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Toilet Talk

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Toilet Talk

By

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of the requirements for the degree of
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First Reader

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Second Reader
My work humorously deflates and nudges at the fetishization around common historical stereotypes of masculinity through the suggestive use of synthetic and mass-produced materials. The pieces function as surrogates for my living companions, a team whose members join forces and toy with and entice one another. As discrete works of art, each piece is confidently autoerotic—the vision of an idealized form that is individuated, self-reflexive, and exhibitionistic. The challenge with my work has been to locate the humanity in the manmade, specifically in the austerity of the molded plastic form. Athletic cups, stall partitions, deodorant and sportswear become idealized stand-ins for the masculine body and repositories for feelings about it that, when manipulated, evoke notions of desire, sexuality and cruising culture.

The constructions of queer zones in the public bathroom and gym have become integral parts of gay political history and have shaped my own personal experience. The architecture and design of these spaces quietly lends itself to the development of personal desire. Cracks, nooks, partitions, reflections from tiles, and slivers of space flirt with notions of voyeurism and partly concealed sexual activity. Sexual desire within the strictures of a marginalized sexual subculture creates a vision that transforms such confined spaces and establishments. These spaces call for the collision of bodies, intentional or otherwise, and physically forces one’s senses to be acutely aware.

“Because all sex acts between men were considered public and illegal, gay men were forced to become sexual outlaws. They became experts at stealing moments of privacy and at finding the cracks in society where they could meet and not get caught. These “cracks in society” expanded as the rapidly growing cities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries created more and more public
places where men could be anonymous and intimate with each other. These included...YMCA rooms, steam rooms and shower stalls; public rest rooms in department stores...and bathhouses.” (Berube 34-35)

These institutional areas of congregation provided a foundation for homosexual men to carve out their own spaces, literally and figuratively. Men had to rely on public spaces; these public spaces already contained features that suggested prohibitions and possibilities. These features were exploited and enhanced, altering the aesthetic of the institutional site. Stall and urinal partitions play with voyeuristic tendencies, imposing rigidly regulated spaces, comprised of mere laminate or metal. Partitions can easily be poked and prodded to expose discreet openings and holes that result in brief moments of exhilaration or defiance (glory-hole). The placement of peep/glory-holes between stall walls were carefully considered and diligently executed.

“Some have suggested that this “silence” on glory holes came from the taboo associated with discussing them while others believe there was simply a naïveté on the part of those designated as responsible for repairing them (i.e., they were, perhaps, simply puzzled by the reason for their existence, mistaking them as a childish act of vandalism).” (Bapst 91)

Glory holes provide anonymity for not only gay men but also men who identify as bisexual or heterosexual. Used for sexual purposes, the glory hole or partition crack requires a passive participant (the observed/penetrated) and dominating one (the voyeur/penetrator). The creation of a power dynamic between male bodies in an institutional setting promotes machismo and idealized masculine sexual behavior. Imported from the heteronormative into gay culture, this power play emphasizes the penetrator as phallic, powerful and hetero-masculine. To
endure and take part in abject homosexual penetration is viewed by heterosexual men as a display of one’s masculine autonomy or impulse to dominate. These are tropes that circulate not only in public bathrooms but also truck stops, prisons, in gay and straight porn, and various other contexts.

In my work, selecting and manipulating objects specifically designed for these sites allows me to create surrogates that are symbolic and embedded with an affect and desire unique to the gay transformation of generally normative institutional environments. Urinal cakes, protective sports gear and cotton gym socks are manufactured to erase individuality and impose the body into conforming to idealized shapes, sizes and colors. The reproducibility of these manmade constructions hints at the artificiality of societal modes of masculinity so commonly doled out in American and consumer culture. Similarly idealized personas, objects and images of hyper masculinity are portrayed in gay pornography and the media. The set design and costumes in gay pornography are derived from and mimic queer zones that have originally taken root in traditional heteronormative spaces. Bathroom stalls, faux tiling and partitions are just a few of the fixtures in these spaces which I use to symbolize and recreate an aesthetic and atmosphere specific to cruising and the fetishization of the anonymous masculine body. Such props and objects are viewed by heteronormative culture and gay culture differently, however intertwined these cultures may be. Despite this frequent disparity of views, gay men and straight men do not live in separate worlds, but instead perform, witness, and even
sometimes inhabit what is seemingly one another’s relationship to homosexuality. Therefore the stall, athletic sock, or toilet take on multiple meanings and can simultaneously act as symbols of desire or function as pre-existing forms of institutional architecture.

The physicality and energy secreting from the manufactured sex object sculptures that I construct are amplified by their material specificity and proximity to one another. Their placement and locale is vital and they are often linked by color, texture and material. This enables the sculptures to speak to one another like teammates, marked in uniform and positioned as if on a playing field. Using restroom ready-mades and creating pseudo gym equipment that is toy-like and absurd, I hope to construct sculptures that parody and challenge commercial extensions and constructions of the body. A slight altering or skewing of the construction of the stall partition playfully challenges perception and social taboos by exposing and subverting common institutional objects, spaces and scenarios. Foam, spandex, and latex tubing, contorted and twisted, begin to take on corporeal qualities replacing the physical body with an alternate body that is manufactured and medical. The composition of these tactile materials into faux familial bodies is humorously provocative and recalls one’s own body. Sourced objects and images associated with sports culture become subverted, injected with humor and at times debased. Influenced by cultural or art arenas like the abject, camp and minimalism, I aim to reposition and queer the industrial object. Athletic cups, vinyl training cones, resin and steel gym accessories are morphed
into sexualized arrangements that channel desire, combat, dominance, fetish and ritual. My combination of bathroom paraphernalia and gendered objects (deodorant, athletic sock, urinal partition) allows me to use and poke fun at the formal masculine language of Minimalism with the addition of symbolic gay and queer content.

Scent and the abject have become driving forces in my work, specifically through the use of synthetic urinal deodorizer blocks (cakes) found in men’s restrooms. The purpose of the blocks is to disinfect and reduce odors in restroom urinals. Specific to the men’s restroom, these deodorizers are found in institutional settings and public spaces where the masculine body and its functions are forced to conform to strict social mores. These blockers are designed and constructed to limit contact and eliminate individuality. Chemicals used to mask the scent of urine or sweat and partitions used to section off and hide these acts are just a few of the limitations imposed by the social constructs of the public bathroom. This forces a robotic, almost manufactured affect that is tense and aware. The fetishization surrounding debasement, humiliation, uniform and BDSM culture historically position the homosexual as a pervert amongst hetero ideals. By running the risk of public sexual encounters in unfavorable discreet areas, an image of uncleanliness arises -but rather is sought out by the queer community, relished and savored momentarily to defy such social codes, behavior and conduct.

“It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in between, the ambiguous, the composite... Any crime, because it
draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility." (Kristeva 4)

Kristeva demonstrates how the abject can break norms and challenge order by puncturing regulations and laws in order to showcase opposing identities. Again referencing the glory hole, this puncture to both the laminate partition and society is an act of sexual defiance and subversion of institutionalized social norms. With the emergence of queer zones in public bathrooms, tearooms and gyms the desire and fetish surrounding the daring atmosphere and environment of cruising becomes sought after and recreated to achieve a heightened sensory sexual experience. This ideal scenario becomes the topic documented in gay pornography, articles, and media, equally reinforcing and transgressing masculine stereotypes of sexuality that, having been created by suppression, must be fantasized and fetishized. Scent allows for the communication of information and is able to convey specific memories and situations; scent is important in my work because it also is one of the more invasive senses that can hold power and alter the body. The use of urinal cakes and the chemical clean scent they produce allows me to capture an element specific and dependent on the public bathroom. The public bathroom is a semiprivate space where abject notions surrounding gender, desire and the body accumulate and are aided by the bathroom’s fixtures and furnishings. My work uses and puts a new interpretive force on the way these fixtures and furnishings function as symbolic cultural icons.

My subversion and appropriation of the masculinist language of
Minimalism becomes a tool I utilize to shift, alter and queer the way institutional objects and architecture are perceived and embodied. I explore both formal and autobiographical themes, often related to desire, sexuality, and the relationship between public and private space. The queering of the institution and its promotion of hyper masculine ideals allows me to confront the challenges and expectations imposed on the male body. Now historic sites, the public bathroom, locker room and gym have allowed for complex social and sexual encounters between heterosexual and homosexual men. These encounters reveal the complicated nature of identity and sexual behavior, affirming the greater cultural significance of homosexuality and the spectrum it exists on.
Works Cited


Image List

Michael Blake
Hunter College MFA Thesis Exhibition
April 21 – May 7, 2016

1. Untitled
   Mixed media
   Dimensions Variable
   2016

2. Untitled (Object #1)
   Powder coated steel, rubber tubing
   19 IN x 5 IN x 5 IN
   2016

3. Ring
   Rubber tubing, plastic, sock, metal and plastic rings
   32 IN diameter
   2016
4. Globe
   Powder coated steel, hook
   12 IN diameter
   2016

5. Untitled
   Powder coated steel, hardware
   5 FT x 9 FT x 6.5 FT
   2016

6. Sac
   Spandex, foam, steel, polyfil
   14.5 IN x 9 IN x 6 IN
   2016
7. Sac (detail)
   Spandex, foam, steel, polyfil
   14.5 IN x 9 IN x 6 IN
   2016

8. Partition #1-#3
   Foam, hardware
   42 IN x 86 IN x 20 IN
   2016

9. Partition #1-#3 (detail)
   Foam, hardware
   42 IN x 1.5 IN x 20 IN
   2016