

(UN)BECOMING

by

Adam Atkinson

July, 2019

Director of Thesis: Timothy Lazure

Major Department: School of Art and Design

This document provides written support for the thesis exhibition, *(Un)Becoming*. The body of work uses taxidermy and specimen collection techniques to explore the relationship between the Westward Expansion of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and modern conceptions of masculinity. Through jewelry and sculptural objects, I unravel my personal experiences as a queer individual growing up in a deeply repressive environment—specifically, I examine how the culture and the history of the Mormon Church, Idaho, and the American West more generally have come to define manhood, and how those definitions have shaped how I perceive myself. Using the visual languages of woodcarving, taxidermy, and ornamentation, I create reimagined versions of hunting and botanical objects through a queer lens.



(UN)BECOMING

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Art and Design

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

Adam Atkinson

July, 2019

© Adam Atkinson, 2019

(UN)BECOMING

by

Adam Atkinson

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF THESIS:

---

Timothy Lazure, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER:

---

Lisa Beth Robinson, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER:

---

Mi-Sook Hur, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER:

---

Linda Adele Goodine, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER:

---

Gerald Weckesser, MFA

DIRECTOR OF THE  
SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN:

---

Kate Bukoski, PhD

DEAN OF GRADUATE SCHOOL:

---

Paul J Gemperline, PhD

## DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my partner and best friend, Everett Hoffman, who has stood by my side through thick and thin and gives me hope when the light seems dim. To my mom for supporting my passion for the arts. To my peers in the graduate program at East Carolina University, especially Margaret Claire White, my dear friend and ally. To my cat Snarf for being a constant joy in my life. And finally, to my dog Lucy, who left this mortal plane during my final year of graduate school, and whose memory I cherish every day.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend gratitude to my thesis committee for their assistance through this process, as well as others who have walked along this path with me. To Tim Lazure, for your unparalleled expertise in metalsmithing, and for guiding me through a myriad of technical problems; I could not have completed this work without you. To Mi-Sook Hur, for never holding anything back, and pushing me to find new ways of seeing. To Lisa Beth Robinson, for asking questions and encouraging me to think deeper. To Gerald Weckesser, for keeping me confident, and helping me to see value in myself. To Linda Adele Goodine, for your theoretical expertise, and the invaluable insight into aspects of the work which I could not see. To Ken Bova for providing guidance and mentorship in my studies over the last three years. And to my friend, Garrett Highley, who generously gave his time and talent to help me edit this document.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	vii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 1: TOUCHING TROPHIES .....	8
CHAPTER 2: SHEATHED .....	13
CHAPTER 3: INSERTABLE.....	18
CHAPTER 4: EARRINGS .....	23
CHAPTER 5: SEEDING .....	27
CONCLUSION.....	31
REFERENCES .....	32



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Theodore Roosevelt, photo by George Grantham Bain, Library of Congress, 1885 .....	3
Figure 2: <i>Life of the Hunter</i> , Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait, oil on canvas, 1856.....	4
Figure 3: <i>The Perils of Frontier Life—A Fierce Encounter with a Giant of the Forest</i> , Library of Congress, ca. 1905 .....	5
Figure 4: <i>Weight</i> , copper, steel, brass, bear fur, dimensions variable, 2018 .....	5
Figure 5: <i>Alaska Brown Bear Diorama</i> , Belmore Brown, American Museum of Natural History, 1941 .....	9
Figure 6: <i>Touching Trophies</i> , basswood, steel, dimensions variable, 2019 .....	10
Figure 7: <i>Venus of Willendorf</i> , c. 28,000 BCE – 25,000 BCE .....	11
Figure 8: <i>Young Corn</i> , Grant Wood, oil on masonite, 1931.....	12
Figure 9: <i>Sheathed</i> , basswood, steel, white tail deer fur, tartan shirt, 30"H x 8"W x 12"D, 2019 .....	13
Figure 10: <i>Bully</i> , Kate Clark, wolf hide, clay, foam, thread, pins, rubber eyes, wood, paint, 2010 .....	15
Figure 11: <i>Vulcan's Forge</i> , Diego Velázquez, oil on canvas, 1630 .....	16
Figure 12: <i>Insertable</i> , basswood, steel, enamel, white tail deer fur, 36"H x 12"W x 12"D, 2019.....	18
Figure 13: <i>Cabin Door Still Life</i> , Richard LaBarre Goodwin, oil on canvas, after 1886 .....	21
Figure 14: <i>Buckskin Borders</i> , oak, steel, silver, white tail deer fur, 3"H x 1.5"W x 2"D, 2019.....	25
Figure 15: <i>Seeding</i> , sawdust, rabbit skin glue, herbs, soil, dimensions variable, 2019 .....	27
Figure 16: <i>"Untitled" (Placebo)</i> , Félix González-Torres, cellophane wrapped candies, dimensions variable, 1991 .....	29
Figure 17: <i>"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross)</i> , Félix González-Torres, cellophane wrapped candies, dimensions variable, 1991 .....	29
Figure 18: <i>Seeding</i> , installation view, 2019 .....	30

## INTRODUCTION

Fox and beaver pelts; bear skin rug; mounted antelope head; antlers from various species; bird skulls line up neatly on the mantle; baculums; cougar bones on the bookshelf. Hunting trophies like these lined the walls of my childhood home. In my formative years, I saw myself in the taut skin and rigid bones of various species of the northwest wilderness; my family's lineage is written in these preserved hides, and the juxtaposition of them with my own body helped generate my sense of self. The taxidermied animals of my childhood set an impossible standard of masculinity—they represented a version of self that is fragmented, displaced, and unable to become whole; an invisible subtext that describes the type of man I failed to become. The body of work presented in this thesis is a personal expedition, in which I seek to unravel and rearrange these constructs of masculinity through a queer lens. This paper focuses specifically on how ideals of masculinity were formed through the hunting and taxidermy practices in Westward Expansion, and how I might be able to subvert those constructs.

The widely accepted belief among Anglo-Americans throughout the 19th century was that Westward Expansion was endorsed by God, and it was their Manifest Destiny to inhabit the far reaches of the West (Pratt 796). My ancestors were among the many early Mormon pioneers, and their history is a key facet of Mormon identity today.

The culmination of Westward Expansion and the Mormon Pioneer Movement during the 19th century resulted in a shift in gender definitions in the West that continues to be felt today. The values of individualism and freedom are impressed upon young men of the Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS) from a very young age. The terms *LDS* and *Mormon* are equivalent indicators of the Church of Latter Day Saints, and I use them interchangeably throughout this text (Taylor).

The Mormon Pioneer Movement is a crucial aspect of LDS history, as it laid the foundation for the religion in the mid-19th century. Re-enactments of early Mormon pioneer history take place every summer on a week-long trip called the Trek, in order to solidify the pioneer identity within the church. Activities on the Trek generally focus on faith and perseverance but are coupled with strict gender segregation. For example, the “Women’s Pull” is an event in which the young women and female Trek leaders pull replicas of old-fashioned handcarts along eight miles of trail. In the meantime, the young men are separated to re-enact the Mormon Battalion’s involvement in the Mexican-American War.

The constant pressure of my heritage, and the masculine role I was expected to play in it, was inextricably tied up in the idea of becoming a Western man. My work is largely propelled by an inner tension between wanting to exemplify these masculine attributes, and a desire to be true to the more feminine aspects of my identity.

My research has primarily focused on the question of how these Western conceptions of gender formed. In “Epiphany in the Wilderness”, Karen R. Jones posits that the performance of the hunt and the creation of taxidermied trophies are demonstrations of male domination over natural habitats. One of the biggest proponents of Western outdoor sport was President Theodore Roosevelt, who himself was an avid hunter; however, Roosevelt posing in full buckskin regalia in a less-than-Western New York studio (fig. 1) is a testament to the performative nature of the hunter hero. Roosevelt believed that there was a crisis of masculinity among American men due to the rise of urban industrialism. For Roosevelt, hunting was seen as “that vigorous manliness for the lack of which in a nation as in an individual, the possession of no other qualities can possibly atone” (Jones 39). The solution Roosevelt proposed was to revitalize that sense of masculinity by looking to the West, to reconnect men with their primal instincts.



Figure 1: Theodore Roosevelt, 1885

*(Un)Becoming* began from experimentation using bear fur gifted to me by my partner.

Fur was a tactile material I was quite accustomed to; one of the most salient memories I have from my father's den was the bear skin rug that hung on the wall. The beast was both a foe and a friend, forever frozen in a wide-mouthed snarl as if about to bite unsuspecting viewers. At times I imagined the bear to be my protector, and other times a predator looming over me. He kept me company as I spent many summer hours in the cool dark recesses of my parents' basement. The triumph of my dad's greatest trophy literally hung over me as I developed my own gender identity. His own conquest of nature echoed the narratives that emerged during 19th century Westward Expansion. I respond to tales such as his and others in my work by cutting up and rearranging furs and animal parts to create new narratives.

Stories of expeditions perpetuated stereotypes of hunting activities as treacherous, manly ventures and were widely depicted in art. The image of a man fighting a bear with a dagger in hand titillated the imaginations of the American public, driving middle- and upper-class men out on to the trail. In response to Anthony Rotundo, Karen Jones writes that “men of the late 19th century sought to connect themselves to primitive impulses and to define their lives in terms of passionate struggle” (Jones 39). We can see these Romantic notions played out in *Life of the Hunter* by Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait (fig. 2).



Figure 2: *Life of the Hunter*, Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait, 1856

I was inspired by the theatrical qualities of hunting culture, especially in early photographic documentations. In “The Perils of Frontier Life—A Fierce Encounter with a Giant of the Forest” (fig. 3), a dumpy taxidermied bear supposedly in the moment before it meets a tragic end is clearly staged, demonstrating the artificiality of masculine hunting practices. Dominance over wild animals was encapsulated in photographs such as this one and others, representing a visual dialogue between predator and prey, hunter and trophy, man and nature. From these photographs and others like them, a visual lexicon of masculine codes were built into an American framework of gender. *Weight* (fig. 4), the work I made from bear fur, plays with the idea of trophies by denying the “natural” portrayal of an animal pelt and extending it through

space in various arrangements. By cutting up and framing the fur throughout the gallery, I enable the viewer to experience the trophy as a multiplicitous form integrated into their surroundings, rather than a singular object to behold. I chose an installation format to emphasize the construction of gender dynamics as something that surrounds us in our everyday lives.



Figure 3: *The Perils of Frontier Life—A Fierce Encounter with a Giant of the Forest*, ca. 1905, Library of Congress



Figure 4: *Weight*, copper, steel, brass, bear fur, approximate diameter 1.5", 120 total, 2018

Tangentially, I also turned to queer theory as a conceptual format for upsetting and rearranging gendered binaries in my research of the early West. Queer theory stems from the theoretical discourse of Poststructuralism, which resists humanist ideologies of universalism and normalized modes of being in the world. Under humanist thought, a narrative of knowledge and power relationships removes the cultural and political conditions of human existence, instead

emphasizing an autonomous self, generated through internal universal principles.

Poststructuralism emphasizes “particular forms of knowledge, and the ways of being that engender and become ‘naturalized,’ in culturally and historically specific ways” (Sullivan 39). In other words, Poststructuralism is a critical discourse which deconstructs dominant modes of being in the world, and locates the subject through a cultural lens. This series looks specifically at the intersection of hunting, gender, and sexuality that has influenced who I am, my outlook on the world, and the values I hold. By mapping out this network, categorical ways of being are revealed to be unstable and in a constant state of flux, whereby positions of dominant power can be analyzed. Using queer theory, I attempt to navigate systems of power already in place to imagine different ways of being outside of a heteronormative matrix. One such system of power rests on the distinction between natural and unnatural, and is one against which queer culture has both been defined and has defined itself. David Halperin defines the word queer as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Sullivan 43). In this context queer is positioned in opposition to normal or naturalized ways of being in the world. Queer could be seen to be whatever normal is not. However, the problem in defining queer in this way is that by playing into binary positions of dominance/oppression it, “reaffirms identity in opposition to the supposedly normative other” (Sullivan 45). Instead of thinking of queer as a static position of identity between hetero/homosexuality, queer can be thought of as a mode of becoming. Sullivan writes, “Deconstructing the presumed opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality, the ‘unnatural’ and the ‘natural’ is important, then, because it enables us to acknowledge the constructedness of meaning and identity, and thus to begin to imagine alternative ways of thinking and living” (Sullivan 51). Working in between distinctions of masculine and feminine, I

seek to deconstruct what defines these binary oppositions, using hunting practices as part of a masculine visual lexicon.

In my work, I used abstracted anamorphic forms to play with the distinctions between natural and unnatural. These forms reference the body, using organic abstractions reminiscent of appendages, genitalia, and creases or folds of skin. The work looms on the outskirts of identifiable body parts, instead assuming a position of ambiguity. I encourage the viewer to engage with these objects by investigating what characteristics define a gendered body, and how when those divisions are blurred, a non-essentializing view of gender can be reached. I explore the relationship between gender and power in this body of work by locating discrepancies between binary gender representations, in order to reimagine the dynamics of sexuality.



## CHAPTER 1: TOUCHING TROPHIES

*Touching Trophies* is a series of three wall-mounted sculptures which experiment with the intersection of eroticism, tactility, and trophies. The curves, crevices, and softness of carved wooden forms are made to entice the viewer into having a sensual experience with the work. Each object was an intuitive visual experiment, leading to abstracted forms which recall intimate parts of the body. Much like a fine jewelry setting, the wood is carved and set in oversized steel bezels, and are hung on the wall in the style of trophy displays. Much of my conceptual inspiration for this series was drawn from Jones's book, while the formal qualities were inspired by taxidermy mounts from my childhood.

The aftermath of the hunting experience is often memorialized through preservation of animal skins. Taxidermy, a Greek term originating from the roots "taxis" meaning to arrange and "derma" meaning skin, encapsulate the spirit of the hunt through true-to-life replications (Carr). The poses and intricately crafted skins are arranged onto foam, wood, or wire understructures, in order to produce a portrayal of the animals as if they were in their natural habitats, such as the Alaska Brown bear featured at the North Carolina Natural History Museum (fig. 5). Outdoor sport stores, natural history museums, and men's clubs (among other venues) frequently portray taxidermy as noble creatures, fearsome predators, and gentle beasts setting the stage for an imagined encounter. I've observed preserved wolves hunched and baring their teeth, deer grazing peacefully on vibrant green plastic turf, and birds with spread wings hung from monofilament. The artifice of these theatrics is recognizable, but they are generally accepted as valid representations of the animals as they would appear in the wild. The unseen figures in each of

these living-dead displays are the hunters who claimed the animals as trophies, thus reinforcing the overarching narrative of man's domination over nature.



Figure 5: *Alaska Brown Bear Diorama*, Belmore Brown, 1941

The practice of realism in late 19th century taxidermy developed alongside the rising popularity of hunting as a masculine upper-class activity. Jones describes the social function of taxidermy mounts as "...broadcast[ing] a message of frontier takeover and imperial provenance, the prowess of the hunter hero, and the charm of charismatic megafauna," (Jones 232). The naturalistic display of hunted animals coincided with colonialist goals, namely to capture and contain elements of Western lands for display in private and public collections. Anglo-American possession of the West was made more believable through realistic taxidermy displays, giving colonial conquest a tangible material reality. According to Jones, "...the taxidermist was akin to a faunal forger charged with the task of affecting a masterful deception by facsimile" (Jones 231). The taxidermist was tasked not only with preserving the hunted animal, but with resurrect the beast as close to life as possible.

If taxidermy's realism is integral to the naturalization of masculine control over nature, I propose that abstraction of natural forms can be used as a visual strategy to subvert gender constructs inherent in trophy objects. *Touching Trophies* (fig. 6) seeks to enter a discourse with

the naturalization of masculine codes of possession over nature through sensual wooden trophies. I abandoned the traditional format of using animal skin stretched over an understructure in order to allude to the process of trophy construction; without any skin stretched over the base, we are left with what might be underneath. The abstract wooden forms reference the body, sometimes caving in like the small of the back, and at other times projecting outward like an appendage or phallus. The surface was carved into small hemispheres similar to the balls on a handheld massager, which tempt the viewer to touch their undulations. Viewers accepting this invitation will cross the barrier between passive viewing and active participation in the creation of the object; eventually, skin contact will result in a natural patina, which will provide living proof of a communal experience.



Figure 6: *Touching Trophies*, basswood, steel, dimensions variable, 2019

The forms themselves are organic and feminine, recalling objects such as the Venus of Willendorf (fig.7) or the rolling hillsides of Grant Wood's paintings of the rural Midwest (fig. 8). They also project out from the wall, emphasizing a phallic nature, combining both feminine and masculine characteristics. The viewer is left to make their own conclusions about the gender characteristics of the form they're interacting with. What, if anything, is fundamental about

gender? Why is trophy-making still a masculine activity, and how can the constructs which define it be altered? It is impossible to find simple solutions for these questions, but I propose some possibilities. The wooden forms are contained by a steel bezel, similar to our condition of being born into a gendered society. We are shaped by our environment, but can choose to swell beyond the confines of the mold. I constructed the steel and wood simultaneously, so the form would appear to overlap the edge and exude outward away from the base. Like an overgrown plant in a small flower pot, this represents our capacity to expand beyond what we know and who we were intended to be. I rusted the steel, setting into motion a physical change which will eventually decay the bezel into dust. The base represents the systems which contain us, and the inevitability of breaking them if we keep pushing forward.



Figure 7: *Venus of Willendorf*, c. 28,000 BCE – 25,000 BCE



Figure 8: *Young Corn*, Grant Wood, oil on masonite, 1931

## CHAPTER 2: SHEATHED

Building off my research of 19th century taxidermy and trophy hunting practices, I started incorporating animal skins and other outdoor material into the visual and material language for this body of work. *Sheathed* (fig. 9) was the first of the sculptural pieces to use fur in addition to blacksmithing techniques. It includes white tail deer fur, forged and fabricated steel, carved wood and the collar from an authentic tartan shirt. Material choice was important in developing the ideas behind this piece and influenced the overall form. Additionally, I drew connections to a contemporary collective of artists working in the genre known as Rogue Taxidermy, an art form which uses animal parts in addition to other media to create sculpture, adornment, installation, and other small objects.



Figure 9: *Sheathed*, basswood, steel, white tail deer fur, tartan shirt, 30"H x 8"W x 12"D, 2019

Rogue Taxidermy is a genre of Pop-Surrealism which was founded in the early 2000's by the artist trio Sarina Brewer, Scott Bibus and Robert Marbury. The main parameters of this movement dictate that the art must use some component of traditional taxidermy, that any animal remains used must come from an ethical source, and that taxidermy elements must be presented in an unconventional manner (Brewer). The Victorian practice of taxidermy, from which this genre draws, comprises many materials in addition to animal hide. These can include bones, foam or wood mannequins, and other animal remains which may or may not have been used in conventional practice. Ethical sourcing is also an important aspect of the Rogue Taxidermy philosophy; according to Sarina Brewer's website, "Members were to obtain their materials only from sources such as roadkill, natural deaths, casualties of the pet trade, destroyed nuisance animals, and discarded livestock and wild game remnants" (Brewer). Although animals are used in this practice, they are not killed specifically to make art. Traditional taxidermy forms are also not considered Rogue Taxidermy, and often an array of alternative materials are used to construct the sculptures. These can include paper, wood, metal, found objects, etc. Any arrangement which is outside of mainstream taxidermy protocols fit the bill.

I looked to Rogue Taxidermy artist Kate Clark for inspiration when making this piece. Clark is a contemporary artist working in New York City who fabricates taxidermy sculptures of animals with human faces. Her work is simultaneously unsettling and beautiful. Her piece *Bully* (fig.10), for instance, depicts a tense moment between two wolf-human hybrid creatures which is disquieting, but also familiar to anyone who grew up with bullies in school. Her work seeks to find commonality between human and animal experiences, drawing upon the binary opposition that separates our worlds and recombining them to represent our similarities. In her artist statement she writes that "the fusion of human and animal that I create presents a fiction

suggesting that our human state is fully realized when we acknowledge both our current programming and our natural instincts” (Clark). Embedded in this statement is the idea that despite our cultivated lifestyles, on the inside we’re also instinctively animals.



Figure 10: *Bully*, Kate Clark, wolf hide, clay, foam, thread, pins, rubber eyes, wood, paint, 2010

*Sheathed* is a trophy exploring the relationship between captor and captive. The wooden form is carved from laminated blocks of wood which were roughed out, intricately detailed, and finally sanded to a smooth finish. The phallic form extends upward, emerging out of white tail deer fur at the base. The collar of a Pendleton tartan shirt is embedded in the fur, integrating the garment and deer skin into a single piece. Embedded in the tip of the main body is a hand-forged steel hook, hung from a steel base attached to the wall. These components play between masculine-coded methods of making, organic feminine forms, and animal-human relationships.

Blacksmithing, wood carving, and taxidermy are all practices which have historical associations as masculine practices. As makers, our abilities are not defined by gender and there is nothing essential about a medium which makes it a male or female practice. However, the image of sweaty, bare-chested men hammering thick steel rods is active in my mind’s eye when I



think of the blacksmith. Diego Velázquez's painting *Vulcan's Forge* illustrates this common perception (fig. 11). Active, loud, and dangerous methods are linked to masculine acts of producing art. I use these associations to subvert the autonomous male subject by making him an object of desire. In this case the wooden phallus is penetrated by the steel rod at the soft, curving tip, reversing the active role of penetrator to the submissive role of penetrated. Hanging the piece on a wall hook reinforces the vulnerable state of the object.



Figure 11: *Vulcan's Forge*, Diego Velázquez, oil on canvas, 1630

The relationship between tartan fabric, deer skin, and phallic elements comment on the ways gender is performed and culturally recognized. The phallus is a symbol for the human penis, and is commonly used as a metaphorical reference to power and virility. *Sheathed* plays on the idea that gender is in many ways a drag performance, which is normalized in everyday life and made invisible. I used the fabric and deer fur to draw attention to social constructs of masculinity in juxtaposition to the phallus. Tartan refers to specific fabric patterns in Scottish clan traditions; it was commonly worn by Scottish Highlanders until the English defeated them in the Battle of Culloden in 1746 and prohibited its use until 1785 (Johnson). Tartans are registered to specific clans, and their patterning must be verified to be considered authentic. In

the United States tartan fabrics are commonly associated with clothing worn by lumberjacks. I found the idea of an authentic phallus to be of interest, and chose to incorporate the shirt into the fur, securing the garment to the bottom of the sculpture. By using discarded deer fur and tartan fabric, I question what makes an individual an authentic man.

### CHAPTER 3: INSERTABLE

*Insertable* (fig. 12) was inspired by botanical and animal forms significant to my upbringing as a sexually repressed queer kid in Idaho. The boundaries between feminine and masculine objects were strictly imposed on my interactions with the world: I wasn't allowed to use or play with girls' toys and clothes, and was encouraged to instead enjoy trucks, cowboy boots, and guns. Yet, despite my parent's early interventions, my first sexual thoughts were oriented toward other boys. In the end, I turned out to be a fem gay boy that loved to pick syringas.



Figure 12: *Insertable*, basswood, steel, enamel, white tail deer fur, 36"L x 12"W x 12"D, 2019

Gendered symbols including flowers, the phallus, and animal skins all played a part in the conceptualization of this piece. The floral aspect was derived from Lewis and Clarks' botanical specimens. In fact, their story is central to the history of Idaho's eventual induction into the

United States, and their legacy as brave male explorers was impressed upon me at a very young age.

The “Corps of Discovery” led by Merriweather Lewis and William Clark under the direction of Thomas Jefferson in 1804-1806 laid the groundwork for imperialist expansion in the West, and would eventually lead to the establishment of the Oregon Territory (Furtwangler 1). Idaho would emerge from the Oregon Territory as a state in 1890. The *Philadelphus lewisii*, known commonly as the syringa, was named after Lewis, the botanical expert on the expedition (Awkwardbotany), and became the state flower of Idaho in 1931. This was the flower I chose to use in this piece.

The syringa was documented on the Lewis and Clark expedition. The band of soldiers and explorers were originally sent to discover a passage from the east coast to the Pacific Ocean along the Mississippi river. However, passage west along the Mississippi proved to be impossible, and instead they returned with a vast array of floral and faunal specimens, drawings, and scientific notes, including the syringa (Furtwangler 4). The syringa came to represent a form of state-sponsored containment. This flower was appropriated in honor of Lewis through the renaming of an indigenous plant. The naming, collecting and cataloguing of botanical objects by the Lewis and Clark expedition on the one hand furthered an understanding of the natural world, on the other, their methods of defining and categorizing these plants erased the history of their use prior to their “discovery,” ultimately reducing them to a symbol of beauty for the white colonialist state.

I am drawn to flowers because of their cultural association as a feminine symbol. Other defining terms for flowers allude to their fragility, beauty, and ephemerality. Each flower will eventually wither and decay, leaving behind a crumbled body to feed the many seeds it leaves

behind. The link between flowers as feminine object with frailty and temporal beauty makes them seem disposable. They only have value when in full bloom. I felt the need to represent flowers in a different way, reimagining their association with gender.

I chose the syringa because it represents my history as an Idahoan, my affinity with the feminine, and my heritage from a family of early pioneers. Each flower is fabricated from steel sheet and welded to a thick steel ring. The surfaces of the flowers are painted with enamel, a common practice to preserve steel. I abraded the edges and rusted the entire form to create a sense of entropy. I believe flowers will eventually become ubiquitous for a spectrum of gendered experiences, and the rusted surface treatment visually and physically sets transformation in motion. The balanced form of the circle will decay in tandem with the flowers, until the piece reaches a breaking point and falls apart. My hope in this part of the piece is that our understanding of gender will shift over time, and lead to something equitable. This part is integral to the full piece.

I was inspired by Richard LaBarre Goodwin's painting *Cabin Door Still Life* (fig. 13) for the overall construction. Goodwin was an active American *trompe-l'oeil* painter at end of the 19th century. The content of his still life paintings most often represented artifacts of masculine ventures such as the hunting paraphernalia of *Cabin Door Still Life*. This image commemorates the hunter's experience, referencing both tools of the hunt and prey strung up on hooks. The door behind the still life arrangement provides a threshold, beyond the viewer's eye as if to say "this is a den of men." I find the overall message to be circumscribed. In reaction, I created my own assemblage from carved wooden phallic forms, and strung them up in similar fashion to the steel flower ring. If Goodwin's vision of a hunter's den is exclusively for men, who's to say what

might happen beyond those doors? In my erotic imagination, a den of men would hopefully lead to something more promiscuous.



Figure 13: *Cabin Door Still Life*, Richard LaBarre Goodwin, oil on canvas, after 1886

While making *Sheathed* I tried placing myself in Goodwin's shoes. What arrangement would I put on the door if I wanted to send a message to the viewer? I'm not a hunter of animals, so the instruments in my toolbox wouldn't exhibit a satchel, bullhorn, or strung birds. My hunting excursion would inevitably lead to desire. The phallic forms allude to sex toys such as anal plugs, dildos, and vibrators. At the base of each of these are a ring, which in the mind's eye could be used to grasp with the fingers while plunging into an unnamed orifice. Below the plugs are patches of white tail deer fur, pinned with copper rivets to the body of the piece. They allude to taxidermy, which by definition is the arrangement of skin. Simultaneously, the patches of fur also suggest pubic hair, leading the gaze back to the body. The animal object in this case becomes a tool to be used for pleasure. Each one is strung from fishing drop line, attached to

hand forged hooks, and hung from the rusted steel circle. By placing the flowers above the phalluses the gender hierarchy is upset, hinging the fate of these penetrative forms on the passage of time.

## CHAPTER 4: EARRINGS

In addition to the sculptural forms created in this body of work, I made an extensive series of earrings exploring similar themes of the early American West. I constructed the earrings and the sculpture simultaneously, creating a visual dialogue in which the jewelry influenced formal aspects of the sculpture and vice versa. The cohesion of aesthetics was important in drawing connections between each of the pieces, despite the difference in scale and utility. I prize both formats equally because they each have unique characteristics to offer the viewer. The small scale of jewelry encourages an intimate experience; it is also inherently connected to the body, which offered me a mobile site to explore. Using wood carving and taxidermy elements, I continue to hash out ideas encountered in the early West as they intersect with body ornament, sexuality, and my own experience.

Male body adornment, and particularly piercing the male body, is a site of contention in my past that provided the impetus for making these earrings. The Mormon church imposes a rigid code of conduct and dress for men and women; adherence to that code is considered a moral duty, and is prerequisite to full membership; to identify as a member of the church means to look and play the part. In an address to the young Mormon men and women in 2000, the prophet Gordon B. Hinckley, then president of the church, explained the church's official position on bodily piercings. "...earrings and rings placed in other parts of the body... are not manly," Hinckley explained. "They are not attractive. You young men look better without them, and I believe you will feel better without them" (Hinckley). While this may seem like a benign suggestion, the word of the prophet for Mormons is akin to the word of God.

I grew up questioning the legitimacy of gender divisions within and outside of the church. While Hinckley's advisement may seem localized and small, it helped standardize



reinforcement for heteronormative gender expression amid many other regulations. Intrinsic in his words is the sentiment that adornment is predominantly meant for women, while the unornamented male is ideal.

This has not been an uncommon thought in European and American ideals on adornment and beauty. Adolf Loos, a prominent architect at the beginning of the 20th century and a seminal figure in the early Modernist Movement, wrote extensively on ornament as anti-modern, and went as far as denouncing it as a crime. Loos' essay "Ornament and Crime," written in 1908, focused specifically on the idea of social progress to equate ornament with a degenerate criminal act. One section in particular notes "...not only is ornament produced by criminals but also a crime is committed through the fact that ornament inflicts serious injury on people's health, on the national budget, and hence on cultural evolution" (Conrad 21). In the original context of his essay the criminals he refers to are those who have not yet committed to a modernist future; "stragglers," as he calls them. In contrast, he concludes the essay on the "modern man" writing, "His individuality is so strong that he does not need to express it any longer by his clothing. Lack of ornament is a sign of spiritual strength. Modern man uses the ornaments of earlier or alien cultures as he sees fit. He concentrates his own inventiveness on other things." (Conrad 24). It is clear in his final remarks that he considers ornament the domain of the those other than white men—which throughout the essay are read as the feminine and primitive, while the unadorned Eurocentric male is the master of civilization and Modernism.

Each pair in this series tells a story about being irregular, strange, and queer. The driving force for these earrings was a desire to create an object for my younger self, and other individuals seeking to adorn themselves through a queer lens. As with many of the sculptural pieces, I played with different visual strategies for subverting ideas of masculinity. The phallus

featured prominently in carved wooden forms, and was adorned or altered with floral symbols, deer fur, and metal components. Similar to *Insertable*, flowers from the Lewis and Clark expedition were used to reference the feminine, and talk back to my past.

*Buckskin Borders* (fig. 14) is one piece using flowers from the Lewis and Clark expedition I'd like to highlight in this series. *Buckskin Borders* was inspired in part by miniature eye portraits, or "lover's eye" as they are sometimes called, of the late Georgian Period. The Prince of Wales, later George IV, is believed to have started this fashionable trend in late 18th century England. Having fallen in love with the widow Maria Fitzherbert, he pursued and eventually married her in a secret ceremony, despite King George III's wishes. The Prince of Wales kept the oval lover's eye brooch of Maria hidden under his lapel as a symbol of their secret love (Grootenboer 496).



Figure 14: *Buckskin Borders*, oak, steel, silver, white tail deer fur, 3"L x 1.5"W x 2"D, 2019

Being forced to hide the desire of someone you love parallels the coming-out story common to many LGBTQ+ people. The oval format of the Prince of Wales's miniature eye portrait was a direct inspiration for this piece. I carved the ovals out of oak and burned tiny holes throughout the surface into an abstract, unrecognizable design. By keeping the burnt imagery ambiguous, I reflect the experience of realizing desire for someone of the same sex but not being

able to find the words to describe it. I was trained from childhood to believe heterosexuality was the only correct relationship model, and it took many years to acknowledge my homosexuality; the deer fur encapsulating the form represents a containment of those feelings. Each oval is hung from the ear hook, dangling between fabricated steel rabbitbrush flowers, referencing another species found on the Lewis and Clark expedition.

## CHAPTER 5: SEEDING

The final piece in this body of work, *Seeding* (fig.15), is an installation and social practice project which encourages community building, material transformation, and reciprocal generosity. The work consisted of over 500 sawdust-glue composite casts with seeds embedded on the inside. Essentially they were seed bombs. In keeping with the overall visual aesthetic of the exhibition, each seed bomb was an abstracted, organic form. I drew inspiration from Mary Jane Jacob's essay "Reciprocal Generosity" which discusses how to extend the art experience between artist and audience beyond the museum or gallery space into everyday life. I was also greatly inspired by Felix Gonzalez Torres' work using candy as a representation for people living with HIV during the AIDs crisis. Jacob's essay provided the conceptual groundwork for this piece, while the formal content is a direct reference to González-Torres.



Figure 15: *Seeding*, sawdust, rabbit skin glue, herbs, soil, dimensions variable, 2019

Reciprocal generosity is based on the idea that the art experience can be an exchange between artist and viewer, and through active engagement the viewer can become an equal participant in a creative discourse. The art institution, museums, and art itself function authoritatively over the audience in the viewer-artist dichotomy. "Knowledge, tradition,

authority and prestige,” are all positions of power Jacob defines in museum curatorial practices, and the audience is subject to the terms of value outlined by these institutions (Purves & Jacob 5). Art displayed in galleries and museums provide a special experience for the audience, but the intended audience most often coincides with values intrinsic to the work. The audience is interpolated, so to speak, as knowing and having familiarity with the ritual of viewing art, which excludes the uninitiated viewer. Reciprocal generosity seeks to level the imbalance in this power dynamic by inviting the audience to become creative agents in the making of art. Jacob posits several methods for engagement. “Acknowledging, identifying, meeting the audience face-to-face, we begin to eliminate the barriers of distance, difference, and power that anonymity otherwise allows” (Purves & Jacob 6). Learning about what the audience has to offer and what their values are allows their input to become a part of the creative process. The artist merely acts as mediator or initiator of this conversation. In *Seeding* I attempt to provide a community-oriented experience for the audience using one of the most fundamental human needs as the medium: sustenance.

Félix González-Torres was the main influence for my installation. González-Torres used piles of candy to represent people who were dying of AIDs at the height of the crisis. In “*Untitled*” (*Placebo*) (fig. 16) a 1000-1200-pound pile of silver foil-wrapped candies represented the endless cycle of death that took place in the gay community. González-Torres also made portraits of his partner Ross, who died of AIDs prior to González-Torres himself. One of the most famous examples of his work is “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross*) (fig. 17). A pile of variously colored candies that started off at the same weight of his deceased lover, Ross, and through consumption was depleted until nothing was left. Robert Storr reflects on the experience of audience participation as looking into a mirror; he writes that “...these mirrors are shadowed

or touched by phantoms whose fleeting aspects reminds one both of unique beings not present—the artist and his lover—and of the essentially ephemeral nature of the physical being—the viewer—who is present” (Ault, González-Torres, & Storr 9). In seeing themselves and their values reflected in the portrait they consumed, the viewer was reminded of the invisible other that slowly dissipated as each visitor took a bite. The power of González-Torres’ work was a conversation I wanted to engage with in my project.

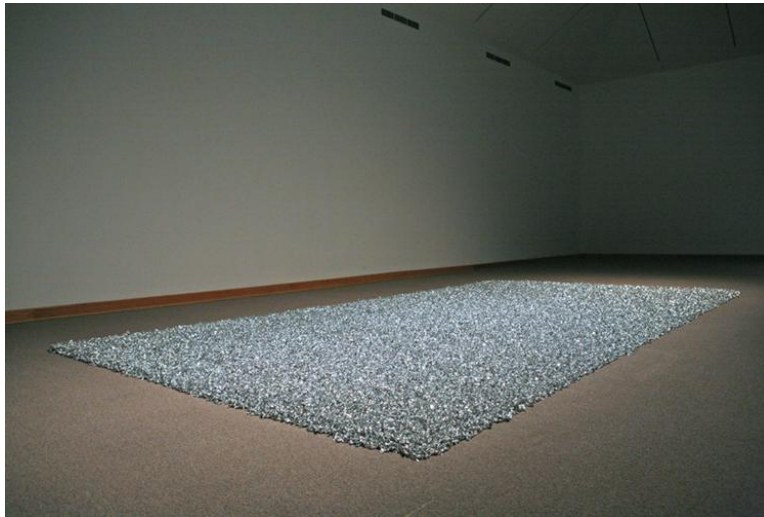


Figure 16: "Untitled" (*Placebo*), Félix González-Torres, cellophane wrapped candies, dimensions variable, 1991



Figure 17: "Untitled" (*Portrait of Ross*), Félix González-Torres, cellophane wrapped candies, dimensions variable, 1991

*Seeding* (fig. 18) was arranged as three piles of seed bombs leading the audience from the front to the back of the gallery. A card was displayed at the entrance, instructing individuals to

take these small objects, explaining how to plant the seeds, and giving suggestions for community building. I composed the installments as squares roughly four feet per side, and laid down a pile of soil underneath the wood composite forms. At first glance, it is difficult to recognize the amorphous bodies as having the potential to grow cooking herbs, so dirt was used to hint at their potential use. Each of the composites were cast in rubber molds using the sawdust remains of the sculptures, and rabbit skin glue (which dissolves when wet or heated). Embedded in these composites are a selection of organic cooking herbs, including dill, rosemary, basil, oregano, and thyme. The herbs are randomly combined with the seed bombs to encourage the viewer to plant the seeds, and patiently wait for the herb to reveal itself. “Share your bounty with others” is the phrase I chose to nudge the participant into a creative, communal act.



Figure 18: *Seeding*, installation view, 2019

## CONCLUSION

*(Un)Becoming* is a series which looks through the lens of history to catalog, communicate, and alter a vision of Westward Expansion, making its many hidden intersections visible. The Westward movement generated and perpetuated a culture of hetero-masculinity which continues to dominate our political landscape. We are shaped by the actions and events of the travelers who came before us; the objects they affirmed their values with carry cultural baggage into the present, which we negotiate on a daily basis. We can't change the past, but we can use it to alter the course of our future. I believe real change is feasible when we become more aware of the social structures that define us and choose to take action to alter them. If we allow ourselves to unravel the warp and weft of our shared past, new constructions of difference, empowerment, and equality are made possible.

Change must occur outwardly and inwardly to break through the boundaries that contain us. Making this work allowed me to face parts of my history which I continue to reconcile. I am not the man my father intended me to become, yet I am still hunting to find meaning and connection in the skins he left behind. As a child, I used to run my fingers through the fur of the bear skin rug in his den, not fully realizing I was caressing a dead animal. I imagined myself as a wandering cub in the wild, eating berries and fresh salmon, trotting through the woods toward adventure. Then one day I found the seared opening of the bullet hole, and the illusion was broken. Yet somehow as a man I still managed to become the bear, and I show my fur through the jewelry and objects I make. A hunter kills the deer; a trapper skins the beaver; a surveyor charts the land; a prospector pans for gold; a cowboy shoots his pistol. Man is a mythology.



## REFERENCES

- Awkwardbotany. "Idaho State Flower." Awkward Botany, 15 June 2015, [awkwardbotany.com/2013/06/03/idahos-state-flower/](http://awkwardbotany.com/2013/06/03/idahos-state-flower/).
- Brewer, Sarina. "History of Rogue Taxidermy | Sarina Brewer." Sarina Brewer. [www.sarina-brewer.com/introduction.html](http://www.sarina-brewer.com/introduction.html).
- Carr, Jeff. "A Brief, Gross History of Taxidermy." Museum of Idaho, 8 Feb. 2019, [museumofidaho.org/idaho-ology/a-brief-gross-history-of-taxidermy](http://museumofidaho.org/idaho-ology/a-brief-gross-history-of-taxidermy).
- Clark, Kate. "Artist's Statement." Kate Clark, [www.kateclark.com/](http://www.kateclark.com/).
- Conrad, Ulrich and Adolf Loos. *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*. MIT Press, 1970, pp. 19-24.
- Furtwangler, Albert Joseph. *Acts of Discovery Visions of America in the Lewis and Clark Journals*. University of Illinois Press, 1999.
- Grootenboer, Hanneke. "Treasuring the Gaze: Eye Miniature Portraits and the Intimacy of Vision." *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 88, no. 3, 2006, pp. 496–507. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/25067264](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25067264).
- Hinckley, Gordon B. *A Prophet's Counsel and Prayer for Youth*, [www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2001/01/a-prophets-counsel-and-prayer-for-youth?lang=eng](http://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2001/01/a-prophets-counsel-and-prayer-for-youth?lang=eng).
- Johnson, Ben. "Tartan, the Symbol of the Clan | Scottish Tartan." Historic UK, [www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/The-History-of-Tartan](http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/The-History-of-Tartan).
- Jones, Karen R. *Epiphany in the Wilderness: Hunting, Nature, and Performance in the Nineteenth-century American West*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015.
- Pratt, Julius W. "The Origin of 'Manifest Destiny.'" *The American Historical Review*, vol. 32, no. 4, 1927, pp. 795–798. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/1837859](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1837859).
- Purves, Ted, and Mary Jane Jacobs. *What We Want Is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art*. State University of New York Press, 2005, pp. 3-10.
- Sullivan, Nikki. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. Edingburgh University Press, 2003.
- Taylor, Scott. "LDS or Mormon? It Depends." *DeseretNews.com*, *Deseret News*, 2 Apr. 2011, [www.deseretnews.com/article/700123737/LDS-or-Mormon-It-depends.html](http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700123737/LDS-or-Mormon-It-depends.html).

