

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: I HOLD YOU CLOSE

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I Hold You Close articulates the precarious emotions of being queer in a society riddled by violence. Using steel, melted weapons, sound, and motors, this installation reflects on my own experience of queerness and queer love. Rather than framing vulnerability as a weakness, these works invite the viewer to consider vulnerability as a weapon.

I HOLD YOU CLOSE

by

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Foreword

*“Crawling, bending, melting, reaching, vibrating...
Each creature moving to their own rhythm even before your arrival. You step onto
their land, immediately aware of your own contribution to this pulsing symphony.*

*Footsteps, breathe, stroke, whispers...
How you begin to bend to their will, choreographed movements and sounds that
could care less about harmonizing. Instead, they ask you to simply vibrate the way
you’ve arrived, accepting all the non-normative ways to be a musician. To use your
voice.*

Awkward. Uncanny. Haunting. Screechy. Forever transitioning.

*As you weave in and out of their limbs, dancing to an irreplaceable tune, the ghosts of
flesh greet you. Only hints of their once-earthly intimacies revealed: a kiss, an
embrace, an entry. Undoable once seen, these images reconfigure the creatures into
something more, a reflection. Your own insides echoing the vibration of each desire.*

*Oh how you begin to bend into the same shapes, forging your cyborg self into their
precarious structures. Tethering on the edge of imbalance, you sonically weld into
their wings, a relationally beyond imagination.”*

—Antonius Bui

Dedication

For Houry, who has been the most supportive partner I could ask for. I love you baby.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my wonderful Professors: Shannon, Delio, and Foon who all took me under their wings and listened to my wild ideas. Thank you to Gwen, who has been the best studio assistant I could ask for. Thank you to my family and especially my stepmother Isabel for instilling in me a love of art and access to contemporary art at a young age. I am the artist I am today, because of you.

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Chapter 1: For Art (the Creatures)

I Hold You Close is a culmination of my lived experience and my art practice. The sculptures in the exhibition, which I refer to as “creatures,” are instruments of mourning in a society that is riddled by gun violence and homophobia while simultaneously queer itself. This work is deeply personal. Rather than framing my work with a conceptual lens, I allowed my raw emotions to guide my creative process. In this work, I asked myself the following: What does it mean for me to be in a queer relationship?

Strange metal forms made from variously treated steel and forged weapons fill the gallery. The sculptures have highly sharpened extremities and feet, which can seem dangerous to viewers as they walk among them. The surfaces of the sculptures vary from highly polished to dusted black. The sharpened feet of the sculptures make the creatures appear vulnerable as the sculptures gently tremble; yet this also makes the work more structurally sound. Although the sculptures shake, they will not fall.

Hand-cast musical forms connected to motors move on the sculptures, creating their own internal sonic language. Metallic sounds fill the air as irregular pieces of metal, bells, chimes, and inviters (instruments created specifically for ringing) move in predictable and unpredictable ways. Rotating clear disks of various sizes are the mechanisms of the system. Plexiglass disks attached to the motors

control the movement of the instruments and forms. Delicate engravings cover the disks. Some of the drawings look like territories, maps, or islands. Other rotating engravings can be deciphered as what they are: queer bodies embracing.

On the walls of the installation are large rotating disks. Some are mirror-like, reflecting fragments of the creatures with engravings. Others are photographic disks of two queer bodies holding each other, looking confrontationally at the viewer. When first working on this installation on a small scale last semester, I started colloquially referring to these sculptures as creatures. This reference helped me feel as though I had a close relationship with the sculptures and also made them feel more like bodies. Throughout this essay, I will refer to the sculptures as creatures so that the reader may develop the same sense of bodily closeness.

The work has a meditative quality to it, as if the delicate sounds its strange limbs generate want to lull the viewer into a peaceful state. The engine, like the quality of the motors, reminds the viewer of systems repeating with occasional breaks. The viewer begins to notice the specificity of the material, the occasional shell casing, and the tiny triggers included in the sculpture. Then the viewer reads the wall text and realizes that part of the sculpture is made from melted weapons.

The sculptures seem both incredibly vulnerable and yet almost weapon-like. Sharpened points confront the viewer as they walk around the sculpture's limbs and

watch their feet as they navigate the twig-like sharpened sections of the sculpture's feet.

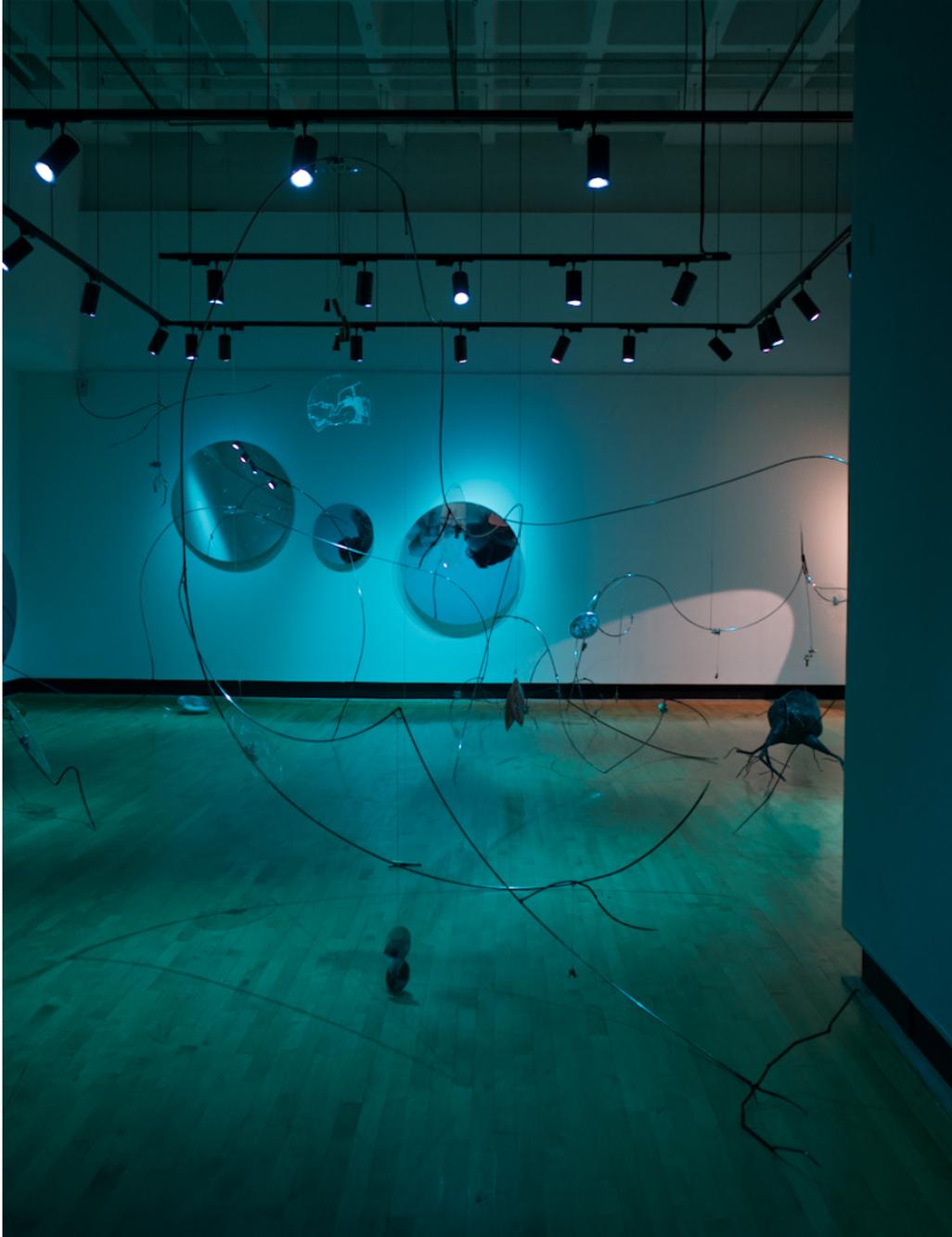


Figure 1. Image of "I Hold You Close" Installed at UMD Gallery



Fig 2. Image of "I Hold You Close" Installed at UMD Gallery

Chapter 2: For the Queering of Metal

“...the hostility frequently expressed against...queer individuals is a function of fear of the undecidability of the (queer) body.” (Nancy J. Hirschmann)

Queerness is not a noun; it is a verb. To queer is to defy representation, to question a single stagnant form as a metaphor for identity. Kant believes that to have an authentic experience of beauty through a work of art, we the viewers need to forget about “interest” (the naming of things, or the “signifier”) and simply experience. This is an inherently queer idea. If we forget about the naming of bodies or gender (the signifier), then we can have an authentic experience with people for who they are. This is why a politics of representation is so important to queerness. Queerness is not who we are, but how we are. It is a question of form.

I am one of the few and first artists to argue that metal is an inherently queer medium. Metal's unique ability to constantly shapeshift sets it apart from other materials. When casting, all you have to do is place metal in a furnace; it will liquefy, and you can pour it into a mold and give it an entirely new shape. For centuries, humanity has been melting down weapons and turning them into church bells, and then turning the bells back into weapons. The cycle continues.

When forging metal, the material is placed inside an oven and heated until it glows yellow. At this point, the metal can be molded and shaped into any desired form.

When making my creatures, I worked with long unwelded steel rods and transformed pieces of gun parts. My assistant Gwen and I bent the steel rods with our bodies. We shaped them through machines that bent, forged, welded, then cut them into pieces to be re-welded. As two queer women, we felt as if we were using our bodies to weld and wield power in these moments, to reclaim but also in many ways to allow the metal to speak for itself.

I hope that the creatures convey this transformative experience. They are both the creations of queer bodies and vessels for articulating the possibilities of the queer self.

Chapter 3: For Weapons

“...most metal doesn’t want to be a weapon.” -Student

The first weapon I melted was a SIG SAUER MCX rifle. I melted it down to cast 49 liberty bells for each of the individuals who lost their lives in the Orlando Pulse Club shooting. As a Queer Latinx, the mass shooting was a wake-up call. I felt as if I could have easily been in that club that night. How many times had I sought refuge in a queer Latin nightclub? How many times had I felt most comfortable on a queer dance floor? I wanted to take the materiality of violence (weapons) and transform that materiality into its opposite: music and art. A liberty bell not only represents “freedom” in the US; it is also used by the alt-right to support Second Amendment rights. This paradox of the Liberty Bell is fundamental to understanding freedom in the US. In Spanish it is called “un arma de doble filo,” a double-edged sword. My father and current partner immigrated to the US because of the illusion of freedom in this country. However, once you arrive, you realize that this freedom comes with the freedom of xenophobia and the freedom to die. The US stands alone among first-world nations in providing such easy access to firearms. In my family’s country (Argentina) and my partner's home country (Lebanon)—both places that have experienced active civil war within the past 40 years—access to such weapons is almost impossible.

On a subconscious level, I believe I was also drawn to making bells from weapons because of my Argentinian heritage. Argentina was colonized by Spain. As

with many Latin American countries that experienced Spanish colonization, Catholicism was fused with local indigenous religions, creating a more culturally local and spiritual form of practiced religion. Although I am not personally religious, I was raised with an aunt who lives in a monastery and is a nun. I was also raised among the rituals and symbols of Catholicism as they relate to Argentine society. Bells within the cultural framework of Latin American culture are often rung to resurrect the dead. I believe this instinctual cultural association also affected my desire to cast bells. In a recent interview, I was asked about the criticism and pushback I have received. I spoke about being trolled by the alt-right. Several times when posting about the process of my work on Instagram, I have received hundreds of comments on the same post. Conservatives vocalize their horror and indignation at my actions, often focusing on my being a woman and queer. A journalist who interviewed me recently commented, “You are their worst nightmare.”

When watching myself speak about the experience, I realized that people are equally terrified of weapons shapeshifting as they are of queers. As queer bodies continuously shapeshift away from singular genders, identities, or modes of representation, metals also possess the capacity to shapeshift in a similar manner. At any point in time, any weapon may be melted, hammered, cut, and thus transformed. It is this possibility of shapeshifting that terrifies the alt-right. As the most elemental forms on earth, the human body and metal both contain the inherent possibility of change.

“Queer Transformation will have to proceed in different arenas, mobilizing different constituencies with a range of different tactics.” (Peter Drucker)



Fig. 3: Image of gun transformation process. 2016.



Fig. 4: Mercedes, Stephanie. The Ring of Freedom. 2017.

Chapter 4: For the Queering of Sound

“Percussion music is revolution. Sound and rhythm have too long been submissive to the restrictions of nineteenth-century music. Today we are fighting for their emancipation... healthy lawlessness is warranted. An experiment must be necessary... What we can't do ourselves will be done by machines we will invent.”

—John Cage

Although Cage refused to consider his own sexuality and queerness in his work, his perspective on sound is fundamental to my creatures. Cage's work was and is revolutionary because he saw no distinctions between sound, noise, and music. To Cage, all noise is both sound and music—a horizontal approach to sounds that resists hierarchy and is inherently queer. In the same way that Kant's theory of interest/beauty can be understood as queer, by ignoring the signifier (the object making sound), the signified (the sound itself) can be better understood and appreciated. I hope the creatures I have created are in some ways the machines that Cage envisioned he would make one day. These creatures, as in Cage's quote, are unruly in their percussion. Rather than moving harmoniously, they bang, scrape, and ring to their own rhythm. In some ways, they are machines precisely because of their motors, mechanized to follow codes and patterns.

Interestingly, Donna Haraway also uses the metaphor of cyborgs as a way to explore the future potential of “othered” bodies. In “Cyborg Manifesto” Haraway states: “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction.” How can we apply Haraway’s queer understanding of the cyborg to Cage’s vision of percussive instruments as lawless and revolutionary?

Another composer who has inspired me is Pauline Oliveros, a Queer Latinx composer whose work focused on deep listening through unique improvised sounds. “Deep Listening, as developed by Pauline Oliveros, explores the difference between the involuntary nature of hearing and the voluntary, selective nature of listening.”^[1]

Through ritual, myth, and experimentation, she considered her compositions to be activism. Oliveros is the only composer I feel deeply connected to, and she has heavily influenced the creation of my creatures. Oliveros wrote a series of experimental scores. One reads: “Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.” Like so many Latinx artists, Oliveros is asking for art to be both an embodied experience and one that is fully immersive and involves all of the senses. Oliveros also worked with “kinetic awareness”, which involves bodywork that asks the participant to forget about learned social constructs.

Many of the scores or exercises Oliveros composed are similar to my own work. In “Tuning Meditation”, she works with a group of students. One singer begins

with a single note, and the rest of the group harmonizes; the singers soon begin to change their own tune, creating fractured sounds that again shift into harmony as another note is formed. The cycle continues.

It is my hope that my creatures embody the state of consciousness Oliveros intended for her sonic participants. I am also deeply curious about the similarities between my own work and that of Oliveros. Is it because we are both queer and Latinx? These are questions I would ask Oliveros if she were still alive.

“Healing can occur . . . when one’s inner experience is made manifest and accepted by others.” —Pauline Oliveros

Chapter 5: For Houry

“So it is better to speak remembering...we were never meant to survive” (Audre Lorde)

You, Houry, my partner, once told me after a year of dating that you were afraid of having sex in front of windows for fear of being shot. You and I have such different backgrounds in terms of our queerness. I went to an undergraduate school that was all women, gender-queer, and trans students. Attending school at Smith, a queer epicenter in the US, my experience enabled my rapid transition through my queer adolescence. Completely liberated from patriarchy and heteronormativity, I could wake up each day and express my sexuality in whichever way I saw fit. I will forever cherish the three years I spent at Smith; they taught me a level of liberation that is impossible in the real world.

You are a queer asylee who grew up in a homophobic society and country. You didn't come out until you moved to the US six years ago.

Part of being queer is the articulation of queer love. I have been able to express queer vulnerability because it is a real, lived aspect of the experiences I feel in our relationship. This is why my “creatures” feel so vulnerable. They are the physical manifestations of my (and perhaps our) lived emotional state. Integral to the queer experience is the act of survival—withstanding outright hostility or daily microaggressions. I realized months after making my first creature that the work was

about your specific fear. I have been engraving drawings of our intimacy on the clear forms that rotate and cause bullet casings, gun pieces, and new forms cast from the first two to make sounds.

This work I have made, *I Hold You Close*, has come from an emotional rather than a theoretical perspective. Although many of the artists, composers, and theorists I have mentioned connect strongly to my work, upon deeper reflection, this work was made from a raw emotional space. Keeping the work personal and intimate has allowed me to be honest and raw in the process of its creation.

Chapter 6: For Latinidad

Although all four of my parents have shaped me artistically (my father is a mechanic, my stepfather is a philosopher/musician, and my mother is a dancer-turned-lawyer), my stepmother is unequivocally the reason I am an artist. When I visited my family's home in Buenos Aires as a child, my bedroom was my stepmother's library. She specialized in Latin American revisionist art history. My introduction to contemporary art came from leafing through her 1970s/80s Artforum collection as a high school student. One of my earliest encounters with contemporary art was Lynda Benglis's 1974 Artforum advertisement. The advertisement was a self-portrait. In this self-portrait, Benglis is naked and aggressively confronts the



viewer with a fleshy dildo. The work is seductive. As a young gay woman, it combined agency, eroticism, and power for me. The message was clear to me even as a young teenager: this artist was saying “Fuck you” to anyone who disagreed with the way she wanted to express her sexuality. I fell in love with art because of its ability to express raw, immediate emotions and combine so many ideas into one form.

Fig 5: Benglis, Lynda. Artforum Ad. 1974.

The most influential items in my stepmother's collection were her Latin American art history books. At school, I longed for a perspective that matched the world of art and artists I had grown to love: Ana Mendieta, Alfredo Jaar, Feliz Gonzalez Torres, and Teresa Fernandez, to mention a few. I satisfied this longing by reading for the first time: "Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism in Latin America." The book argues for a radical Latin American approach to art history that questions the dominant Western gaze. The book even goes so far as to argue that Latin America never experienced "modernism," but instead, we jumped straight into our own version of postmodernism.

Another work of art that I discovered in my stepmother's library that changed my understanding of what art could be was Graciela Carnevale's "Acción del Encierro" (Confinement Action) in 1968. This work was part of a performance cycle entitled, "Ciclo de Arte Experimental" in Rosario, Argentina. Argentina was experiencing a cycle of violence generated by its dictatorship (1976-1983). In the work, viewers were asked to enter a gallery. The artist then left and went home, leaving the viewers locked in the gallery; the viewers were forced to break the glass in the windows of the gallery in order to escape. Carnevale described the work as a reflection on the cycle of violence, dictatorship, repression, and freedom in Argentina. It was up to the viewers ("the people") to break out of the cycle of repression in which they were trapped. This is another canonical work to which I continually return to in my practice, as it evokes a full-body experience that is unquestionably political.



Fig 6: Carnevale, Garciela. "Acción del Encierro" 1968.

Recently, I have also been deeply influenced by “Latinx Art: Artists, Markets and Politics”, written by Arlene Dávila. Dávila coined the term “Latinx Artists” to refer to artists born in Latin America or whose family are from Latin America. This is critical for artists who, like myself, exist within the US art world but simultaneously come from a space of Latinidad. Similar to queerness, this position is about articulating a way of being and identity that in many ways cannot be articulated otherwise.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The lighting for the installation is cerulean blue. From across the gallery, the blue glow filling the room contrasts intensely with the “normal” lighting in the rest of the gallery. Upon entering the space, the viewer’s eyes quickly adjust to the lighting, and the space suddenly seems far less blue. The more time a viewer spends in the installation, the more their eyes adjust. Curiously, when one leaves the installation, they realize how blue the space really was. Their thoughts are confirmed as they turn back and once again experience the intensity of the installation’s floodlighting. This is the experience of queerness. Inside our queer communities, we forget our identities and simply exist. Once we leave them and enter into a heteronormative world, we are reminded that not only are we queer, we are “other”.

At one point in making this work, my sculpture once stabbed me. I was forging one of its feet, and because of its extreme sharpness, it stabbed my forehead between my eyes. I had recently had a dream about the sculpture, in which I did not know if I was the creature or if the creature was attacking me. I hope to keep my creatures alive as I continue to express my understanding of queer vulnerability through my life and my work.

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