

Strange Mouthfeel

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Abstract

“Strange Mouth Feel” explores how imagery historically used to depict otherness can be reclaimed and celebrated through performance and embodiment. I do so to contend with my own identity through a satirical lens. This research-creation project examines the history of abject depictions in medieval European art, focusing on gargoyles and elements of gothic architecture as subjects that represent hybridity and fluidity. The artworks accompanying this paper manifest as interdisciplinary sculptural objects that are activated through live performance. During scripted performances, I employ practical effects makeup and choreographed movement to embody the image of the gargoyle. Humour is embedded within the work as a tool to confront issues that are unpleasant, controversial, or frightening. Throughout the exhibition, sculptural moments that represent drainage systems—such as toilets, gutters and drains—are reimagined as portals. The narratives and characters developed in this research draw on my own experiences, as well as imagery from popular culture and gothic reproduction. World-building methodologies borrowed from science fiction and drag are invoked to represent queer temporalities that have the potential to interrupt and reclaim narratives surrounding horror and the abject in contemporary culture.

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Land Acknowledgment

Moving to a new place set the tone for my time at York University. I grew up an heir to the violent histories of settler colonial descent in the North-Central Saskatchewan prairies on the territories of the Cree and Blackfoot Nations. Relocating to 'vancouver' at age 19, I learned a great deal about land rights and Canada's ongoing colonial efforts while dwelling and benefitting from my experiences on the stolen lands of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. It was also while in so-called 'vancouver' that my interests in the natural world deepened. How could they not, when each spring on the Pacific NorthWest coast, after months on end of rain, suddenly: rhododendrons, cherry blossoms, maple blossoms, chestnut blossoms, magnolias, kerrias, forsythia and forget-me-nots in their many varieties... for miles on end, the streets scattered with cotton-candy pink petals. These plants (some native but mostly the product of colonization) shaped my understanding of self, place, and filled me with

joy (and seasonal allergies) each spring for the twelve years that I lived there. I was deeply saddened to leave this environment behind as I trans-planted myself to a different part of the country in late 2023.

Making in a new place can be difficult. Feeling at home in a new place can be difficult. I have, however, found a great deal of enrichment in learning from my natural environment and about the history of the land I now dwell on here in Tkaronto. Arriving in early September, I first noticed the sumac trees, their flowers like bright red torches along the tracks of the TTC on the way out to York. Mulberry trees line my apartment windows, their leaves a great variety of shapes. A tulip tree down the block from where I live maintained the cones of its spring flowers, taking on the skeletal shape of a tulip throughout the winter. I feel so very indebted to the Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat, Anishinabe, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation peoples whose ancestors have been responsible for the land stewardship, collaboration and preservation in this place for millenia.

The Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Treaty amongst the Anishinaabek and Haudenosaunee Confederacy beautifully illustrates and exemplifies the ways in which I hope to live on this land, especially as an uninvited settler. To take only what one needs, and to foster the regeneration of our resources as to ensure that everyone I live amongst, as well as future generations, can live reciprocally in communities of exchange, with the land and other non-human inhabitants.

It has been a pleasure getting to know this land, these waters along with the many things that live above and below them. I am humbled by their resilience, constant transformation and am endlessly grateful for their sustenance and inspiration.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Land Acknowledgment.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vii
List of Figures.....	ix
Introduction.....	2
Glossary.....	6
Strange Mouthfeel (artwork description).....	14
Performance Script.....	18
Becoming Gargoyle.....	22
Hellmouths and Spitting Monsters.....	27
Comedy/the reenactment of failure.....	37
LOUD LOSERS.....	40
Works Cited.....	46
Works Consulted.....	47

List of Figures

Jules D. Mills, “i know you know” Digital Collage, 2025.....	20
Jules D. Mills, Install shots from “Strange Mouthfeel” Exhibition, Special Projects Gallery, York University, 2025.....	24
Jules D. Mills, Image still from live performance of “strange mouthfeel” in Special Projects Gallery, April 2025	28
Carved Stone Gargoyle 15th century, West Country, England.....	31
Jules D. Mills, “a penny for your thoughts” Digital Image, 2025.....	33
Design from Floor Tile, 14th Century AD, British Isles: England: Buckinghamshire: Penn, (from British Museum Collection).....	35
Jules D. Mills “untitled”, from “tall towering turret” series 2024/2025.....	37
Jules D. Mills, “waterspitter”, from “tall towering turret” series, 2024-2025.....	38
Hellmouth Illustration from "The Hours of Catherine of Cleves", (illuminated manuscript) 15th century AD, Dutch.....	42
Facade of a Hellmouth at Sacro Bosco, (16th century AD) located in the province of Viterbo, northern Lazio, Italy.....	43
Jules D. Mills, Digital image still from “TALL4U” video work, 2025.....	45
Jules D. Mills, “tall tales from the towering turret”, Digital Image, 2025.....	48
Jules D. Mills, “tall tales from the towering turret”, Digital Image, 2025.....	49
Jules D. Mills, Hand-built Godzilla, Ceramic Sculpture, 2025.....	52

“Today in the university we spend far less time thinking about counter hegemony than about hegemony.”

Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

Introduction

Working across disciplines feels inherent to who I am. As a non-binary 32 year old Canadian of mixed European settler descent it seems natural that, like my heritage, identity and experiences, my embodied non-specificity should be reflected in the ways that I make. My position within North American society as an emerging artist and arts organizer without a trust fund has situated me in a necessary state of transience and adaptability over the past thirteen years. 9 housing moves, 8 serving jobs (some of which overlapped), 4 different art studios. It is possible that my high functioning ADHD and generalized anxiety also have something to do with my insistent interdisciplinarity—not being able to focus on one specific thing for too long without being distracted and excited by another different thing. Consequently, there is no one thing that consistently calls to me—not one colour, one shape, one medium—what I am interested in is how one thing might guide me to the next, overlapping in unexpected ways.

As an interdisciplinary artist, I have come to value ‘do it yourself’/ ‘fake-it-until-you-make-it’ approaches to working, especially within institutional frameworks. Having experienced limited access to certain fabrication facilities, technologies and gate-kept making environments throughout my artistic career, I have found it necessary to forge my own way, to insist, to self-teach, to learn from YouTube, to skill share and to lean on knowledge sharing communities. Navigating the university industrial complex as a gender-fluid student has also made me reflect upon the ways in which ‘passing’ or proof of experience (as a craftsperson, an artist, a queer) is often required or questioned in these settings. I explore these topics in my work through modalities such as camouflage, comedy, performance, and disassociation. In the

section “Becoming Gargoyle”, I reference research by theorists such as Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Sara Ahmed to examine and question who passes in our society, and to examine how otherness is historically constructed.

My interest in what ‘passes’ or does not in society led my research towards historical depictions of the abject and consequently, monster theory.¹ Studying historical depictions of the abject subject has also steered my attention towards traditions of European architectural decoration and gothic mimicry. In the section “Hellmouths and Spitting Monsters”, I will discuss my interest in the symbolism and compositions of gothic Hellmouths and gargoyles, considering this genre of sculptural/architectural openings as speculative portals to queered futurities. I further synthesize these interests in the script “Strange Mouth Feel,” written for a live performance wherein I anthropomorphize the gargoyle, embodying a monstrous/chimera creature of my own making through the use of prosthetic makeup and sculpture. The absurdity and disassociation involved in this endeavour leads to my reflections in the section “Comedy/the reenactment of failure”. Here, I elaborate on my interest in performance both from the standpoint of method and methodology. I believe that performance is inherently interdisciplinary and collaborative. It requires the coordination of tension in your muscles, gravity, the rhythm of your breath, and trust in the ground beneath your feet that holds you. Perhaps this is why I am drawn to performance—as it is a way for me to illustrate and foster relationships with the art objects I create in collaboration with

¹ “monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards expression. They ask us why we have created them.

Jeffery Andrew Weinstock ed. *A Monster Theory Reader*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020 (52)

my non-human kin² and continue to acknowledge their agency post ‘completion’ of the object. This belief helps me survive and embrace the queer possibilities that performance offers me, and experience the transformative possibilities of speculative world building. In these areas I draw again from scholarly writing by Halberstam and Muñoz as I discuss the ways in which clowning, performance and drag are important methods of disassociation and survival within my practice.

The work in “Strange Mouth Feel” is influenced by and builds on work by artists and writers such as Alex Da Corte, Bridget Moser, sin wai kin, Mike Bourscheid, Allyson Mitchell, and Octavia Butler. I am inspired by the ways that Mike Bourscheid, Alex Da Corte and sin wai kin combine pop-cultural and historical imagery to build campy or whimsical characters with which they explore, express and celebrate aspects of queerness. I draw from the ways that Allyson Mitchell uses images of monstrosity and horror in a campy way, in order to question historical depictions of women and queers as monsters. In doing so, I admire how Mitchell is able to embrace and recontextualise historically abject imagery throughout her sculptural and performative work, as in *Lady Sasquatch*, *Killjoy’s Castle*. I am influenced by the stylistic and comedic aspects of Bridget Moser’s live and video-based performance practice, the success and confidence of which assures me that there is room for ‘serious’ contemporary art to also be funny. I have endless admiration for the world-building and story-telling abilities of Octavia Butler, who uses speculative and science fiction as an eloquent conduit for social commentary, and the humanisation of the ‘other’. My time working as an intern at the Western Front Society in 2015 also continues to inform and inspire my work.³

² See Glossary: Material Kinship

³ While there, I had the opportunity to spend time with the spirited history of early performance art and artist-run organization in Western Canada. Shout out to Kate Craig,

Key themes in much of the work by the artists I admire are character development and world building. Through DIY sensibilities, drag and methods from speculative fiction, many of these artists deconstruct and reconstruct history and social narratives through a playful lens. In order to address and subvert the violent histories implied in my work, comedy and satire are central to my performances. Lastly, yet very much alongside the aforementioned topics of research, I reflect on failure—what it means to pass, to fail to pass, to fail to fail, thus passing (all of which I hope to accomplish through this thesis).

The work I make resists classifications.⁴ I am interested in the performative nature of all making, blurring where one thing starts and the other thing ends, and the ways in which gestural languages influence each other. My approach to this thesis project has been shaped by a curious web made up of internet wormholes, personal reflections, art therapy, academic research, gossip, institutional critique, and the need to have a bit of a laugh. I hope that the resulting exhibition allows for comic gothic moments that offer a bit of respite, while encouraging viewers to reflect upon the subjects I address with renewed empathy.

Eric Metcalf, Hank Bull, Anna Banana, Carol Itter, Vincent Trasov (Mr. Peanut), Andrew James Patterson and sooo many more.

⁴ By working interdisciplinarily, I also borrow from what Natalie Loveless calls “a challenge [to] monodisciplinary legacies and methods, drawing on a long history of queer pedagogical thinking.” I invoke this methodology as a guide while I re-imagine queer temporalities and embody the inherently queer characteristics of the gargoyle through performance and photography. These approaches to research and creation have been highly informative as I strive to resist hegemonic methods of classification through my practice.

Natalie Loveless. *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation*. 1st ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. (60)

Glossary

This is not a normal glossary. Like many of the other traditions of display that I co-opt throughout my thesis work, I make use of the glossary's literary conventions within my own set of intentions. A glossary is usually found at the end of a text, whereas here, I use it as a place to begin; I feel that beginning my written work by contextualizing the vocabulary I use will help guide my reader's understanding of the narratives I weave. A glossary usually displays a clear definition of universally accepted terms, whereas here I use a mix of my own definitions, poetics, and written thoughts borrowed from academics who spelled things out in such a way that I admire. Stitching disparate concepts, literary devices and imagery together, I create a written chimera of my own making.

Abject

*"The abject lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master."*⁵

Camouflage

To separate from one's shell like a snake from its skin. Or to take on the snake's skin. A method of survival. A method of appreciation. Drag. A method of becoming and self discovery. A sneaky bush spying on you from across the park. Material Kinship—becoming as a way to understand. Animorphs. To personify, to anthropomorphize, to become your own version of that thing.

Sara Ahmed asks, "is happiness what passes?"⁶

⁵ Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.(2)

⁶ Ahmed, Sara. "Happy Objects." In *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham. Duke University Press, 2010. (35)

Comedy

Clown, Bouffon, Parasite, Pervert, Jester, Vice, Truth-Teller, Close-Reader, Fool;

“to render—through a clever pun, or surprising image—an abstract concept, word, or experience suddenly objective and concrete, that allows it to signify beyond the predictive sphere of logic and the status quo.”⁷

Disidentification

“Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”⁸

Futurity

Renewed or continuing existence, performing towards that which does not yet exist,

*“The present is not enough. [...] the critical work that utopian thought does, in its most concise and lucid formulation, allows us to see different worlds and realities. And this conjured reality instructs us that the ‘here and now’ is simply not enough.”*⁹

⁷ Johanna Skibsrud. “To the Point of Clowning: Going Astray with Theodor Adorno”. In *Fool*. Ed. Skibsrud, J. Routledge, 2024. (19)

⁸ José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. (4)

⁹ Muñoz describes *straight time* as “presentness” [that] needs to be phenomenologically questioned[...], stating that Queerness’s ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world.

José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 1st ed. New York: NYU Press, 2009. (25)

Gargoyle

In German: A *wasserspeier* (water spitter), in Italian, *grónda sporgente* (protruding gutter).¹⁰ The Spanish *gargola* and the French *gargouille* (to gargle), which come from the Latin *gargula* (meaning gullet or throat).¹¹

Gothic

“With Vasari the word ‘Gothic’ means ‘barbarian,’ and he holds that the style was invented by the Goths, after they had conquered the Romans and destroyed all the good antique structures.”¹²

In Giorgio Vasari’s *Three Arts of Design: Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting*, he emphatically expresses his distaste for what he terms “monstrous and barbarous” Gothic Design, which he felt “lack[ed] everything that can be called order” in favor of the stylistic ‘improvements’ introduced by the renaissance, stating “May God protect every country from such ideas and style of buildings! They are such deformities in comparison with the beauty of our buildings that they are not worthy that I should talk more about them, and therefore let us pass on to speak of the vaults.”¹³

¹⁰José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.(8)

¹¹ Benton, Janetta Rebold. “Holy Terrors: Gargoyles on Medieval Buildings.”(8)

¹² Giorgio Vasari, *Vasari on Technique: Being the Introduction to the Three Arts of Design, Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting. Prefixed to the Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, ed. G. Baldwin Brown, trans. Louisa S. Maclehorse (London: J. M. Dent n& Company, 1907; eBook, April 14, 2024), eBook #73397.

¹³ Giorgio Vasari, *Vasari on Technique: Being the Introduction to the Three Arts of Design, Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting. Prefixed to the Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, ed. G. Baldwin Brown, trans. Louisa S. Maclehorse (London: J. M. Dent & Company, 1907; eBook, April 14, 2024), eBook #73397.(“Of Architecture, 28).

Hellmouth (entrance)

A gasping corridor—taking in, swallowing, consuming

“By bringing the world into the mouth, we seek out points of contact, of renewal, and of affirmation, as well as debate and negotiation. It is through the mouth that we come to know the world, and to test ourselves as part of it.”¹⁴

A portal to hell, or, a monster’s mouth, thought to be the entrance of hell, because what else could lie within those abject boundaries? Hmmm. But maybe we should take a look inside, anyway, just to see it with our own eyes, to be sure. We seem to be invited inward, to be swallowed.

There is a table inside, and a feast is being served!

What a dark little joke, to eat within the mouth of another. To eat and be eaten.

Open wide!

Jaws clamped open, a forever scream

But one that invites you to try out its strange mouth feel

A portal to the inside

Where we put plenty and then forget unless—

Hellmouth (exit)

It returns

An emergence

Expulsing

Ejecting

Coughing up

¹⁴ Brandon LaBelle. *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. (35)

Spit it out! That which does not serve you, it is your innate right to reject the words, to vomit the sounds and eject the ideas that do no good.

Vomiting is the ultimate attempt to expel what is unwanted¹⁵

As we eject, reject what has already passed through the mouth, we are abjected.

“Acts of burping, choking, coughing, spitting, and vomiting highlight the mouth as a vital passageway, an extremely volatile opening whose sensitivity to the materiality of the world balances us between life and death.”¹⁶

Material Kinship

To acknowledge the various forms a more-than-human material has taken throughout time, and to consider what impacts your hands might have on it during your brief encounter. To listen to the stone. To ask, “[w]hat does it mean to acknowledge one’s closeness to, enmeshment in or even kinship with the material world? And what does it mean to question family structures—the way they organize, coerce and make deviant certain lifeforms—and dwell in other possibilities of kin-making?”¹⁷

Monster

Derives from the Latin *monstrum*, which is related to the verbs *monstrare* (‘show’ or ‘reveal’) and *monere* (‘warn’ or ‘portend’).¹⁸

monster as racialized entity

monster as disease

monster as aging

¹⁵ , Brandon LaBelle. *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. (39)

¹⁶ LaBelle, Brandon. *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. (39)

¹⁷ Edwards, Clementine, and Kris Dittel. *The Material Kinship Reader*. First edition, Onomatopoe, 2022. (2)

¹⁸ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Ed.). (2020). *A monster theory reader*. University of Minnesota Press. (2)

monster as queer

monster as nature, anthropomorphized

monster as political weapon

monster as tool of suppression

monster as misunderstood, sympathetic other

monster as capitalism's worst enemy

Monster Theory

A subfield of cultural theory that looks to historical and contemporary depictions of monstrosity to question the political implications and cultural origins that shape our societal behavior and beliefs about 'otherness'. This field of study holds great significance within my work as I study the historical contexts of imagery pertaining to gargoyles, grotesques and chimeras of the European Medieval period (roughly 1200 CE-1600 CE). In *Strange Mouthfeel*, I remove said imagery from its horrifying historical context in order to re-animate these images through performative embodiment. In doing so, I endeavor to reclaim and celebrate aspects that have been used to debase women, trans people, the mentally ill and otherwise liminal cultural subjects (see **Monster**).

Mud

Squishing between your hands and toes, the food you've mashed up in your mouth, the place where language starts to blend in with that macerated food, and comes out as Art Speak. Muddied meanings, muddied notions, what you might wish to shake off, to clean up (but there is always a residue).

Performance

“The performance process is a continuous rejecting and replacing.”¹⁹

“Performer training focuses its techniques not on making one person into another but on permitting the performer to act in between identities; in this sense performing is a paradigm of liminality.”²⁰

Portal

A drainpipe, a toilet, a puddle, a mouth, an opening. Finding the portal is one thing, knowing where it will take you is another entirely. But if you get to decide... Is that too much pressure, imagining a perfect new horizon? Wouldn't it be great if the portal just took you to a place that someone else thought of and created, and is just perfect? Or maybe we can work together on this, divide our labour and share our thoughts—with some help we might be able to find more portals than just these, and figure out where it is that they should go.

Straight Time

“a narrative that tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life [...] and that the only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction.”²¹

¹⁹ Richard Schechner and Victor Turner. *Between Theater and Anthropology*. 1st ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 1985. (120)

²⁰ Schechner, Richard, and Victor Turner. *Between Theater and Anthropology*. 1st ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 1985. (123)

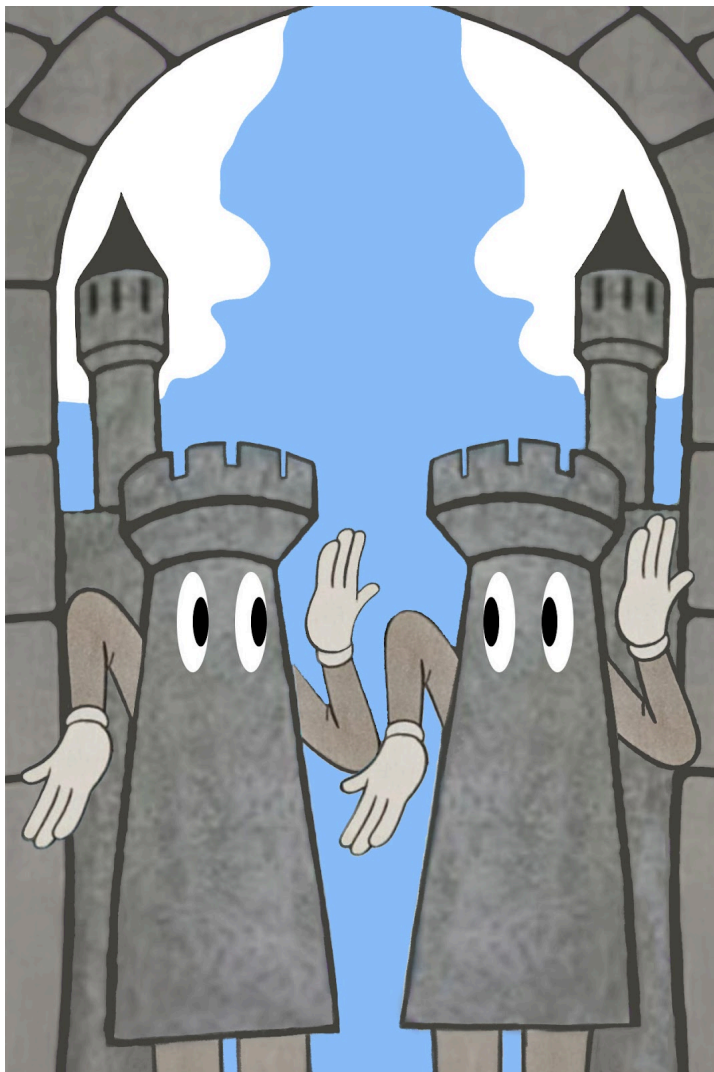
²¹ José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 1st ed. New York: NYU Press, 2009. (25)

Turret

Steeple, Spire, Turret, Tower, Belfry

Capped, Campanile, Tour, Crown, Clocher, Cupola, Conical Dome upon a circular Colonnade (with considerable columns).

Is a tower really tall if it stands alone, and no one sees it tower?



STRANGE MOUTHFEEL (description)

In the gallery there is a small staircase leading to a square platform. A few feet away stands a prop-like castle tower. There is a conical sculpture standing in for a steeple atop the tower. Together the tower with its steeple measures roughly 6 feet in height and 4 feet wide on each side. Both the tower and the staircase-platform are covered in sound proofing panels that are composed of a light grey felt textured surface—manufactured to represent a brick-like pattern. The steeple is covered in a bright purple cotton-velvet fabric, sewn to fit its shape. Topping the entire structure protrudes a slender wooden dowel attached to a length of bright green shop cloth cut into the shape of a pennant flag, which droops downward.

Affixed to the staircase-platform are two ceramic pieces. The first piece sits to the side of the second stair. It is a sculptural depiction of a frog that takes the shape of a utilitarian toilet paper roll holder. The roll of toilet paper that it dispenses is made of the same green textile (cut down from shop cloth) as the pennant atop the tower, and extends down the steps of the platform, taking on the zigzag formation of the stairs supporting it. The second piece also depicts a frog's head with a slightly open mouth, fixed to the right side of the platform. This sculpture also functions as a dispenser for the same green textile, more closely resembling a tissue dispenser.

Two sides of the tower have been carved out in the shape of arching windows with downward points. Both cutouts are filled in with an image; one depicting a subject (me) wearing the tower as costume and the steeple as a hat and spitting a stream of water outward. The second image depicts the artist in a grey monster-like costume with slick hair, grey face paint, plastic vampire fangs in their mouth and a leering expression

on their face. These pieces are lit by harsh, cold coloured spotlights from either direction, casting large shadows of the forms on the walls of the gallery.

For the thesis exhibition *Strange Mouth Feel*, the tower sculpture is activated through a scripted live performance wherein I perform as a gargoyle and interact with a pre-recorded audio track representing the anthropomorphized voice of the tower. The artist/gargoyle is portrayed through the use of extensive visual fx/drag makeup—including prosthetic pointed ears, protruding forehead, chest plate and claw-like nail (and toenail) extensions. These prosthetic elements are painted to resemble a weathered stone sculpture with lichenous patterns decorating its surface.

The performance tells the story of these two anthropomorphized pieces of architecture who are struggling with unemployment now that the castle they were previously a part of has been destroyed. Together they consider ways in which the skills they have might apply to demands within the contemporary gig economy. The work is a satirical critique of the realities of the emerging artist, as well as a way to re-frame historical depictions of monstrosity in a relatable contemporary context. The concept behind the work is informed by material kinship theory, monster theory, as well as comic methods from clowning and drag (see sections “Becoming Gargoyle”, “Comedy/the reenactment of failure”).

The elements of camouflage and anthropomorphization in this work (fake brick sculpture and textured makeup resembling stone) point to the ways in which camouflage (or passing) is equally employed as a mode of survival by non-humans as well as by communities that have been historically othered in society. The section

“Becoming Gargoyle” will further describe my conceptual interests in camouflage and passing.

On the other side of the gallery there is a bench that measures 4 feet in length and roughly 4 feet in height. Its two wide legs, fixed to either side of the bench, are also covered in the faux-brick soundproofing tile seen on the castle and staircase. The top of the bench is upholstered with bright purple cotton-velvet. There are small cutouts on the outward facing sides of the bench legs that reveal a photo manipulated image borrowed from a 14th century british floor tile, depicting a grotesque face with its tongue stuck out. The tall bench invites viewers to sit while they view a projected video work titled ‘TALL4U’. The satirical video is 6 minutes in length and uses the format of a low-budget tv add, advertising the services of the ‘Tall Towering Turret’, who can be rented by the minute, day or year as an extension to your house– in order to “make it look taller and more impressive”. The video includes a testimonial by Gargola, the gargoyle who lived on top of the tower for over 600 years.

There are five printed photos, framed in faux-brick tile, displayed on the walls throughout the gallery. These images document the artist’s performative embodiment of the turret character and the gargoyle, posed in campy portrait-studio style poses, in front of stock photo or portrait-studio style backgrounds. Two of the images also have a sculptural toilet paper dispenser-style fixture attached to them, with a green roll of paper cascading off of it.

Two other small pieces displayed on the wall are:

A small square piece of steel onto which a image borrowed from a medieval floor tile depicting a grotesque face, has been illustrated using welding solder.

A small printed piece framed in faux-brick tile depicts a mirror image created through photo manipulation of two Looney Tunes style castle towers with Bugs Bunny style arms and cartoon eyes.



Performance Script

Gargoyle (*Growling, gasping making gross sounds coming closer to the audience with an empty teapot in hand, gesturing at crowd*)

Turret

“Quick, someone, give it some water already!”

Audience member to pour water into teapot while gargoyle shuffles around excitedly

Gargoyle (*pours water from teapot into mouth, gargling it at first, then asks for more Quickly consumes the rest of the water but spits some out (not at the audience)*)

“It has been so long since I've tasted rainwater!”

Turret

“Forgive our manners. You see, the castle we used to be a part of burned down when the rain stopped. We are all that remains. And really, what is a gargoyle if it does not spew water from a castle’s drainpipes, or a Tower if it has no shorter building with which to compare its height?”

Gargoyle (*dives into monologue*)

“I was born inside of a monsters mouth
A portal to hell
And out I crawled, naked into the world
A world with different rules
the hole from which I came soon after consumed itself
returning to the earth, leaving no trace
Leaving me here
With nothing but a facade to perch upon,
I do not dare go further forth in this uncertain place
Rather, I stay here and mock
From my high place of watch.”

Turret

“Take it easy.
(*to the audience*) They like to get carried away, it's in their nature to be a bit fantastical.”

Gargoyle (*growls at Turret, spits some water at it*)

“We used to be useful, even...
I would use my gaping mouth to adorn the gutters high atop the castle
My own mouth a portal

Out of which water would spew
Like this: *(sip water and spit)*
Or this: *(spit water and spit bigger)*
Sometimes It would land on a unobservant passerby
Too nearsighted to see from where my stream of water arched
(speaking to imaginary passerby)
I spit on thee!
Just spit, not spite
just a bit of jest
Just a bit of rain water..."

Turret

"It hasn't rained in decades now
They've rerouted the pipes
It's time to face the facts
Your mouth is dry.
Your spit no longer comes out in a unending stream
It looks like you are trying to laugh, cough, scream,
But no sound comes out
Isn't it a painful pose to uphold, without the resounding affect?"

Gargoyle *(becoming quite sad)*

"I am like a joke with no punchline
Retired, with no further purpose
Nothing to contribute."

Turret

"Maybe it is time we consider joining the gig economy."

Gargoyle *(goes from looking very glum to gesturing excitedly)*

"Yes... Yes!
But we are limited in our dexterity...
(examines teapot closely)
But perhaps I could find work as a teapot!?"

...To reemerge again anew
...As who knows what...
Useful again! Useful!
A teapot, YES!"

Turret

“Let's work on our resumes...

The last castle I was a part of for over 435 years.

Before that... I was part of the Quarry.

And before that... It's tough to remember. But I was there for a while.”

Gargoyle

“Special Skills...what are your ‘special skills?’”

Turret

“I’ve been a watch tower

a prison

a place to throw things and people you don’t want

a way to compensate for a small penis

...Maybe someone would rent me to attach to their house and make it look more impressive? Or use me as a place to store their ladders? Or to lock away their daughters? Do people still do that?

Gargoyle (*snarls with excitement*)

“Maybe you could play professional basketball?”

Turret

“Do you want to hear a song I have written about my woes?”

(Gargoyle snarls with excitement)

Turret

“They Call me a tower

They call me a turret

They call me A belfry

A campanile,

A steeple

But people don’t seeeee

The potential that could beeee

If someone were to em-ploy meee”

(Gargoyle skips around singing a version of the tune with the wrong words)

Gargoyle

“Very good! You could do a show in Vegas!

But me...Maybe...

I could be a... a showerhead?!

Or a fire hydrant?

A watering can?

A sprinkler?

Or a drinking fountain!”

Turret

“That’s the spirit.”

Gargoyle

“Yes, I’d like that

...to spew again.”



Becoming Gargoyle

“The phobic object, through a campy over-the-top performance, is reconfigured as sexy and glamorous; and not as the pathetic and abject spectacle that it appears to be in the dominant eyes of heteronormative culture.”²²

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler pointedly posits: “What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?”²³ This question resonates deeply with my practice, wherein I engage in repetitive, performative acts of mimesis, camouflage, and mimicry as approaches to studying a subject. Camouflage is a common tactic of survival within the world of non-humans. The history of queer culture also borrows a great deal from this method: acts of passing, indicating, camouflaging, fitting in as modes of survival. In the body of work that makes up “Strange Mouthfeel”, I implicate these methods—employing textiles, sculptural material, prosthetic makeup, and drag—to create an embodied performance as an anthropomorphized castle turret and gargoyle. I am also interested in how attempting to embody an architectural form made of stone might be an act of disassociation, as well as a way to ruminate on the lived-time of non-humans.²⁴ Reflecting on the transient nature of stone, I parallel stone’s materiality to my experience in a queer body, enduring and ever-changing.

The hybrid species (both imaginary and representational) that make up the sculpted appearances of gargoyles throughout the medieval European period remind

²² José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. (3)

²³ Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Oxford: Routledge, 2007. (42)

²⁴ “In the work of the late biologist Lynn Margulis, symbiosis (literally ‘living together’) is not approached as a marginal sub-field, but rather as the driving force of all biological novelty and complexity. Her concept of ‘symbiogenesis’ acknowledges evolution’s many layers of cooperation, interdependence and shared responsibility. Principles of ‘becoming with the other’ seriously complicate the classical Darwinian notions of competitive ‘survival of the fittest’ here, as life is rethought as something essentially collaborative and composite.” Groom, Amelia. 2017. “Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore: A Lichenous Embrace.” *Girls Like Us*, no.10. <https://ameliagroom.com/a-lichenous-embrace/>.

me a great deal of the modern notion of trans-identity. As I study these images, I note how they resonate with José Esteban Muñoz's description of queerness as hybridity. In the introduction to *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, he states that

identity markers such as queer (from the German *quer* meaning 'transverse') or *mestizo* (Spanish for 'mixed') are terms that defy notions of uniform identity or origins. Hybrid catches the fragmentary subject formation of people whose identities traverse different race, sexuality, and gender identifications.²⁵

This idea of hybridity, as a rejection of uniformity, is central to my work, which embraces fragmentation and multiplicity in identity and form. As I re-stage historical imagery through performance, I also see gargoyles as a testament to queer survival. In *Skin Shows*, Halberstam notes that "the emergence of the monster within Gothic fiction marks a peculiarly modern emphasis upon the horror of particular kinds of bodies."²⁶

This aligns with my interest in monstrous embodiment, which I explore through the lens of a feminist killjoy.²⁷ Gargoyles (a subgenre of grotesques and chimeras), are abject representations of otherness that have endless possibilities in their hybridity. And better yet, they mock, they intimate, they folly and spit water from their towering positions atop sanctified architectural forms. In the section titled "Comedy/the reenactment of failure", I further address how comedy is central to my work, often functioning both as a coping mechanism and also as a unifying entry point to difficult topics. Analyzing gargoyles

²⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, . *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. (32)

²⁶ Jack Halberstam. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. (3)

²⁷ "The feminist killjoy begins her political life as a stereotype of feminists, a negative judgement, a way of dismissing feminism as causing and caused by misery. In reclaiming the feminist killjoy for ourselves, we turn the judgement into a project, because if feminism causes misery, that is what we might need to cause. So often the terms used to dismiss feminism provide evidence of its necessity. By naming ourselves as feminist killjoys, we not only commit ourselves to the task of killing joy, we recover a feminist history. The feminist killjoy is a history. The feminist killjoy has a history. A history can be a handle. It can help to know that where we are, others have been." Sara Ahmed. *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*. London: Allen Lane, 2023. (2)



from this lens allows me to borrow from their imagery to communicate similar coding, in order to address histories of abjection through a satirical lens.

Performance is a way for me to process my own identity. Through the use of costumes, prosthetics and scripted movement, I welcome the experience of joyful disidentifications²⁸—at once separating from the self and re-imagining the self. The gargoyle character I portray in “Strange Mouthfeel” employs tactics from drag as a way to explore alternative identities, and also to poke fun at the performative nature of gender. Much like the gothic style itself, drag doesn’t always claim to be authentic: there is always an underlying celebration of falsity, facade, and play. The choice to use faux-brick soundproofing tiles to construct the turret costume/sculpture in “Strange Mouthfeel” also compliment the performance's emphasis on the uncanny, passing, and mimicry.

Through this work it is my intention to create comic, reflective moments that question the hegemonic, regulatory practices of identity. It is also through the use of the imagery pertaining to the abject that I create space for interruptions, intentional failures, and the assignment of new associations as I endeavour to imagine my own version of queer futurity. Muñoz’s writing reinforces my belief in the importance and transformative possibilities of performance. In performing, I accept the challenge therein implied when he states that “our charge as spectators and actors is to continue disidentifying with this world until we achieve new ones.”²⁹

²⁸ “Disidentification can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production”. José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and The Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.(25)

²⁹ José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. (200)



Hellmouths and Spitting Monsters

Monsters are historical indicators of marginalized subjects that have the potential to make people uncomfortable, or don't quite fit in. In "Parasites and Perverts: An Introduction to Gothic Monstrosity," Halberstam sums up the function of gothic fiction as "a technology of subjectivity, one which produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known."³⁰ Through my work, I embrace the creative potential of subverting this inherent dichotomy, creating space to celebrate imagery that have been previously used to condemn or isolate members of society.

Gothic historical art forms present a certain fluidity that I am drawn to. A key part of the theoretical foundation of this work, as discussed in the section "Becoming Gargoyle", is my contention that portrayals of grotesque and chimera-esque sculptural forms can be read as inherently queer, and trans* beings. This fluidity, which has been alternatively described as "lacking everything that can be called order"³¹ by the opinionated Giorgio Vasari, has been rendered in an unfashionable light since the Renaissance. Even contemporary gothic representations have come to be synonymous with the kind of tropes that present as facade, falsity, and gaudiness (perhaps, in part, a result of Vasari's early stylistic condemnation). Nonetheless, cultural imagery returns time and again to gothic settings as a conduit for storytelling. This rings especially true during times that call for representations that echo our experiences that do, indeed, seem to lack everything that can be called order. The uncanny, undetermined shadows

³⁰ Jack Halberstam. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. (2)

³¹ Giorgio Vasari. *Vasari on Technique: Introduction to the Three Arts of Design, Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting. Prefixed to the Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, ed. G. Baldwin Brown, trans. Louisa S. Macle hose (London: J. M. Dent & Company, 1907; eBook, April 14, 2024), eBook #73397.

cast by the gothic style make for a natural setting within which queer narratives can be cast. In “Parasites and Perverts: An Introduction to Gothic Monstrosity,” Halberstam summarizes this paradigm concisely, stating that “the queer artist works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness. Indeed the darkness becomes a crucial part of a queer aesthetic.”³² This coupling is furthered by the fact that many representations of otherness are tied to the cultural histories that define monstrosity, much of which originates from the European Gothic era.³³



³² Jack Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. (96)

³³ “The preoccupation of medieval Christianity was sin and the Eternal fate of one’s soul, coupled with the general absence of literacy among the populace and the consequent emphasis on the didactic use of visual imagery resulted in the creation of many monsters and medieval art. Janetta Rebold Benton “Gargoyles: Animal Imagery and Artistic Individuality in Medieval Art” in *Animals in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*. Ed. Nona C. Flores. New York: Garland Pub., 1996. (157)

The title of this thesis work, *Strange Mouthfeel*, references the turn of phrase “it leaves a bad taste in your mouth”, used to describe an experience that leaves one with a lingering negative or uncomfortable feeling. I like that this idiom references one of the human body’s primary portals (the mouth), and choose to swap ‘bad’ for ‘strange’, recontextualizing the noted affect to underline the indeterminacy (simultaneous intrigue and repulsion) one can experience when exposed to abject imagery. I take interest in the mouth as it occupies a similar set of contradictions. Often considered through a lens of bodily abjection, the mouth is also an integral space through which we consume or eject parts of the world. This interest strengthens my preoccupation with imagery pertaining to gargoyles (water spitters) and that of Gothic Hellmouths. The following subsections will break down both my interest in the imagery pertaining to these two sculptural and architectural forms, and their mouthy natures.





Gargoyles (drain/portal)

Often presenting as chimeras, their collaged bodies are made up of varying anatomical combinations belonging at once to animals, humans, and demons, representing scrambled or ambiguous species, genders, and sexes. These moments of fluidity are where I focus my research on gargoyles, drawing inspiration from the histories and symbolisms behind their forms. There is, however, some scholarly debate and uncertainty as to what meaning or purpose gargoyles did exist to serve, aside from their functional purpose as water spouts.³⁴

In my thesis research/creation, I explore the potentiality of both gargoyles and quotidian drain pipes as portals. Portals occupy a place of inquiry in my practice, and evoke world-building as they explore the possibilities of alternate realities. By considering gargoyles as potential transformative/transportative portals alongside other mundane architectural conduits such as toilets, gutters, and drains, I am interested in queering them through the reimagination of where they might lead. By considering a drainway as the opening of a portal, I reference how queerness can create space for transformative possibilities in the everyday. I am also interested in considering the ways in which the (often abject) materials we dispose of and release through these passages might trans-fer/trans-port/trans-form as they flow throughout the systems that exist out of our sight.

³⁴ See Glossary section: Gargoyles

While there are many speculations around the symbolism that medieval gargoyles would have represented (to ward off evil spirits from the church, to serve as moral warnings, to make people laugh etc), the fact that gargoyles were often so far up atop the steeples and towers of churches puts many of these potential meanings into question. It is unclear as to whether most people in the middle ages would have been able to see many of the gargoyles adorning the structures from such a height.

Janetta Rebold Benton. *Holy Terrors: Gargoyles on Medieval Buildings*. 1st ed. New York: Abbeville Press, 1997.

Hellmouths (To eat, be eaten, and laugh with your mouth wide open)

The second form of grotesque architectural sculpture that my research takes particular interest in is that of Hellmouths. Hellmouths, popular amongst Renaissance garden landscapes, are large hollow stone structures with human-sized entrances carved out to resemble the mouth (door) and eyes (windows) of a monstrous creature.³⁵ In *The Monster in the Garden*, Luke Morgan defines their architectural form as “ambiguous, hybrid structures. Ostensibly, [the Hellmouth] represents the entrance to the underworld, but it is also a grotto, an outdoor dining room, and an anthropomorphic building carved out of the local rock.”³⁶

Similar to gargoyles, Hellmouths emphasize a body space of in-betweenness. This is achieved both through the indeterminacy of their hybrid appearances as well as the focus on the mouth as a portal between the inside and outside of a body. If the grotesque body is always, as Bakhtin wrote, “a body in the act of becoming”³⁷ then, “the Hellmouth exemplifies this idea. It appears as if it is frozen in the moment of swallowing and devouring, and thus of change.”³⁸

³⁵ The origins of this imagery seems to be speculatively linked to a plethora of ancient sources, however, as argued by Gary D. Schmidt, “the image of a disembodied head with a gaping mouth, into which the damned are thrust, emerged in tenth century Britain out of a coalescence of four distinct visual ideas: hell conceived as an open pit, Satan depicted as a roaring, devouring lion, Satan as a fire-breathing dragon, and the cavernous mouth of the sea monster Leviathan.”

Gary D Schmidt, . *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell: Eighth-Century Britain to the Fifteenth Century*. Selinsgrove, Pa: Susquehanna University Press, 1995. (32)

³⁶ Luke Morgan. *The Monster in the Garden: The Grotesque and the Gigantic in Renaissance Landscape Design*. 1st ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 2015. (59)

³⁷ Mikhail Mikhaïlovich Bakhtin and Hélène Iswolsky. *Rabelais and His World*. 1st Midland book ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. (64)

³⁸ Along with this quote, Morgan notes that “The haptic, embodied encounter with the building is, in other words, more important than detached, intellectual experience. (186)

Luke Morgan. *The Monster in the Garden: The Grotesque and the Gigantic in Renaissance Landscape Design*. 1st ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc, 2015. (62)

The context and scale of Hellmouths also shifts the relationship of the viewer to abject subject, asking us to enter its inner sanctum, offering to consume us. While this may be a wry joke regarding the irony of eating (dining inside the Hellmouth) while being metaphorically consumed by an anthropomorphized structure—I fixate on the conceptual potential these forms might have in inviting embodied understandings of monstrous beings. As I become a castle turret or gargoyle through the performance of *strange mouthfeel*, I engage with a similar act of entering and becoming one with the monster.

As such, my research/creation aims to locate in gargoyles and Hellmouths sites of aesthetic and political possibility through staging, embodiment, and performative reenactment. Through these actions, I respond to Muñoz’s urges “to enact queer restaging of the past [to] help us imagine new temporalities that interrupt straight time.”³⁹ Employing the aesthetic of Gothic reproduction, leaning on its layers of facade to render an uncanniness that echoes the horror versus farce that conceptually underlies the work.

³⁹ José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 1st ed. New York: NYU Press, 2009. (22)





Comedy/the reenactment of failure

“The act of fun is forever orbiting the tragedy of life.”
Maik Schüter (*fun that is no fun*), on Cindy Sherman’s *Clowns*⁴⁰

Through my thesis work, I parallel myself (a genderfluid queer) to the image of the medieval gargoyle. I employ imagery pertaining to gargoyles because of their portrayal of composite anatomy, leering gestures and gothic materiality. Stylistically, gargoyles represent societal fears in their portrayal of abject, fluid subjects.⁴¹ However, I consider their imagery in my research/creation for their possibility to be reinterpreted as comical, mocking subjects that inhabit both dark histories of otherness, as well the subversive potential of cultural critique. In the making of performance, I embrace humour for this space of potential duality—to at once reinterpret and reclaim, as well as to satirize historically implied notions.

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva writes that “laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection”⁴² and that “the abject lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the [hegemonic] rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.”⁴³ Laughter, clowning and stand-up comedy in their many variations enable us to distance ourselves

⁴⁰Cindy Sherman, Maik Schlüter, Isabelle Graw, and Kestner-Gesellschaft. *Cindy Sherman: Clowns*. München, Germany: Shirmer/Mosel, 2012.

⁴¹ “The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety and fantasy, giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns,’ a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on a page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again.”
Jeffery Andrew Weinstock ed. *A Monster Theory Reader*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020 (38)

⁴² Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 1st ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. (8)

⁴³ Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. 1st ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. (2)



from troubling experiences, while providing a means to process, survive, and critique. On one hand, gothic depictions of monstrosity allow audiences to find consolation in that, no matter how bad we have it, it could be much worse. On the other, we see in the character of the monster glimpses of ourselves, though the moral of the tale is usually that these are the parts of ourselves that should be rejected or suppressed. However, as theorist Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock points out in his essay *Invisible Monsters: Vision, Horror, and Contemporary Culture*,

[T]he overall trend in monstrous representation across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century has been towards not just sympathizing with but empathizing with—and ultimately aspiring to be the monster. [...]The result is a reversal of polarities in which evil is associated not with physical difference but with cultural forces that constrain personal growth and expression.⁴⁴

In the work “Strange Mouthfeel” I engage with this contemporary urge to restage monstrosity and dystopias as a way to cope with and make sense of my own

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock. “Invisible Monsters: Vision, Horror, and Contemporary Culture” in *Monster Theory Reader*. Ed. Weinstock, J. A. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. (360)

experiences. The narratives and characters I develop in this work are grounded in humour or satire as a method to process contemporary politics and personal experiences around gender dysphoria, sexism, misogyny, and transphobia.

I feel that humour is also a useful and unifying method of engagement when confronting audiences with unpleasant, controversial, or frightening issues. In doing so I employ methods traditional to bouffon, clowning, and drag. Eury Colin Chang—a Canadian performer and academic—states that

[T]he clown-fool and precursor to the modern-day bouffon was not merely a victim or object of pity but was also capable of revealing the complex interior life of the audience. The ability of bouffon to uncover, rediscover, and wrestle with the human psyche is at the core of its critical capacity.⁴⁵

Given the turbulent conditions of late capitalism under which I am making this work, I see humour as a vital tool of survival and employ it as a strategy of critique. In their essay *Comic Gothic*, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik write “if [the] Gothic demonstrates the horror attached to such a shifting and unstable world, it also, in its comic and ludic aspects, celebrates the possibilities thereby released.”⁴⁶ Performing as an anthropomorphized gargoyle or castle tower builds on art historical works by Dadaist and Surrealist makers, who leaned into absurdity or irrationality as a way to critique cultural conditions. In doing so, I also occupy a space for personal and joyful disassociation. I hope to harness this as a way to ease discomfort and make our tumultuous world feel more livable.

⁴⁵ Eury Colin Chang. “Bouffon: The Roots of ‘Critical Clowning’ in Canada.” *Canadian Theatre Review* 183 (2020): 25–29.

⁴⁶ Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik. “Comic Gothic.” in *A Companion to the Gothic*. Ed David Punter. Oxford; Blackwell Publishers, 2001. (327)

LOUD LOSERS

What does it mean to fail to pass

What does it mean to embrace failure, when the goal is to attain a Masters Degree?

To Master Failure?

To overcome failure

To incur debt

(Academically, Culturally, Financially)

To fear failure

To fail to flop

To flop the fail

To fail and not fail

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam states that “[t]o live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately to die; rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and the hopelessly goofy.”⁴⁷ Considering failure as an inherently human experience, as well as an inherently queer experience, I attempt a practice of embracing and celebrating failure through my artwork. In doing so, I am also encouraged by creative frameworks gleaned from my experience with clowning, stand up comedy, butoh dance—all of which encourage and foster the practice of ‘failure’ or expressions of the taboo.

⁴⁷ Jack Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. (186)





Halberstam states that “[l]osers leave no records, while winners cannot stop talking about it, and so the record of failure is a hidden history of pessimism in a culture of optimism.”⁴⁸ In this, Halberstam emphasizes how “queer failure is a quiet one.”⁴⁹ Alternatively, I am interested in highlighting the traces or records that “losers” *do*, in fact, leave on our society and how they might be utilized in the reinterpretation of failure. I am interested in those who lose LOUDLY, intentionally, and in doing so, mocking societal binaries and celebrating what exists despite them, to spite them.

One of the loudest losers I can think of is Godzilla.

Despite Godzilla’s superpowers and super resilient nature, the humans always manage to get it in the end, saving the world (their world) from his⁵⁰ wrath. We love to watch Godzilla put up a good fight...and lose again and again. A twist, however, on this usual monster hunting narrative that provoked my thought came at the ending of the 2023 film *Godzilla Minus One (Gojira Mainasu Wan)* directed by Takashi Yamazaki. Spoiler ahead: The ending of the film depicts the protagonist’s reunification with his thought-to-be-dead love interest, who has been hospitalized but lives. In the final moments of the film, though Godzilla has been ‘destroyed’, a dark, shadowy form is depicted coming from a vein in the survivor’s neck, glowing dubiously. This imagery

⁴⁸ Jack Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. (88)

⁴⁹ “It quietly loses, and “In losing [the queer art of failure] imagines other goals for life, for love, for art and for being”.

Jack Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. (88)

⁵⁰ Is Godzilla male? Does a monster know gender? Many influential women have been depicted as monstrous (i.e. witch hunts). He holds the male pronoun in most English releases. Do we gender Godzilla as male because most historically dominant figures and their ‘worthy’ opponents are thought to be male? In *Godzilla Minus One*, I was enthralled by the “feminine” aspects of the monster’s design—wide hips, scaly breasts. Quite the figure! What if Godzilla was a patriarchal re-imagining of the ‘evil feminist’ as a raging monster...on her period...out to get the patriarchy and ruin society with hormonal rage!

insinuates the long-term effects that would be felt by the people who were caught in the wake of Godzilla's destruction. The monster has been vanquished but the results of its presence linger.

The Godzilla franchise was initially conceived as an epic re-imagining of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and *Godzilla Minus One* grapples with the various effects that atomic war had on the people of Japan during and after World War II. This final scene could be interpreted as a metaphor for the radiation poisoning that survivors of the bomb would suffer and ultimately die from in years after the war. It could also be interpreted as a metaphor for the psychological damage that stays with people who have lived through traumatic events. For my own research and interest in monster theory, however, I shift the interpretation of this final scene to consider the lasting touch of alterity, abjection or monstrosity—that which is not inherently negative, but always transformative. The interdisciplinary work that makes up the exhibition “Strange Mouthfeel” provides an opportunity for me to culminate and embody my research on abject subjects that lose loudly, leave traces and continue to resist binaries. By embodying the image of the gargoyle in a slapstick way, I consider how these images, though intended to reinforce certain kinds of abjection, survive and can be reinterpreted as they resurface in a contemporary setting.

To fail in our capitalist society can come with severe penalties. Conceptual art and critical theory (perhaps because of their classist, intangible or non-linear foundations) are some of the rare spaces that shelter failure in a context of safety and societal acceptance. For most, seeking out art forms wherein failure is an integral part of the learning process is counterintuitive, maybe even radical. We have conformity

hammered into us at all stages of our lives, and even within these fail-forward artforms (such as clowning, butoh, and comedy), there are still rules and outlines that govern success. Even so, in practicing failure through my creative research, I am able to better imagine a future outside of straight time and late-capitalism. In my work, failure is a practice in transformation, a practice of refusal; a way to open up portals into the realities I seek to inhabit.



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