicated than what the hegemony dictates. The other reality, the traditional binary, remains dominant in Woodbridge. In recognizing this, I have become curious about how I can contribute to the sharing and expanding

of queer and feminist knowledge while confronting the traditions I experienced from being a member of a large Italian diaspora.

It is from lived experience, embodied memory, and becoming acquainted with feminist and queer theory that my artistic inquiry emerges. My research-creation asks how I, as an illustrator and visual artist, can negotiate masculinities and queerness through an aesthetic practice by attending to how the aesthetics of domestic interiors contribute to the rigidity of masculinity and heteronormative conformity, while also moving beyond analysis to queer these visuals and *play* with spatial logics. How might these aesthetics be repurposed, disrupted, or reimagined to propose a softer, more playful understanding of male identity, untethered from a restricted *masculinity*?

What becomes apparent through the creation of *Playing House* is that a return to play is necessary for my connection between thinking and making. As D.W. Winnicott suggests in *Playing and Reality*, “playing is an experience...always a creative experience...a basic form of living.”⁷ The making of my work operates within this register as both a method of construction and an experiential mode of thinking through space, memory, and possibility. My play exists along what Winnicott calls “potential space” where something new can be produced: not a faithful reconstruction of the past, nor a complete departure from it, but a reworking that allows for multiple modes of inhabitation.⁸ The creative procedures of my project aligned with Winnicott’s assertion that “it is in playing and only in playing that the individual...is able to be

⁷ Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971), 51.

⁸ Gennaro Saragnano and Christian Seulin, eds., *Playing and Reality Revisited: A New Look at Winnicott’s Classic Work* (London: Karnac Books, 2015), 33.

creative and to use the whole personality,” and further, that it is “only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.”⁹

Drawing is the core of my artistic practice. For me, it is a method of communication that feels safe and, importantly, sustains a form of play carried from adolescence into adulthood. It offers a way of transmuting complex emotions into something legible while maintaining a sense of creative fulfillment—a necessary condition for my engagement with drawing to function as a therapeutic tool where illustrations become vessels for feeling to exist outside of myself, to be revisited when needed. Within my research-creation, memory, drawing, and play are deeply intertwined as methods of revisiting and reproducing.

In chapter 2, I address memory as both tender and galling, focusing on moments where play, femininity, and shame collided. This chapter traces how adherence to performing masculinely shaped behaviour and why these memories are an emotional ground from which this project emerges. Chapter 3 examines my childhood home as a gendered structure, where rooms and objects carried distinctly masculine and feminine codes with special attention to pieces of decor that inspire the aesthetic language of this work. Chapter 4 moves into the making, focusing on actively reimagining space through a hybridized aesthetic. I describe the process for the major series of this project, *Birch Vignettes*, which involves turning sketches into laser-cut, layered vignettes that sit between illustration and installation. Chapter 5 describes a collection of works complementary to the major series, *Tufted Troves*, which transform decorative vessels into hand-tufted textile objects. This work utilizes material to add both physical and conceptual softness to the overall project while engaging with the gendered history of textile craft. Chapter 6

⁹ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 51.

addresses an additional complementary series, *Suminagashi Schematics*, and highlights a motif/material that is a visual throughline in this project: marbled ink.

Playing House, is an act of reconstructing what masculinity means by relieving the weight of its false expectation, becoming reacquainted with adolescent desires that were pushed away, and reimagining domestic space as a place of expression and comfort rather than conformity and rehearsal. Having memory and experience motivate my artistic practice, with the support of feminist and queer theorists, aligns with what Alex Brostoff and Lauren Fournier identify as autotheory's merging of subjective experience with critical inquiry. My project actively moves, "between 'theory' and 'practice,' between 'living,' 'thinking,' and 'making.'""¹⁰ *Playing House*, with its various methods of fabrication and meaning-making, is the result of research-creation and, it has also aided in my processing of adolescent memories and insecurities, many of which I did not realize were still being carried in my subconscious.

¹⁰ Alex Brostoff and Lauren Fournier, "Introduction: Autotheory ASAP! Academia, Decoloniality, and 'I,'" *ASAP/Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 3.

CHAPTER 2: RECOLLECTION—*A STARE TO SHATTER A SPIRIT*

The process of creating *Playing House* surfaced memories of myself as a frivolous young boy. I remember myself skipping and cartwheeling, singing and dancing, dressing in costumes made of blankets and adult coats, creating dolls out of paper, as well as animating tassels, ribbons, and fabrics. I felt bright in these modes of play. I learned, however, that if my play teetered on the feminine, it would elicit critical responses: glares, gestures of disappointment, or huffs of frustrated air. Over time, what previously felt like joyful play began to feel too embarrassing to acknowledge. These memories of play, though steeped in nostalgia and fondness, are tainted by feelings of inadequacy, and angst. The mingling of fondness and discomfort creates a throbbing tension. I have become fixated on unraveling the source of these sensations.

It takes immense effort to discern the underbelly of ache hiding just below sepia toned footage.

I realized now what was felt in youth is still present: a desire for acceptance without need of conformity. One particular memory, which feels as sharp as the moment of its unfolding, exemplifies the contrast of glee and despair. It takes place while visiting my cousins' home, which was a house full of girls. I loved this fact because it meant there was no pressure to play with *boy toys* or to play *boy games*. The majority of their toys were domestic play sets: toy kitchens, toy grocery store tills, toy cleaning supplies, toy salons, and toy vanities. We loved to role play and act out skits while engaging with the conventions of domesticity. Making these little girls laugh always resulted in a sense of love and belonging that were not easily found elsewhere. At seven years old, I found myself interested in their vanity set; the hard plastic make-up and poorly reflective mirror intrigued me. I sat in the set's dwarfed chair and mimed an application of lipstick in the hazy mirror. The room we were playing in was in line with where the adults were gathered. While playing with the hard, hollow, plastic make-up, I sensed the

searing heat of stares from the other room—I was the dumbstruck actor trapped in a glaring spotlight in front of an unamused audience. Not a word was said, but disgrace was telepathically communicated. Without instruction, I pulled the hard, hollow, humiliating plastic lipstick away from my pouted lip, lifted myself off the vanity seat and moved myself out of the adult sight line to contend with the numbness growing in my body. This is one of my earliest memories of shame. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sarah Ahmed describes shame as “one’s body [seeming] to burn up with the negation that is perceived (self-negation); and shame impresses upon the skin, as an intense feeling of the subject ‘being against itself’ . Such a feeling of negation, which is taken on by the subject as a sign of its own failure, is usually experienced before another.”¹¹ Shame is a sensation that would repeat over and over, associated with the games I wanted to play, the cartoons I wanted to watch, the music I wanted to listen to, and the sports I did not want to partake in. Shame had presented itself so often throughout my adolescents that it became a consistent humming rather than flashing instances. To be aware that one lacks masculinity in boyhood is a painful experience, one that Raewyn Connell dissects in, *The Men and The Boys*. Connell interviews a man named Adam, who shares a memory that elicits shame similarly to my recollection:

How a man throws a ball is different to how a woman throws a ball. I didn’t want to throw a ball in front of my Dad because I knew it wouldn’t look right, it wouldn’t be like the way a good, strong boy should throw it. And once, I remember, I was brave enough to throw it. And he made fun of me and said I threw it like a girl.

In response to Adam’s story, Connell asserts that since interpersonal emotions are fused to bodily activity, Adam learned “how to be both inside his body throwing and outside his body watching its gendered performance.”¹² The sensation of the self being divided—

¹¹ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 103.

¹² R. W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 91.

present within while also surveilling from a distance—is a taxing process that becomes habitual.

My wanting to play and dabble with feminine conventions never dissipated, however I became cautious and did so when I knew I was in the safety of my own company, where I was not at risk of being, “‘found out’ as bad by others”. My young mind made the realization that, “shame [felt] like an exposure” and resulted in an attempt to hide—a hiding that required me to “turn away from the other and towards [myself].”¹³ I learned that acceptance hinged upon a performance of masculinity I neither desired nor understood. Solitude, therefore, was a comfortable place where division was not needed.

It is an uncanny sensation to instinctively know the choreography of a performance without knowing the context of the play.

Solitude is a theme that has often appeared in my artistic practice. In each instance I have unintentionally recognized it as both a comfort and a maladaptation. Solitude is different from loneliness. For me, it is a choice or response that can bring serenity however, in excess it can be crippling. Prior to *Playing House*, my practice was keen on playing with the human figure by fracturing its form and contorting it. I explored the duality of serene solitude and solitude as a maladaptation in 2018 through illustration, as seen in *figure 1*.

As I described, solitude was an accessible safeguard in adolescence when all else felt hostile. I visualized this desire for retreat in 2022 through illustration, as seen in *figure 2*. Here, children's blocks are assembled in a suggested expanse of rural openness with only hints of civility existing in the distance. There is no figure in this work, only the impression that someone was present and built a monument in a quiet moment of play. This work was a first instance of using the

¹³ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 103.

motifs of adolescent play that is explored with greater inquiry in *Playing House*. Through this continuation, I realize how my relationship to isolation has gnarled roots in shame.



Figure 1. Andrew Presutto, *Isolation*, 2018, digital illustration.



Figure 2. Andrew Presutto, *Coming Out of Youth—Fabrication*, 2022, mixed media illustration.

While wading in the flood of memories that have become frosted with a film of remorse, I wondered how I might be different if I, as I am now, had been the architect of my upbringing. I questioned what would change if I could fall back through time to be the heartener of my young desires. This pondering felt as frustrating as relaying a message under water: the words too wetly distorted to reach a distant recipient. So I began to think instead, what if I could unleash “new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription”¹⁴ by designing a place for my adolescent memory to live, a playset where memory can be remapped, a doll house to detach from shame and gendered expectation, an architectural model where the behaviours that were subtly *corrected* out can be invited back home.

¹⁴ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 15.

The idea of remaking the past while speculating on the future is akin to Edie Fake's series of illustrations titled, *Memory Palace*. In this work, Fake recreates illustrations of building facades inspired by Chicago's queer spaces that no longer exist as well as facades of entirely imagined spaces. The illustrations are highly decorative, colourful, and read as idealizations and memorializations of place, as seen in *figure 3*.

Fake's *Memory Palace* plays with spatial memory—the title itself is a reference to a mnemonic which requires one to mentally store information within a specific location of an interior space (within the kitchen cabinet of their childhood home for instance) and, later imagine the act of “walking through” through that interior and retrieving the information. This technique is used to make more tangible how memory is held, navigated, and reconstructed. Fake sees this technique as a way of viewing the history of Chicago's queer buildings not through nostalgia but through curiosity and wondering what these spaces mean for the present and how queer spacing making can happen.¹⁵ Fake notes that, “some drawings were based on real places... some were just amalgamations of exciting details in the environment that I thought ‘if these came together, that would be a really great gay space.’”¹⁶ What I glean from Fake is the permission to treat memory as a structure that can be reproduced with whatever alterations are necessary to bring them closer to one's desire.

¹⁵ “Edie Fake / Out of Body,” YouTube video, Allen Memorial Art Museum, 2025.

¹⁶ “Edie Fake / Out of Body,” YouTube video.



Figure 3. Edie Fake, *Club LaRay* and *The Newberry Theatre* from the series *Memory Palaces*, 2014, gouache, ink, and ballpoint pen on paper.

CHAPTER 3: DEMOLITION—*RETRACING; MOVING FORWARD*

My childhood home was a loving environment with parents who had the best of intentions; yet it was not always soft. I now find myself getting lost in the vision of what a dream home might be. As a true to form gay stereotype,¹⁷ I care deeply about the aesthetics and formal elements—being surrounded by colours that possess mood altering properties, textures that elicit comfort and, “objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise.”¹⁸ I moreso romanticize a place where softness awaits at the threshold, where I can “choose softness for me. To be my own soft place and that for others” so that the rigidity of masculinity is lessened and a capacity for expression is widened.¹⁹ This desire to construct softness within space relates to Ness Lee’s installation, *A Soft Place to Land*, presented at the Varley Art Gallery of Markham (see *figure 4*). Lee’s work offers a compelling model for articulating the necessity of softness— particularly within a suburban setting where conformity to hegemonic norms can feel especially restrictive. Lee’s work is grounded in their relationship to Markham, their experience of queerness shaped by their Hakka diasporic identity, and addresses a necessity to challenge generational ideologies—which seek to uphold colonial legacies, praise witness, and value heteronormativity—and replace them with something softer.²⁰ My own experience of suburbia and the desire to soften its stiff expectations, as introduced in chapter 1, resonates closely with Lee’s approach. Their installation, composed of large-scale, embraceable soft sculptures,

¹⁷ Carl Matthews and Caroline Hill, “Gay Until Proven Straight: Exploring Perceptions of Male Interior Designers from Male Practitioner and Student Perspectives,” *Journal of Interior Design* 36, no. 3 (2011). This text discusses the collective assumption that interior design falls under the category of a gay man’s job.

¹⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Ashon Crawley (@ashoncrawley), “I will choose softness for me. To be my own soft place and that for others,” Instagram post, June 28, 2021; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

²⁰ Marissa Largo, *Elusive Desires: Queer Feminist Asian Diaspora and Suburban Possibilities*, curatorial essay for *Elusive Desires: Ness Lee + Florence Yee*, September 24, 2021–January 2, 2022 (Unionville: Varley Art Gallery of Markham, 2021).

muraled walls, and plush tapestries depicting nude queer bodies, transforms the gallery into a space of intimacy. Being on display in the suburb of Markham provides those who feel they live in a place “devoid of difference” an opportunity to be witnessed by and bare witness to a queer body.²¹



Figure 4. Ness Lee, *A Soft Place to Land*, 2021, installation. (Courtesy of Varley Art Gallery of Markham, photographed by Toni Hafkenscheid.)

Lee’s work makes visible that softness can be deliberately activated. It is in this sense that I see softness as being intentional sensitivity. Within a “Euro-American context, from the 12th and into the early 13th century, the term soft has referred to feebleness or docility.”²² Sensitivity is

²¹ Largo, *Elusive Desires*.

²² Casey Mecija, “Ness Lee’s ‘Soft Universe’: Queer Diasporic Art and a Pedagogy of Softness,” *Goose Lane Publishing*, November 2021.

used as a descriptor of an overreaction, an inability to cope with difficulty, a sign of futility. It is “precisely because conventional middle-class western masculinity tends to suppress emotion and deny vulnerability” that this rhetoric exists.²³ In contrast, I relate more to how Stephanie Springgay, in *Conditions of Feltness*, describes sensitivity as an attunement to “the affective atmospheres around us”²⁴ and to empathy.

You're too sensitive! Don't be so sensitive! He's... sensitive.

“Too sensitive” is a phrase that has been used against or to dismiss me countless times. I agree that I am sensitive. It is because of my innate softness, my sensitive attunement, that I was aware of where the codes of masculinity permeated in my home. Though not always overt, rooms were containers for gendered logics with little neutrality. This divide hinged on which parent governed a room versus which parent operated more like a visitor to the space, and, importantly, which objects and aesthetic motifs existed in a room. The living room, kitchen, and washroom were examples of rooms animated by my mother’s presence, labour, and decorative sensibility. As such, by conventional association, they were coded as traditionally feminine.

The living room was her personal project, a trove of beauty designed by her effort: fabrics with fractal floral patterns, tasselled drapery, plush cushions so perfectly staged that they both beckoned and repelled touch, and a pair of ornamental chairs with curving contours that evoked admiration. (These chairs are highly significant and I will return to discuss them later in this chapter). The room invited participants to appreciate it. This invitation was paradoxical for me since it was unbecoming of a young boy to have interest in a room that was designed for

²³ Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, 5.

²⁴ Stephanie Springgay, “Conditions of Feltness,” in *Feltness: Research-Creation, Socially Engaged Art, and Affective Pedagogies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 10.

women's socialization. As a learned behaviour, I admired this room in secret to bypass embarrassment—a sensation and tactic which seems to be universally queer. I recall playing pretend in this space while alone, sitting cross-legged in one of the big fancy chairs, animating the tassels that held the drapes in place into figurines, and turning the hollows of vases into treasure chests to be discovered later. By stark contrast, the garage, office, and basement were spirited by my father's presence. These rooms were austere functional and had an intimidating presence. As such, by conventional association, they were coded as traditionally masculine. They were filled with tools, loud machinery, dull books about economics, and automotive and sport memorabilia. An obligation to perform was felt in these spaces. Tools were put in my small hands, sporting equipment was tossed at me, and an expectation to tinker with engines and other obscure mechanisms was directed toward me. It was within these rooms where I was subtly, “taught to reject everything associated with femininity” in an effort to construct my masculinity.²⁵

My home's divide aligns with what Sara Ahmed would describe as a site of orientation in, *Queer Phenomenology*. Ahmed suggests that certain objects leave impressions upon us; how we perceive the impression of the objects depends on external factors like where we are located, or how an object is apprehended.²⁶ By this logic, where an object was located in my home or who gave me an object could persuade my sense of attachment or aversion to it. I may, “have [moved towards or] away from objects depending on how [I was] moved by them.”²⁷ If an object held

²⁵ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 83.

²⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 27–28.

²⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 28.

beauty or comfort, “I [might have picked] up the object, or [got] closer to it, and even [pressed] it nearer to me.”²⁸ I extend Ahmed’s theory beyond object and to the rooms of the home themselves. Their atmospheres—altered by the objects they housed or the users who occupied them—could sway the push and pull of orientation. The rooms that I associated with femininity sparked a curiosity and pleasure that required concealment. The rooms I associated with masculinity demanded participation yet fed into insecurity.

The pair of chairs in the living room, mentioned earlier, were objects with a particular pull. They were reproductions of Louis XV chairs, iconic pieces of Rococo design. When I asked my mother about how these chairs came to adorn the living room, she was proudly excited to tell me the story. In the early 2000s she found them while searching through vintage stores and was lured by their elegant presence. To her surprise, the chairs were heavily discounted because the upholstery on both chairs was stained with ink. Despite their blemishes, something about these objects spurred desire. “I just needed to have them,” she exclaimed. Once the chairs were brought home, my mother tended to them and with careful touch was able to clean the stained fabric. These chairs marked an important proximity in which indulgence was afforded.

When I asked my mother what attracted her to the chairs, she first regarded their aesthetic appeal, describing the chairs as “elegant, dainty, and different— sort of more feminine—from most of the furniture in the house that felt too dark and boxy.” For her, the Louis XV chairs spoke to refinement, composure, and they “just looked so classy.” The sense of classiness, or class, is significant. In the introductory chapter I reference the desire to attain greatness in middle class suburbia. My parents were determined to attain a lifestyle more comfortable than what they were raised with. They both worked diligently in their professions and were able to elevate the

²⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 28.

sacrifices their parents made when first immigrating to Canada. For both my parents—especially my mom—one such way of attaining greatness (or the presentation of it) was through staging objects like the Rococo chairs, in our home, as an approximation to luxury and tangible proof of success, regardless of their discount. My mom did not realize that these reproductions referenced “a society where luxury goods organized social identity...where domestic [objects carried] a dense charge of class meaning and aesthetic judgment.”²⁹ However, it does not take an art historian to realize that there is a distinction between an object that has been ornately crafted versus one that is minimal and mass produced. For her, the association to class and assumed feminine appeal—the delicacy, the curvature, the decorative attention—the chairs possessed were equally compelling.

As an adolescent, I did not understand these chairs through the lens of class; that language was not available to me yet. What I recognized instead was that these were *my mom's chairs*. They carried her presence. When I sat in them I felt a closeness to her. The feminine appeal that my mother was drawn to was also alluring to me. For my young self, the chairs presented an adjacency to the femininity that I revered in secret.

When I reflect on Rococo reproductions now, I understand them through the language of drag. Not in a literal sense, but in how they perform. Though many variations of drag exist, there is often overlap in how it operates through exaggeration and an attention to surface decoration. These chairs function in a similar way. Their carved details, rich textiles, and curvatures all reference to a time period of feminine excess. That excess has not always been celebrated. In *Ornament and Crime*, Adolf Loos argues that “the evolution of culture is synonymous with the

²⁹ Daniëlle O. Kisluk-Grosheide, “The Golden Age of French Furniture in the Eighteenth Century,” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2003).

removal of ornament from utilitarian objects,”³⁰ positioning decoration as something to be outgrown. Read against this, the chairs begin to feel even more performative. They insist on ornament; their surface embellishment resists the logic of refinement through reduction. Placed beside more modest furniture, they read as inanimate drag queens. In *Playing House* I use the visual codes of ornament and the idea of drag to speculate on a future domestic setting that is in proximity to queerness and away from hegemonic expectation.

The decorative quality of the Louis XV chairs are an aesthetic foundation and conceptual origin point of *Playing House*. In realizing the significance of these chairs in my home, I instinctively began to draw them from memory—creating my own reproduction of the reproductions. My illustrations of the Louis XV chair did not have the same degree of organic garnish, rather they were flattened silhouettes with graphically stylized embellishment. It was a decorative drawing that recalled the source objects, but was put through a filter of illustrative style influences which have been inspiring my hand since adolescence, as seen in *figure 5*.

I recall being mesmerized by the aesthetics of animated worlds, so much so that I would watch some shows simply because I loved the way they were designed. (Conversely, there were shows I could not bear to watch because I did not enjoy their artstyle. This usually included shows that featured unsettling 3D animation, like *Reboot*, or had a gritty aesthetic such as, *Ed, Edd & Eddy*.) Shows like *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Samurai Jack*, *Foster’s Home for Imaginary Friends*, and *Steven Universe*, shared a common approach of placing bold, graphic shapes within suggestive, sometimes ambiguous, environments. These shows, while contemporary, display visual languages that are reproductions of animation styles that predate them, much like my drawing of

³⁰ Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime” (1908), in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads, trans. Michael Bullock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), 20.



Figure 5. “Digital rendering of Louis XV chair reproduction,” Andrew Presutto, 2026.

the chair which relies on references to the past. As such, these shows are products of a longer lineage of mid-century American animation, particularly the work produced by Walt Disney Studios, United Productions of America, and Warner Bros. As Norman M. Klein and Charles Solomon have noted in their text, *Enchanted Drawing*, this animation tradition of the mid-century drew heavily from Bauhaus principles, Swiss Modernism, and mid-century illustration, privileging abstraction, clarity of form, and graphic reduction over illusionistic depth.³¹ Artists such as Mary Blair and Eyvind Earle, who worked for Walt Disney Studios,

³¹ Charles Solomon, *Enchanted Drawings*, rev. ed. (New York: Wings Books, 1994), 220.

defined this age of animation. Earle, who was an illustrator and landscape painter, gave instant recognizability to films such as *Sleeping Beauty* with his mark making, stunning colour, and bold use of black. His work achieved the goal of creating a film that was a “moving illustration.”³² His techniques and approach to image are ever present in contemporary animation, most noticeably referenced by Dan Krall and Scott Wills, background painters for *Samurai Jack* (see *figure 6* and *figure 7* for style comparison of *Samurai Jack* and *Sleeping Beauty*). Even Earle's illustrative work, not produced for Disney, can be seen as a major style reference (see in *figure 8* and *figure 9* for comparison).

Series like *The Looney Tunes*, saw a similar approach to stylizing background design, with a particular exaggeration in architecture that defied structural logic: staircases and hallways which seems to start and lead to nowhere, rooms with surreal, competing perspectives, and furnishings which blended reference of the highly ornate aesthetics of historical rivalism with whimsical colour and suggestive line work, as seen in *figure 10* and *figure 11*.

Elle Michalka, a background artist of *Steven Universe*, is one such example of a contemporary artist whose abstract paintings influenced the aesthetic of an animated series. Michalka's work is graphically flat with fields of colour which have textured or fractaled patterns contained within. Her approach, which balances clean edges with textural interest, is not entirely different from my own rendering of the Louis XV chair, where textures and patterns are masked within a larger organic shape (see *figure 12* and *figure 13*).

³²Solomon, *Enchanted Drawings*, 195.



Figure 6. “Background painting by Scott Wills,” *Samurai Jack*, Season 1, Episode 1 “The Beginning,” directed by Genndy Tartakovsky, aired August 10, 2001, on Cartoon Network.



Figure 7. Eyvind Earle, *Maleficent as the Dragon Concept Painting*, 1959, gouache on board.
(Courtesy of Heritage Auctions.)



Figure 8. “Background painting of snowy forest by Scott Wills”, *Samurai Jack*, season 5, episode 1 “XCII”, directed by Genndy Tartakovsky, aired on March 11, 2017, on Adult Swim.



Figure 9. Eyvind Earle, *Village and Star*, 1964, vintage Christmas card illustration. (Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.)

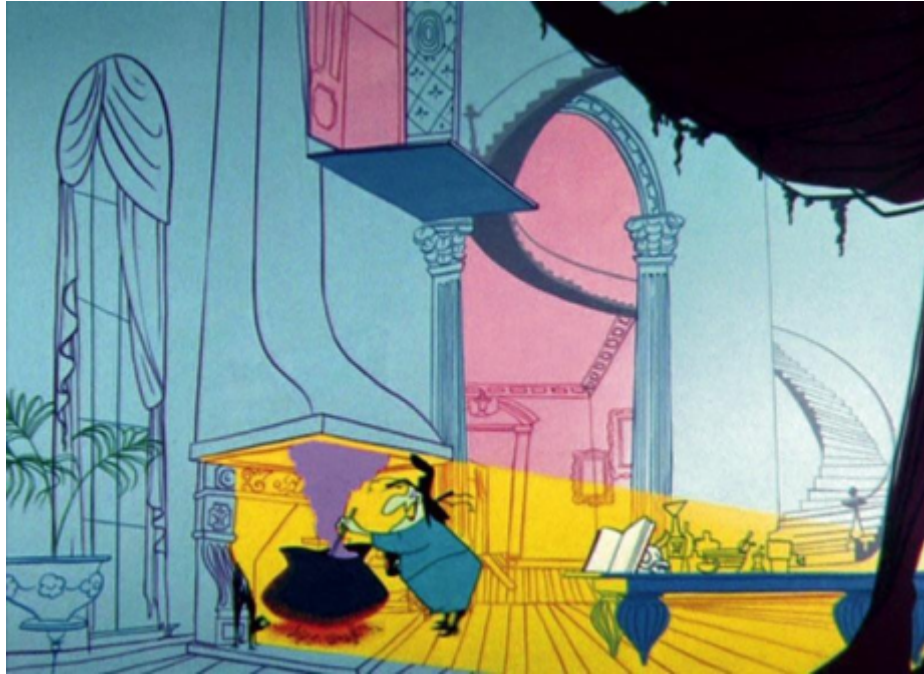


Figure 10. “Still of Witch Hazel's laboratory, layout designed by Ernie Nordli,” *Looney Tunes*, season 26, episode 5, “Broom-Stick Bunny,” directed by Chuck Jones, aired February 25, 1956, on Warner Bros. Cartoon Studios.



Figure 11. “Background painting by Maurice Noble with character layout featuring Bugs Bunny,” *Looney Tunes*, short film, “What’s Opera, Doc?,” directed by Chuck Jones, aired July 6, 1957, on Warner Bros. Cartoons.



Figure 12. Elle Michalka, *Experience*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 36 × 60 in. (Courtesy of Gallery Nucleus.)



Figure 13. "Background painting of the Strawberry Battlefield by Elle Michalka & Rebecca Sugar, *Steven Universe*, season 1, episode 8, "Serious Steven," directed by Ian Jones-Quartey & Kevin Dart, aired January 13, 2014, on Cartoon Network.

The space of the animated world is not constructed to mimic reality, but to reimagine it. Flattened perspectives, striking color blocking, and stylized ornamentation produce environments that are decorative and structurally impossible. They are spaces that resist the logic of realism and instead prioritize affect and visual play. Their detachment from reality also offered palatable suggestions toward the erosion of conventional gender ideologies and queer sexual desire. *Cybersix* for instance, featured a protagonist with secret, gender bent identities. *Steven Universe* subtly portrayed the idea of sapphic love by characters “fusing” together to form a combined entity. These shows, with their liberating themes that challenged *tradition*, were the kinds I would, as mentioned earlier, watch in secret.

I recognize that the animated environments I was drawn to in childhood functioned as sites of imaginative escape. The animated spaces also offered alternatives to normative spatial and social organization. As Jack Halberstam argues in *The Queer Art of Failure*, animation constitutes “a rich technological field for rethinking collectivities, transformation, identification, animality, and posthumanity.”³³ In this sense, the exaggeration and stylized spaces of animation can be understood as queer not only in their departure from realism, but in their refusal of fixed boundaries and stable hierarchies. Bringing the visual language of animation into dialogue with the Rococo reproduction, my illustration of the Louis XV chair presented a hybridized aesthetic which moves across temporal boundaries and provided a point of departure by which ornament, memory, and stylization can work to resist the critiques of fanciful design and proposes a decorative language that is playful, excessive, and deliberately unreal—one that acknowledges ornament as a site of possibility. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Louis XV chairs serve as an aesthetic foundation and conceptual origin point for *Playing House*. From my illustration

³³ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 174.

of the chair came a fabricated version that presented an opportunity to consider how a space and objects that were not made for me can be queered. This version—yet another reproduction—has been laser cut, stained with surreal colour, adorned with marbled ink, and staged with objects that reflect children’s toys, as seen in *figure 14* (the relevance of this production method and material use will be detailed in the following chapter). Importantly, this chair matches the scale—to the best of my memory—of a set of stools that was used by my sister and I as young children. Our stools, which were simplified, stout, rounded forms made of plastic, were designated as our spot. By bringing the Louis XV chairs down to a child’s scale, I validate the memory and childhood desire to sit and play in the big fancy chair.



Figure 14. Andrew Presutto, *Birch Vignettes: Twice Removed*, 2026, laser cut birch plywood, watercolour, and marbled sumi ink, chair approx. 32 × 24 in. Photographed by Bisma Jay.

CHAPTER 4: ORNAMENTATION—*THE BARBIE DREAM HOUSE*

The fusion of ornament with the stylistic language of early 2000s animation becomes a design code that unifies the discrepancies across the rooms of my childhood home in the primary series of my research-creation, *Birch Vignettes*. With new aesthetic rules, rooms which felt charged with femininity can become invitational without shame and the rooms organized by masculinity can be warmed without requiring performance. This speculative design overhaul is a method of putting the interior spaces of my childhood home into drag regardless of their gendered perception.

The power of drag is its ability to undress gender binaries and subvert its presentation. Interior finishes and furnishings are the superficial layer that bear the burden of being gender. Through drag, this burden can be re-oriented: it can be hyper feminized or hyper masculinized or *gender-fucked*. Whether presented on the body as clothing, accessories, and make-up or within the walls of a home as furniture, decor, and finishes, drag is the outer layer that can be changed or reconstructed as needed by the spirit who dwells within.

In thinking through this comparison, drag artist Sasha Velour's performance as a plush armchair comes to mind. Velour begins their performance fully embedded within the form of the chair with only a cut-out in the backrest to reveal their face—strikingly made up and animated by an expressive lip-syncing to the lyrics of *In My Arms* by Kylie Minogue. At first, their movements are subtle: a slight shimmy that appears to be restricted by the costumes' form. As the performance unfolds, however, this restrained motion gives way to a dramatic reveal as Velour breaks the form of chair, showcasing it to be a full garment. Her movements become much more

liberal, as seen in *figure 15*; the absurdity of seeing a chair come to life and dance feels as though it belongs in an animated world where objects are capable of being transfigured.



Figure 15. Sasha Velour, *The Big Reveal Live Show*. Costumes by Diego Montoya Studio. Performed in Toronto, May 9, 2023, at the Bluma Appel Theatre.

I also think of Liza Lou's *Kitchen* (see *figure 16*) as a marvelous example of both objects and space being transformed by material—in a sense, being transformed by drag. Lou's *Kitchen* is a 1:1 scale model that is encrusted in glass beads. The glittering beads make surfaces feel surreal, opulent, and almost illustrative—especially in the way surfaces like woodgrain, water, and textiles have been flattened and stylized. Ordinary objects and products have been made lux by way of Lou's meticulous fabrication. Something as mundane as a bottle of detergent becomes a kitsch commodity. While Lou's installation is a commentary on the unrequited effort of women

labour and the disregard of craft as serious art,³⁴ the use of domestic space as a site of transmutation and subversion is inline with the notion of drag and the intent of my work.



Figure 16. Liza Lou, *Kitchen*, 1996. Glass beads, plaster, wood, and found objects, 96 × 132 × 168 in. (Courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.)

Similarly, Trixie Mattel’s *Trixie Motel* extends drag beyond the body and into architecture, positioning interior design as a performative, world-building act. *Trixie Motel*, a renovated Palm Springs property, is composed of “seven rooms, seven themes, [each] one-hundred-percent Trixie Mattel.”³⁵ The rooms are saturated in hyper-stylized colour, retro-futuristic motifs, and camp reference, creating what has been described as an immersive environment where guests are

³⁴ “The Making of Liza Lou’s Kitchen,” YouTube video, Whitney Museum of Art, 2020.

³⁵ *Trixie Motel*. 2022. Television series. Discovery+.

enveloped in a fully realized aesthetic persona (see *figure 17*). In an interview with *Out Traveler*, Trixie Mattel notes that the motel is an “extension of the character” made more three-dimensional.³⁶ Each room operates like a different facet of Mattel’s drag identity, translating cosmetic exaggeration and gender play into spatial experience. Critically, the project pushes drag into a new medium—where performance, design, and popular culture intersect—suggesting that identity itself can be constructed through an environment as much as through the body. The motel does more than decorate space, it performs and transforms hospitality into a theatrical immersion where architecture becomes camp, excess, and fantasy.



Figure 17. “Still of Trixie Mattel posed in ‘Flower Power Room’ of the Trixie Motel,” *Trixie Motel*, season 1, episode 5, “Flower Power,” directed by Bob Schermerhorn, aired June 24, 2022, on Discovery+.

³⁶ Mikelle Street, “Trixie Mattel Is the New Queen of Palm Springs,” *Out Traveler*, 2022.

In my research-creation, drag, as introduced in the previous chapter, is applied by borrowing from the opulence of Rococo-esque splendor, and the surreal perspective, fanciful colour, and playful atmosphere of animated interiors. Some rooms required a heavier application of drag in order to reach my desired equilibrium. The living room, as the origin point (see *figure 18*) required minimal transformation compared to a space like the garage where adornment was limited to cold tools or a space like the basement—a blank space waiting to be warmed. *Birch Vignettes* is a collection of speculative remodels with origins that are deeply tied to memory. These compositions play with time, floating somewhere in between past and future—a remaking of the past to think differently about the future.



Figure 18. Andrew Presutto, *Birch Vignettes: Living Room*, 2026, laser cut birch plywood, watercolour, and marbled sumi ink, approx. 28 × 32 in. Photographed by Bisma Jay.

The production of each vignette in this series follows a similar process. They begin as illustrations, where objects and rooms are flattened, stylized, and exaggerated. It is at this stage that memory is treated as malleable, translated and reworked through a process akin to the memory palace (as mentioned in chapter 2) where I situate myself within the house. I imagine myself walking through the rooms and the sensation of being in each space. The living room is where I recall feeling inspired by ornate craftsmanship; the bathroom always brought up a sense of curiosity for the ritual of getting ready and the allure of beauty; the kitchen was understood as a space for feminine labour and gathering. In contrast, the office felt like it demanded formal behaviour. The garage was where I felt most like an imposter and where the performance of masculinity was most required. The basement had an aura of dread despite being designated as the site for play. In rooms coded as feminine, the goal is to preserve the sources of inspiration, curiosity, and creativity but remove the association of shame. In those coded as masculine, the aim is to dissolve the feelings of alienation and pressure to perform and, replace them with a sense of genuine belonging to unify the home. The act of remodeling each space is a method of recording affective conditions.

When designing both the furniture and the architectural forms, I am attentive to the tension between hard edges and curves. I aim to shift the furniture from being something to be used toward something that has the capacity to provide comfort, whether physically or atmospherically, through my design of shape. Wherever possible, edges are softened, replaced with rounded forms that evoke a sense of embrace. This is especially significant in objects like beds, chairs, and couches, which I have designed to feel inviting—as though they are ready to hold the body. For example, the basement, which in my memory was quite an empty and uncomfortable space (because of having to feign interest in conventionally masculine activities:

playing indoor sports, watching sports, or performing strength with workout equipment) has been re-furnished with a large, circular couch that appears as if it has the capacity to offer an embrace, as seen in figure 19).



Figure 19. Andrew Presutto, *Birch Vignettes: Basement*, 2026, laser cut birch plywood, watercolour, and marbled sumi ink, approx. 28 × 32 in. Photographed by Bisma Jay.

When I think about an embrace, the artist and illustrator Dani Torrent comes to mind. Torrent's painting practice focuses on depictions of queer men who are always in positions of deeply warm and emotional embraces or enacting moments of care: reading stories, providing a shoulder to rest, bathing, or cutting hair (see *figure 20* and *figure 21*). One of the greatest threats to

hegemonic masculinity is making visible cis men who are openly expressing tender care for each other. The simple act of an embrace, or showcasing that, “men too can hold hands”³⁷ can help dismantle the patriarchal rhetoric that remains pervasive in Canada and the United States, which stops men from being “more open, more close, more trusting, more caring, more physically caring [and from] touching and cuddling.”³⁸ Artists such as Torrent are necessary for normalizing male tenderness. While my work does not overtly depict same-sex care, the sensation of the embrace is embedded in my approach to design.



Figure 20. Daniel Torrent, *Two Figures in Bathtub*, Illustration from *One Day, Two Weeks, Three Months... Works by Daniel Torrent, 2025*, mixed media illustration. (Courtesy of artist's instagram @danitorrentx.)

³⁷ Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, 5.

³⁸ Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, 133.



Figure 21. Daniel Torrent, *Blue is a Warm Color*, illustration from *One Day, Two Weeks, Three Months... Works by Daniel Torrent*, 2025, mixed media illustration. (Courtesy of artist's instagram @danitorrentx.)

I admire Torrent's keen dedication to showcasing tenderness. It seems like an underrepresented quality in gay art that tends to focus on the validation of straight passing, hypermasculinity. Gay representation on social media platforms seems to function as a contemporary theatre of male performance. One that speaks to Judith Butler's argument of gender as "a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed without one's knowing."³⁹ The presentation of maleness seen on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, and dating apps like Grindr and others, intensifies hegemonically masculine expectations rather than dissolves them. Within gay male visual culture in particular, these platforms often reproduce hierarchies that privilege whiteness, muscularity,

³⁹Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

dominance, and emotional opacity as desirable traits. These patterns echo Raewyn Connell's theorization of behaviours linked to marginalized masculinity, in which gay men will uphold the patriarchal expectations that hinder them in an effort to not be alienated by other men or associated with the feminine.⁴⁰ It is common to see gay men's dating profiles that use language rejecting femininity, trans-ness, fatness, and non-whiteness in an effort to distance themselves from otherness and align with the privileged norm.

After each room is drawn, the objects within the setting are isolated and taken apart; at this stage, the entire image becomes a kind of puzzle—fragmented with the intention of later being reassembled into a physical representation. These shapes are digitized so they can be interpreted by a laser cutter, which cuts, engraves, scores, and burns them out of sheets of birch plywood. Each sheet of plywood contains the components that will eventually culminate into a layered collage of wood, many pieces becoming part of the hidden foundation. Some pieces make up the surface of the vignette whereas other pieces are the underpinning, or foundation, of the puzzle; each component is necessary for creating the illusory depth of the composition (see *figure 22*, *figure 23*, *figure 24*, and *figure 25* for the production process).

⁴⁰ Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, 84.



Figure 22. “Digital rendering, in Adobe Illustrator, outlining the components to be laser cut and engraved,” Andrew Presutto, *Birch Vignettes: Study* (work in progress), 2026.



Figure 23. “Pieces of laser cut and engraved birch plywood,” Andrew Presutto, *Birch Vignettes: Study* (work in progress), 2026.



Figure 24. “Mock assembly of laser cut pieces,” Andrew Presutto, *Birch Vignettes: Study* (work in progress), 2026.



Figure 25. Andrew Presutto, *Birch Vignettes: Study*, 2026, laser cut birch plywood, watercolour, and marbled sumi ink, approx. 20 × 40 in. Photographed by Bisma Jay.

Colour plays a crucial role in this project, as an affective strategy that shapes how these rooms are felt as much as how they are seen. Highly saturated jewel tones are paired with the raw tones of the plywood to create a bridge between excess and grounding. The richness of these colours evokes a sense of opulence and introduces a jovial whimsy into the space. Set against the natural wood, however, these more audacious hues do not feel artificial or out of place; rather, the

plywood anchors them, allowing the compositions to remain materially and visually sound. The pigment application is intentionally transparent, acting more as stain rather than opaque covering. This treatment allows for vivid colours to be expressed without drastically departing from the warm and organic quality that the woodgrain offers. The addition of the rich tones are especially important in reworking the masculinized spaces of the home, which once felt overly serious, rigid, and bound to utility.

The bedroom is one such room which has undergone a heavy colour revamp. My childhood bedroom, while a space of my own, was furnished with hand-me-downs from my father's young adulthood—objects that carried his history. The furniture was bulky, darkly coloured, and held a gravitas. While I value the care and resourcefulness embedded in passing objects down, the atmosphere they produced felt misaligned with how I wanted to inhabit the space. The room carried a sense of stiff maturity that did not readily invite play or ease, and as a result, did not feel like an extension of self. In my remodel of the bedroom, *Birch Vignette: Bedroom* (see figure 26), colors are vivid and bring a surreal quality of excess to the space; this approach to colour is borrowed from the visual language of 2000's animation. These illustrative spaces are rendered with colour palettes that divert from reality yet manage to make distortion seem entirely believable for the world they belong to. Returning to the living room, the choice to render the Louis XV chairs in saturated jewelesque colour, rather than their original creamy pastel



Figure 26. Andrew Presutto, *Birch Vignettes: Bedroom*, 2026, laser cut birch plywood, watercolour, and marbled sumi ink, approx. 24 × 28 in. Photographed by Bisma Jay.

treatment, serves to depart from their overt formality and reorient their presence toward something more playful. As Jack Halberstam writes in *The Queer Art of Failure*, “the magical mixture of color and craziness definitely allow for cartoons to serve as attractive tools for the easy transmission of dense ideologies.”⁴¹ Halberstam's writing underscores how chromatic excess is not only decorative, but is also capable of reconfiguring the perception and feeling of space.

⁴¹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 175.

The entire act of making *Birch Vignettes* evoked feelings akin to playing with blocks or puzzles as a child, returning me to a state of juvenility. This return was not anticipated; rather, it emerged through the act of making itself. It is only in constructing these works that I am able to conceive of these rooms as spaces in which an adolescent version of myself might exist without the burden of feeling out of place. In my present, early adulthood, I find myself wondering what my younger self would think if they could engage with this process. In many ways, the act of making becomes a point of continuity. Despite the passage of time, certain investments in play, sensitivities to affect, and desires for acceptance remain unchanged.

Like a nest doll, years of maturation have enveloped my child. While each new layer adds space for complexity, at the inner core there is unadorned, innate desire.

Much of my play at home was solitary, as a result of the shame I discussed in chapter 2; the making of *Birch Vignettes*, too, happens in solitude. While this presents a mirrored condition, what distinguishes my playing now is an awareness of why solitude felt necessary. Solitude now allows for the space to imagine, and to be hopeful while engaging with difficult memories. Play, this time, is animated by curiosity rather than constrained by shame. The presence of enjoyment allows these memories to be reworked and ultimately remapped. Play allows the past to be held differently, not as something fixed, but as something that can be made productive, generative, and newly meaningful. This is especially observed in *Birch Vignette: Garage* (see figure 27). This piece, being more heavily rooted in masculine association, presented a challenge. I had little motivation to illustrate this work due to the negative associations and memories. Thankfully, with the concept of putting space into drag, the space became approachable and, to my utter surprise, it became one of my favorite pieces in the series. When I expressed this to my sister,



Figure 27. Andrew Presutto, *Birch Vignettes: Garage*, 2026, laser cut birch plywood, watercolour, and marbled sumi ink, approx. 20 × 40 in. Photographed by Bisma Jay.

who holds a doctorate of psychology, she was excited to find a bridge in our areas of interest.

She explained that my thesis is offering me a:

corrective emotional experience, in which earlier environments shaped by restriction are revisited under new conditions of safety and autonomy. The work engages an experiential mode of change, aligning with psychological frameworks that emphasize the transformative power of embodied encounters. This act of making or ‘playing’ is really an act of re-authoring, where memory, identity, and space are reconfigured simultaneously, allowing for the emergence of new emotional meanings and a reworking of internalized narratives tied to the home.⁴²

Each vignette is situated within a frame—a site of housing for significant memories and precious objects: familial photographs, snapshots of fondness, collages, pressed flowers, children's artworks, etcetera. Items become deemed worthy of remembering or valuable by their placement

⁴² Dr. Jessica Presutto, in conversation with the author, April 2026.

within a frame. Artist Seongmin Ahn foregrounds the frame as an active device that can add meaning and complexity to a work, or, in the case of her work *Object D'art_01*, can be the work itself (see *figure 28*). In an artist talk, Ahn describes the frame's capacity to elevate without the object itself being altered.⁴³ By framing outlets, for example, she draws attention to their necessity, redirecting focus toward systems we rely on but rarely notice.



Figure 28. Seongmin Ahn, *Object d'art_01*, 2022, vinyl cut installation on wall, 9 × 7 ½ in. (Courtesy of artist's website: www.seongminahn.com)

Jackie Briggs' article "What's in a Frame?" further clarifies that frames are not passive borders when she notes that "Western European frames have evolved to reflect their time and place. The history of their design is a record of styles and practices that are as much a function of practical

⁴³ "Artist Talk: Seongmin Ahn," YouTube video, The Korea Society, 2023.

demands as they are subject to the whims of taste.”⁴⁴ In the article, Brigg notes an example of a portrait by Paul Cézanne that arrived at the Guggenheim within a frame that predated it by nearly two centuries. This combination of artwork and frame points to a collapse of temporal distinction rather than a preservation of it. As Briggs write, such anachronistic pairings often emerge because “previous owners and dealers reframed paintings to reflect changing tastes of their eras,”⁴⁵ revealing that frames are not fixed to the moment of a work’s production but can be continually recontextualized. A similar flattening of time and space operates in Ahn’s *Cloudwater* series, where she laser-cuts frames that reference 18th-century European design, situating the work within a historical lineage of taste and value, while the imagery within—rooted in East Asian painting traditions—introduces a different temporal and cultural register (see *figure 29*). The frame is not chosen after the production of the artwork—it is fabricated into the artwork. The collapse, therefore, is very intentional rather than happenstantial. Notably, the cloud forms that overlap and move beyond the frame’s edge unsettle the authority of the frame, suggesting that what is being pictured cannot be fully contained by the Western structure surrounding it.

In *Birch Vignettes*, temporal compression is also at play by way of drawing inspiration from a periodic language of excessive ornament while fabricating with a contemporary process. Furthermore, rather than an artifact of the past being memorialized in the frame, it is a desire for queer futurity that is deemed valuable by the frame. This process of thinking and making brings the past, present, and future into closer proximity. The decorative and fanciful edges, that sometimes draw on elements of *trompe l'oeil*, are designed to have a make-believe

⁴⁴ Jackie Briggs, “What’s in a Frame?,” *Checklist*, May 21, 2021, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

⁴⁵ Briggs, “What’s in a Frame?”



Figure 29. Seongmin Ahn, *Cloudwater_italian frame_04*, 2024, ink, gold on paper, with wood cutout, 13×10 in. (Courtesy of artist's website: www.seongminahn.com)

quality—allowing memory, fantasy, and desire to occupy the same space. The vignettes, as their name suggests, are fabricated entirely of birch plywood. For me, this material choice is layered with significance. Aesthetically, the flatness of this material is a nod to the flattened worlds and animation where any suggestion of depth is an illusion on a flat surface. It also alludes to the idea of set design, whether sets for theatre—speaking to the theatricality of drag or gendered performance—or playsets—sites where childhood desire is made *real* through acting imaginary desire. Furthering the notion of set design, the vignettes maintain a sense of emptiness since there are no figures present nor clutter that might suggest a lived-in interior. *Even Birch Vignettes: Bathroom*, the composition with the most inclusion of what can be perceived as small, personal objects has been designed akin to a staged home—where personal objects act more like

displays of merchandise, as seen in *figure 30*. The staged home is space meticulously and stylishly designed to elicit desire yet empty enough to allow one to fill in the gaps with their narrative. As speculative spaces, the *Birch Vignettes* are sites of projection rather than documentation. They cannot be inhabited in any fixed or resolved way; instead, they remain in a state of anticipation, waiting for the one who desires them to enter and engage in their play.



Figure 30. Andrew Presutto, *Birch Vignettes: Bathroom*, 2026, laser cut birch plywood, watercolour, and marbled sumi ink, approx. 20 × 40 in. Photographed by Bisma Jay.

The manufacturing of the material is a departure from its original state. Once a living thing, the plywood becomes a cheap material with a primary purpose of economical and fast fabrication. In José Esteban Muñoz's reading of Jack Smith in *Cruising Utopia*, he speaks of the way material transformation becomes a strategy for imagining otherwise. When Muñoz describes how, in Smith's world, "dime-store glitter became diamond dust, and cheap polyester [is] transformed into silken veils,"⁴⁶ he is pointing to a mode of making where value can be given to a material through aesthetic reorientation. The *D.I.Y* nature of drag—the queer resourcefulness—can be applied to interior space as well and relates to the presentation of class, opulence, desire and fantasy discussed in Chapter 3. As an extension of self, one's space can become an actualized fantasy when tackled with the determination of drag and queer resourcefulness.

Plywood is rarely seen as a precious commodity, yet, for my project, it is the primary material through which *Birch Vignettes* is constructed. Through a process of laser-cutting, laminating, and saturating with colour, the plywood is reworked into something more ornamental than its intended use would suggest. Like Smith's materials, the plywood is not disguised. Its grain, its thinness, its structural logic all remain visible. What shifts is how its presentation exceeds the materials expected use of efficiency or utility. The transformation is not about elevating the material into something else entirely, but about allowing it to become something entirely different than an invisible structural material. The intrinsic beauty of the wood is on full display.

Laser-cutting presents an interesting opportunity to push the typical function of the machine, which is designed for prototyping and producing quick, efficient models in service of future functionality. My process borrows the technological capacity for efficiency while resisting its

⁴⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 169.

intended tempo. This subtle subversion unfolds within the makerspace—my work proceeds slowly, with attention directed toward aesthetics in a space “equipped with tools that enable rapid prototyping [and] rapid iteration.”⁴⁷ In this way, the laser cutter is displaced from its expected role. Its precision and efficiency are redirected toward ornament, and excess. The machine, typically aligned with industrial logic, becomes implicated in a process that values slowness and speculation. The objects that emerge are not functional in any conventional sense; they do not serve use, optimization, or productivity. The function of prototyping is still present, however, in my project, the prototype is of a speculative and idealized environment. This reorientation might be understood as a queering of the tool itself as it is shifted away from its prescribed function toward a more affective and non-utilitarian mode of making.

⁴⁷ Josip Marić, “The Gender-Based Digital Divide in Maker Culture: Features, Challenges and Possible Solutions,” *Journal of Innovation Economics & Management* 27, no. 3 (2018): 152.

CHAPTER 5: FABRICATION—MAKING SOFT

While revisiting the memory of my childhood home, like an apparition visiting its relatives of the past, I focused not only on the objects and spaces, but I observed how I moved through space and the ways in which I played. While doing so, a forgotten memory had resurfaced—a form of play I engaged with, while alone, which involved hiding treats inside pieces of decor. I would burrow individually wrapped candies, small chocolates, or packs of gum inside of objects with hollowed interiors to be *found* at a later time. I do not know what compelled me to do so, yet I found great amusement in turning decorative objects that I quietly admired into secret, juvenile, troves.

Objects like embellished vases were of particular interest: something about their interiors seemed capable of holding much more than the artificial flowers and foliage my mother often arranged inside them. There was at least one vase per room of the house. My mother had a clear affection for them, which she unknowingly passed on to me. Each was ornate in some capacity: some were embellished with lacelike florals, some were made of smoked glass, my favorites—with which there was one in the living room, on the dining table, and atop a credenza in the hallway—were ceramic with accents of metalwork. These delicate objects were not designed to be handled by a child and especially not to be played with by a young boy. As Winnicott writes in *Playing and Reality*, “the thing about playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects. This is the precariousness of magic itself.”⁴⁸ And so, I found a way. By repeating this play, I began to reposition these objects as containers and collaborators in my mischief. When I later asked my parents if they knew or if they remembered this, they had no recollection. My tactics of secrecy were well executed.

⁴⁸ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 47.

What feels significant now is that while this presented as childhood play, it was actually a negotiation with the spatial and aesthetic codes of the home. It was a way of asserting presence within a space that was designed to be oriented away from me. These acts of concealment and return allowed for a reconfiguration of the relationship between myself and objects. Jane Bennett's writing in *Vibrant Matter* offers a critical framework through which the objects I played with can be understood as active participants, not just passive decor, in the dissolution of expected, gendered play. Bennett argues that objects possess a vitality that exceeds their symbolic functions, describing objects as being "vital players in the world" rather than props for meaning-making.⁴⁹ This framing is crucial for my research-creation as it treats objects as having the capacity to affect and transform those who encounter them. Bennett notes that material forms "exhibit thing-power: it issues a call, even if [one does] not quite understand what it [is] saying."⁵⁰ This idea deeply resonates with my experience of childhood interaction with decorative objects that exerted force long before I had the language to describe it.

For the production of *Playing House* these memories of precarious play and connection to ornate objects emerge as a series of textile works, *Tufted Troves*. In a similar procedure to *Birch Vignettes*, I selected vases from memory to illustrate. Though fanciful in their own right, the vases in my childhood home were not reproductions of Rococo design. My reproductions, however, continue the design codes used in *Birch Vignette*, which bridge ornamentality with the flattened, graphic sensibility of early 2000s animation, ensuring the series remains consistent with the broader aesthetic framework of the project: a temporal collapse that produces a speculative space which reimagines rather than reconstructs the past.

⁴⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

⁵⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4.

The vases in *Tufted Troves* are hand-tufted with wool and punch needle, translating objects that were once hard and fragile into forms that are soft, dense, and materially inviting (see *figure 31*).



Figure 31. Andrew Presutto, *Tufted Troves*, 2026, wool yarn on monk's cloth, each approx. 32 × 15 in. Photographed by Bisma Jay.

Wool operates as both a literal and conceptual softening as it introduces pliability and warmth while departing from the vitreousness these objects had. Where the original vase required careful handling, the tufted version invites contact—it can be felt without hesitation. Needlework complicates utility by introducing layers of aesthetic and affective value—with its embedded sense of care and attention—that exceed an object's functional purpose. This complication makes

it an especially apt medium for transforming the vase's primary function into a speculative artwork. This transformation mirrors the way I reimagined and repurposed these objects through acts of play in adolescence.

The affective quality of the material has historically been associated with femininity and the marginalization of women's work, where needlework is classified as craft rather than fine art.⁵¹

In *The Subversive Stitch*, Roszika Parker cites textile artist Kate Walker, who “never worried that embroidery's association with femininity, sweetness, passivity and obedience may subvert [her] work's feminist intention.”⁵² For me, to engage with textile work is to engage with a set of cultural assumptions about gender, labour, and value. This becomes especially important when considering how masculinity has historically defined itself against such practices. Beginning in the Victorian age, historians of embroidery obscured previous instances of both men and women engaging in needlework and suggested that embroidery had “always been an inherently female activity, a quintessentially feminine craft.”⁵³ As embroidery became feminine it also became amateur. Structurally embedded within the hierarchies of Western art is the notion that “Art of course has no sex,” but craft seemed to. The “division of the arts into fine arts and craft [acted] as a major force in the marginalisation of women's work,” a boundary that feminist artists and historians have worked to destabilize since the 1970s.⁵⁴ For feminist artists of the 1970s who engaged in the Women's Liberation Movement, “embroidery was the perfect medium to give

⁵¹ Joseph McBrinn, *Queering the Subversive Stitch: Men and the Culture of Needlework* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021), xii.

⁵² Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), xvi.

⁵³ Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 17

⁵⁴ Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xii.

form to consciousness-raising.”⁵⁵ Textile practices became a means of articulating lived experience while exposing the structures that shaped it. Feminist interventions insisted that practices rooted in domestic labour—embroidery, quilting, weaving—could operate as critical, conceptual, and politically charged forms of artistic production.

The long-term impact of these feminist interventions can be seen in later textile practices that diminish the binary distinctions between art and craft, as well as between gendered modes of making. As argued in *Queering the Subversive Stitch*, projects such as the *AIDS Quilt* “dissolve and render obsolete the mechanisms of binary gender,” demonstrating the possibility that embroidery might function as a “revolutionary art.”⁵⁶ Despite these massive shifts, patriarchal practices have continued to implicate the “making of the masculine (through exclusion...) as much as the feminine.”⁵⁷ Masculinity, in this sense, is equally produced through what it rejects as it accepts. Thus, “masculinity became defined through a conspicuous renunciation of needlework yet, predictably, men also retained the privilege of access according to demand or desire.”⁵⁸ Parker highlights this tension with the figure of the “manbroiderer,” a term that emerged as both a point of visibility and a defensiveness in an attempt to reconcile masculinity within a practice that was still perceived as feminized.⁵⁹ Although “manbroiderer” gained traction online around 2009, its usage speaks to the effort needed to uphold the fragility of hegemonic masculinity.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xiv.

⁵⁶ McBrinn, *Queering the Subversive Stitch*, 128.

⁵⁷ McBrinn, *Queering the Subversive Stitch*, xiii.

⁵⁸ McBrinn, *Queering the Subversive Stitch*, xiii.

⁵⁹ Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xiii.

⁶⁰ McBrinn, *Queering the Subversive Stitch*, 24.

This defensive positioning can also be witnessed in consumer culture. Products like “Dude Wipes” or “Kleenex: Mansize” are examples of products that position acts of hygiene—activities devoid of gender—as requiring masculine branding to remain aligned with the hegemony. This logic becomes even more explicit within the contemporary phenomenon of the manosphere—a loosely connected network of online spaces (forums, podcasts, influencers) that actively work to reassert rigid, often reactionary models of masculinity.⁶¹ Within these spaces, masculinity is framed as something under threat, requiring constant defense against feminization, queerness, and emotional vulnerability. I glean that practices historically associated with care, softness, or domesticity, such as needlework, could therefore, once again, be positioned as incompatible with “proper” masculinity. The manosphere highlights an alarming resurgence of misogynistic behaviour demonstrating that masculinity is not innate, nor stable, but continually reinforced through forceful acts of distancing from the feminine and from softness.

Within this context, I deliberately choose to handtuft to bring my sense of masculinity into contact with a material and a process that could soften its terms. These simple tools, needle and wool, are inanimate things with the ability to animate, to act, to produce woven loops that yield dramatic and subtle effects.⁶² As a queer man, I do not come to textile work on neutral ground. My ability to engage with embroidery, without immediately rejecting it or feeling emasculated by it—as I would have in my adolescence, is shaped by the work of feminist artists and writers who pushed against its dismissal. Because of their zeal, these materials can now be understood as thoughtful, expressive, and politically charged, rather than trivial or decorative. The patriarchal systems that devalued needlework also defined masculinity through its refusal. Interacting with a

⁶¹ *Louis Theroux: Inside the Manosphere*. Directed by Adrian Choa. BBC, 2022.

⁶² Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 6.

textile practice now feels less like crossing a boundary and more like stepping into a space that has already been opened up. My, as well as other queer male artists, engagement is made possible by it, and accountable to it.

Artists such as Jim Hodges beautifully demonstrate how textile can function as a mode of transformation through affect and relational memory, an example of which can be seen in *figure 32*. As noted in *Queering the Subversive Stitch*, Hodges practice, inspired by his mother's needle work, involves unpicking and re-stitching mass-produced silk flowers—reconfiguring materials already saturated with domestic and sentimental associations into suspended, immersive installations.⁶³ In these works, the gesture of undoing is equally significant to the act of making: the flowers are first dismantled, torn from their mass production, and then reconstituted through a slow, tactile process that foregrounds touch, repetition, and attention. Hodges' process rejects the original function of the object by reorienting the artificial flowers—a symbol of kitsch domesticity. Hodges' work both acknowledges the domestic sphere and stretches it by using the curtain, an object that can at once conceal and reveal. Similar to Hodges, *Tufted Troves* highlights object alteration. While I am not dismantling and reassembling the original object itself, I am recalling how in childhood I altered the objects' assumed purpose, and I am now representing the vase in a different material. What aligns our practices is reimagining what an object can be, and the making visible of materials or objects coded as decorative or feminine can be mobilized to promote softness, repetition, and care.

⁶³ McBrinn, *Queering the Subversive Stitch*, 39.



Figure 32. Jim Hodges, *You*, 1997, silk flowers and thread, 216 × 192 in. (Courtesy of The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia.)

Similarly, the collaborative practice of Leo Chiachio and Daniel Giannone, who “learnt to sew as boys and today make intricate embroideries together” situates embroidery within a queer domestic framework.⁶⁴ A motif often included in their work is the double-self portrait, which is a reference to the family photograph—an image that “[defines] the very essence of family, affirming and authorizing normative sexual and social identities,” that they seek to expose and subvert.⁶⁵ (see *figure 33*) Their stitched reproductions of the self-portrait expose the family image as “‘always phantasmagoric, fictional, narrative’. It is often in the context of family that queer

⁶⁴ McBrinn, *Queering the Subversive Stitch*, 133.

⁶⁵ McBrinn, *Queering the Subversive Stitch*, 133.

children learn to feel shame.”⁶⁶ This relation to shame within the domestic interior aligns with the secrecy of my own childhood play—hiding objects and returning to them alone. It was not only about play, but about negotiating how I could engage with space I admired, making parts of them my own through concealment.

As I work with the punch needle, I think about how I might have responded to needlework in adolescence. Would it have been something I was drawn to, but too ashamed to admit? *Birch Vignettes* and *Tufted Troves* are similar in the sense that they are designed with the intention of allowing a younger version of selfhood to feel at ease—able to play without peering over my shoulder in fear—whether in space itself or through object interaction. The needlework is a way of reintroducing myself to interests that may have been pushed away under the pressure of gendered expectation. Here, the needle, as Melanie Klein suggests, “is used to repair damage. It’s a claim to forgiveness.”⁶⁷ This description of the needle’s action feels particularly relevant for the act of punch needling. Though the needle must push through fabric—a loosely woven cotton called monk’s cloth—with a certain force, it does not rupture it. Instead, it works with the weave of the cloth, moving between its openings, guiding the wool form loops through the snug gaps. If a stitch needs to be undone, there is always the possibility of reversal, there is no harm done to the monk’s cloth as it remains intact and ready to be worked again. The gentleness of this action feels essential when approaching interests that may have felt inaccessible. It offers a kind of reassurance that there is no lasting damage in pushing a perceived boundary. In this way, the gesture of punch needling offers a meditative exercise where past discomfort can be worked through patient repetition and touch.

⁶⁶ McBrinn, *Queering the Subversive Stitch*, 133.

⁶⁷ J. Gorovoy and P. Tabatabai, *Louise Bourgeois: Blue Days and Pink Days*, exhibition catalogue (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 1997), quoted in Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xix.



Figure 33. Chiachio & Giannone, *Comechiffones #1*, 2023, hand embroidery with cotton thread on reused fabrics, patchwork, and quilt, 85×75 in. (Courtesy of artist's website: www.chiachigiannone.com)

CHAPTER 6: NEGOTIATING—SUMINAGASHI AS SCHEMATIC

A foundational component of my research-creation is my engagement with the Japanese art of paper marbling: *suminagashi* which “is often translated as ‘floating ink.’”⁶⁸ This marbling technique involves floating sumi ink on the surface of water in conjunction with a dispersing agent—traditionally a detergent—that forces the ink to expand, to open. In European craft culture, marbling is best associated with the world of bookbinding, often applied to the endpapers of handmade books. However, Japanese forms of marbling existed well before the commonly known European, Turkish, and Persian method; it was a technique reserved for the Japanese imperial house and nobility. The marbled pattern was used to embellish poetical works and to adorn royal correspondence; currently the oldest *suminagashi* sample dates from the twelfth century in the *Sanju-rokunin Kash*—a collection of poems by 36 master poets (see *figure 34*) transcribed for the Emperor Toba.⁶⁹

Engaging with *suminagashi* is a mode of making that teaches the Buddhist philosophy of accepting transience and imperfection.⁷⁰ Each pattern that forms on the water’s surface is entirely unique and can be influenced by the slightest movement, breath, or vibration (I realized, while marbling, that having music play in the room influenced the stability of the pattern as the sound waves jittered the rings of ink). Once transferred to paper, the present moment is captured—the once active surface becomes a static impression. The gesture of capturing the moment gives the *suminagashi* a highly ephemeral quality. It is a mode of making that requires attention and care

⁶⁸ Jae Carey, “Playing with Paper: Suminagashi and Orizome,” *The Met Perspectives*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014.

⁶⁹ Carey, “Playing with Paper.”

⁷⁰ Don Guyot, *Suminagashi: An Introduction to Japanese Marbling* (Seattle: Brass Galley Press, 1988).



Figure 34. “Two pages from the *Nishi-Honganji Sanjū-roku Nin Kashū* featuring the poems of Ōshikōchi no Mitsune,” circa 1112, calligraphy on ornamented paper with Suminagashi marbling, silver, gold, and ink. Kyoto, Japan.

for the short time that the ink is alive with transformation on the water. (see *figure 35*, *figure 36*, and *figure 37* for the variation in marbled patterns achievable with suminagashi). Through a patient alternation of pigment and dispersant, concentric rings form. These rings do not collide or compete; rather, they make space as they drift away and/or fold into one and other, creating patterns that possess a vitality. What started as an experimental play, aesthetic appreciation, and meditative practice became a theoretical method for my research-creation. By tending to the patterns that were growing and evolving on the water's surface, I realized that the specific gesture required of suminagashi was a metaphor of balance. This meaning-making helped me understand the multiplicity of gendered energies within myself in a way that could underpin my research. Masculinity and femininity are often positioned as oppositional poles. Raewyn Connell notes

that hegemonic masculinity depends on the subordination of queered masculinities and femininities to sustain its authority; it requires binaries to survive.⁷¹ I see suminagashi as a metaphor for challenging this binary logic. Its patterns emerge not through separation, but through coexistence, where contraposition is allowed to circulate. With tender action and attention, the ink does not dominate the water, nor does the dispersant annihilate the ink; each agent plays with the other. In this way, I see a visualization of how traditional codes of masculinity and femininity can meet, touch, and transform without collapsing. Rather than performing masculinity as a fixed identity or positioning femininity as its opposite, the marbling process gestures toward what Sara Ahmed describes in *Queer Phenomenology* as the “queer orientation,” a turning toward multiple possibilities.⁷²



Figure 35. “Media study of suminagashi with sumi ink on sumi paper,” Andrew Presutto, 2026.

⁷¹ Connell, *Masculinities*, 44.

⁷² Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 70.

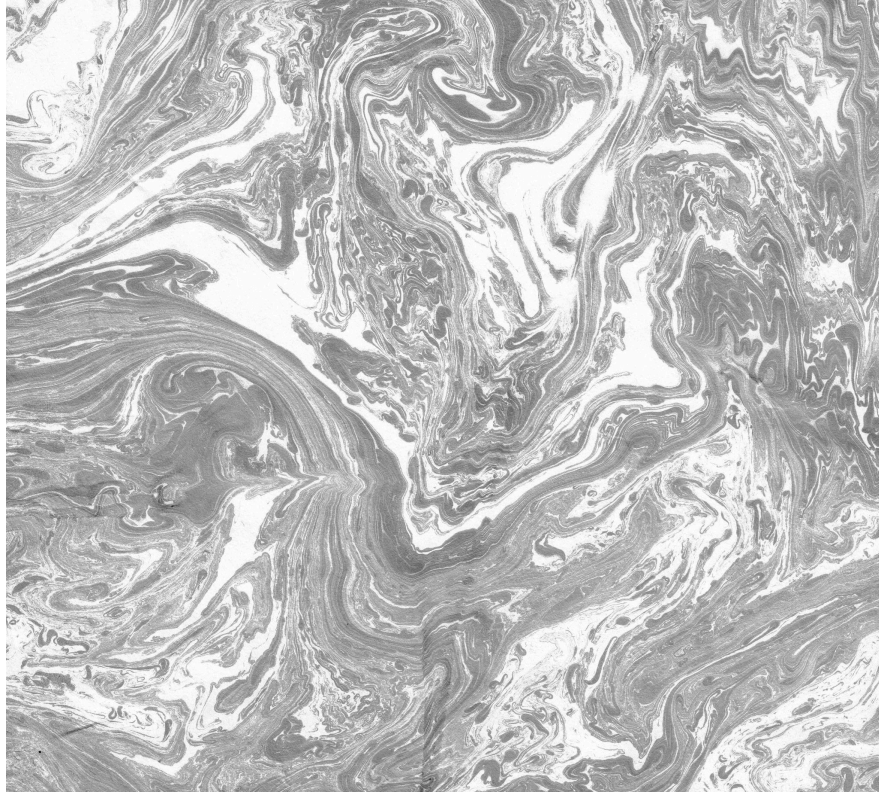


Figure 36. “Media study of sumiagashi with sumi ink on sumi paper,” Andrew Presutto, 2026.



Figure 37. “Media study of sumiagashi with sumi ink on varied paper and plywood,” Andrew Presutto, 2026.

While reflecting on how suminagashi operates as a system of meaning-making within my practice, I find a useful parallel in the work of Hayal Pozanti, who constructs an abstract visual language composed of a “limited repertoire of 31 ‘characters,’” each assigned a specific numerical value or a conceptual alphabet.⁷³ Her forms are highly abstract and appear seemingly meaningless yet they function as a coded system of her own making which can be combined and communicated. In her installation *Instant Paradise*, (see figure 38) these forms correspond “to dates in which human beings created objects or concepts instrumental to the advancement of written communication.”⁷⁴



Figure 38. Hayal Pozanti, *Instant Paradise*, 2021, 95 medium-density fiberboard pieces, 85 × 17 ft. (Courtesy of Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library, New York.)

⁷³ Sarah Hotchkiss, “No Decoder Ring Necessary: Hayal Pozanti’s ‘Ciphers,’” *KQED*, March 7, 2015.

⁷⁴ Ryan Waddoups, “Across 12 Soaring Glyphs, Hayal Pozanti Traces the Written Word,” *Surface*, 2021.

Similarly, in *Ciphers*, combinations of these forms articulate shocking statistical data through an aesthetic and less direct visual syntax (see *figure 39*). Pozanti's approach resonates with my use of suminagashi as it may read initially as purely decorative or aesthetic, yet it is encoded with a conceptual framework that holds multiplicity without hierarchy and visually dissolves rigid binaries.



Figure 39. Hayal Pozanti, *Ciphers*, 2015, oil on linen and painted sculptures. (Courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery.)

Suminagashi is a material practice that allows me to imagine a patterned coexistence with infinite permutations of varying degrees of masculine and feminine energies within a body; it meanders through all the pieces I create for *Playing House*. Much of the organic shape and ornamental patterns I have illustrated coincide with the curvatures of the marbled ink. As a visual through-line of my research-creation, it operates in tandem with the Rococo–animation hybrid aesthetic. For me, it functions as a formal motif as well as a conceptual device that can inhabit

domestic space as decoration that can prompt inquiry or be used as a pedagogical tool. Similar to how certain tchotchkes hold narratives that can spark a conversation about the past, the suminagashi motif may be able to spark discussion—an aesthetic conversation starter—about gender not as fixed or oppositional, but as something relational and fluid.

For the series *Birch Vignette*, suminagashi is applied across a range of illusory surfaces—floors, walls, textiles, countertops, and tiles (see *figure 40* where suminagashi is used to mimic a countertop surface).



Figure 40. Andrew Presutto, *Birch Vignettes: Kitchen*, 2026, laser cut birch plywood, watercolour, and marbled sumi ink, approx. 32 × 30 in. Photographed by Bisma Jay.

The pattern is not intended to mimic the tactile specificity of these materials; rather, it acts as a transferable aesthetic layer. The curvature of the object, furniture pieces, and space in general, was carefully articulated and meant to evoke a sensation of welcomed embrace, as I discussed in chapter 3, however, these rounds also draw inspiration from the rounding of edges and interweaving of shapes of the marbled pattern. In *Birch Vignette: Garage*, for instance, the reflective surface of the car draws from the qualities of the bending ink. Similarly, the curvilinear frames of the series have cutout silhouettes echoing the gapping between rings of ink. In *Tufted Troves*, the metaphoric logic of the suminagashi pattern is mimicked with alternating rings of coloured wool. The patterned rings suggest an illusory depth, shrinking as they become closer to the central point—a subtle nod to the secret treasures that dwell within the void of the vase.

An additional accessory series to *Birch Vignettes* is *Suminagashi Schematics*. While in *Birch Vignettes* and *Tufted Troves* I explore aesthetic interventions at the surface of domestic space, in *Suminagashi Schematics* I imagine the values of balance and coexistence occupying the foundation—embedded into the conceptual architecture of the home before it is even built.

When I was around nine-years-old, my father began working in construction. It was a common occurrence to see blueprints and floorplans sprawled across the kitchen's dining table because they were too large for the desk in his office. In these moments, two otherwise spatially separate spheres of the home—my father's work space and the kitchen's aura of domestic care—momentarily bridged. There was something oddly misplaced about the blue prints in the kitchen, yet in this space they felt approachable in a way that masculinely associated objects had never felt.

In *Suminagashi Schematics*, this memory is expressed by utilizing tea towels—objects that are simultaneously functional and decorative. In my childhood home, however, there was always a towel, which hung across the oven handle, that was purely ornamental—or as my mother says in Italian: “for bellezza” (for beauty). This towel was not to be touched with dirty or damp hands. Its function was suspended in favor of its aesthetic role, while the towel which could be used was tucked away in the cupboard (a sort of Cinderella-in-the-attic treatment). My grandmother also had a collection of decorative tea towels that were similarly not to be used for washing or cleaning. Her towels, stamped with illustrations of regional maps of Italy, provincial pasta shapes, and botanical catalogs, were textbooks that made an appearance whenever they suited an anecdotal lesson.

Following suit with the other works of this research-creation, I begin by sketching the layout of my childhood home from memory, allowing myself to forgo the minute detail like perfect scale or the exact placement of a door frame. The position of each room felt like the most important aspect to remember. When this series was first conceived, I intended to layer my reproduced floorplan overtop a marbled pattern to suggest that my association of gendered balance could underpin the foundation of the home. However this rationale shifted as I began to play. Using digital tools to alter my drawing, I began to fill in my linear floor plans with fields of colour, a shift that gave the drawings an unexpected resemblance to patchwork. Treating each room as an individual patch, I started moving shapes around, testing what might happen if rooms were no longer fixed in place. This movement led to overlap, and eventually to a complete rearrangement of the home’s layout (see *figure 41* for the transition from linear drawing to abstracted composition).

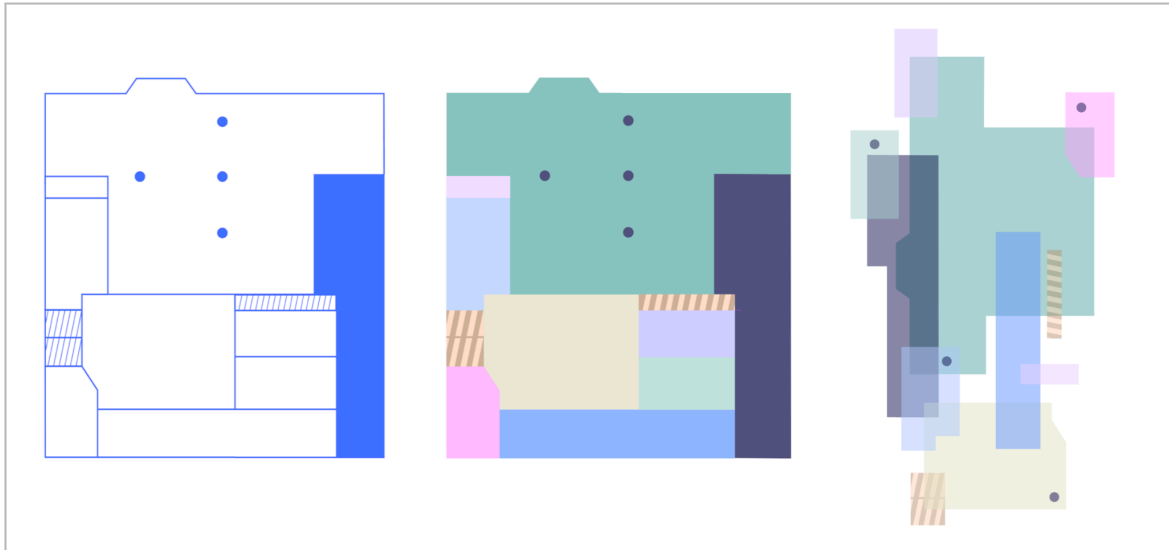


Figure 41. “Digital study, in Adobe Illustrator, displaying the abstraction of a floorplan. The leftmost image is a linear drawing of the floorplan from memory, the central image has been altered with fields of colour, and the rightmost image shows a rearrangement of space.” Andrew Presutto, *Suminagashi Schematics: Basement* (work in progress), 2026.

Through this process, I realized I was digitally reenacting a specific spatial memory: the proximity of my father’s workspace to the kitchen. What began as play became a method of queering and shortening the distance between spaces—orienting and encouraging their contact. In this sense, play operates as a method of inquiry that disrupts the assumption that rooms must remain separate and functionally contained, allowing for new relationships to emerge. As Muñoz notes in *Cruising Utopia*, “The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity.”⁷⁵ Thus, In my re-rendering of memory, rooms can exist in any configuration as they are part of a future speculation that is yet to exist. With the floorplan abstracted and reconfigured, *sumingashi* is then introduced as a visual motif to cement the idea that rooms which originally presented as being at odds, can flow into each other; the house can theoretically be flipped, overlapped, and reorganized entirely. The

⁷⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

compositions are then printed on half panama cotton in the dimensions that reflect the decorative tea towels that adorned the stove handle, *for bellezza*, as seen in *figure 42*.



Figure 42. Andrew Presutto, *Suminagashi Schematics*, 2026, marbled sumi ink and digital renderings printed on half panama cotton, watercolour, each 35 × 25 in. Photographed by Bisma Jay.

This idea of distant or separate spaces being brought together through memory recalls Do Ho Suh exhibition *Walk the House*, in particular his installation *Nest/s*. In this work, architectures and aesthetics of domestic space from the different cities he lived in—South Korea, New York City, and London—are collapsed into a single, continuous structure (see *figure 43*). I was able to experience this work at the Tate Modern in London and was awestruck by its impressive scale, attention to craft, and the material manipulations that made memory feel tangible—as if I was implanted into Suh’s memory palace. Moving through the suddenly shifting architecture felt akin to the ephemerality of flashing recollection. Though my work involves bridge spaces that exist in a much closer proximity, Suh and I both consider ways in which separated interior spaces can be reconfigured and brought together.



Figure 43. Do Ho Suh, *Nest/s*, 2024, polyester and stainless steel, 13.5 × 12.3 x 70.5 ft.
(Courtesy of Tate Modern, London.)

CHAPTER 7: RESOLUTION—*MOVING TRUCK*

Suggesting a final conclusion does not seem appropriate as this work feels more so like the unfolding of a continued practice of revisiting the past, locating points of vexation, and working towards a resolution. It is a process in which art making is remedying wounds.

The chore of moving memories is in deciding which must be discarded, which can be sentimentally stored (with the intention of being passed down and played with later), and which get to ride in the front seat of the moving truck—too precious to ever be stuffed in a box.

What has become clear through the research and creation of *Playing House* is that masculinity was something that arranged me. It directed where I could go and what I could touch; I was “oriented around [it]... taken up by [it].” Now, recognizing where the shades of hegemonic masculinities persist allows me to decide what to omit; no longer “[making] that thing central.”⁷⁶ Masculinity was the condition that shaped my proximity to objects, to rooms, and to self. Revisiting my childhood home as an inquirer allowed me to recognize how fragile these conditions were. The rooms that once felt charged with expectation or shame reveal themselves as constructed environments—systems of objects, aesthetics, and gestures that could have been otherwise. The work of queering these spaces is not about correcting the past but about allowing memory to loosen its knots. As I reconstructed these interiors and objects through drawing, fabrication, and play, I was giving permission to acknowledge that the home I grew up in did not have the conditions to recognize queerness because “queerness is illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight minds’ mapping of space. Queerness is lost in space or lost in relation to the space of heteronormativity.”⁷⁷ My young, queer ways of existing in space were not absent,

⁷⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 116.

⁷⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 72.

but they were invisible. *Birch Vignettes*, *Tufted Troves*, and *Suminagashi Schematics* all work to resist the temporal restriction that Muñoz describes, where “heteronormative culture makes queers think that both the past and the future do not belong to them.”⁷⁸ *Playing House* refuses this limitation. It reaches backward not to dwell in what was, but to reopen it. It reaches forward not to resolve everything, but to see that so much more is possible than what was learned. *Birch Vignettes* provides a space where the adolescent self is no longer confined to survival of the past, but can migrate into a new vessel to play within. *Tufted Troves* materially recodes objects to remove the reluctance of interaction with them. *Suminagashi Schematic* offers a way of negotiation through playful reorganization and imagination.

What emerged most unexpectedly through this process was realizing the gravity objects carry and “the extent to which the [self] and the it slip-slide into each other.”⁷⁹ In childhood this slippage was not something I had the language to recognize. With new awareness comes a shift toward recognizing when or how an object may produce a sensation of shame or alienation and the ability to determine if distance is necessary. There also comes a capacity to transmute the object into a tool of heutagogy through which emotional responses can be read. Ultimately, *Playing House* suggests that identity is something we continue to assemble, disassemble, and remake. It proposes that masculinity should be held more lightly—softened, stretched, and adorned without losing integrity, but instead gaining flexibility. Although home was a site where I was vexed by insecurity, I do not wish to destroy its memory. Instead, I pack what is dear and move forward, queerly.

⁷⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 112.

⁷⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 17.

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APPENDIX A: EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION IMAGES





