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## Performing Binaries

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Humberto Reynoso

### Artist Statement

I take a critical view of socio-political and cultural issues dealing with homoeroticism and gay politics. I explore gender theories in order to further understand what it means to be masculine or feminine and how it affects my placement in my society. I use art as a tool for expressing my opinions questioning traditional sexual identity. Religion is a factor that keeps reappearing throughout my work. In growing up Catholic I was taught to live by the morals and ideas of the Catholic Church, which meant to follow the teachings of the bible. Also, I was taught there was no room for questioning what the bible is teaching because, then, I would be questioning my faith in Jesus Christ and that is the ultimate sin. During my teen years, and through my early twenties, I experienced a great deal of guilt about being gay. My guilt was so strong that, I convinced myself that being gay was a phase, I was then, suppressing my emotions, and subsequently becoming depressed.

There has been a correlation for many years between Gay groups, drugs and “increased rates of mental problems and subsequent suicidality” according to Sue McAndrew, the author of “Coming Out to Talk about Suicide: Gay Men and Suicidality,” in the *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*.<sup>1</sup> McAndrew states that there is a trend toward following the suicide path, and this trend is found amongst both sexes; however, multiple studies have shown that a higher rate of suicide is found among young gay men. Also, gay and bisexual males are four times more likely to report a serious suicide attempt than their heterosexual counterparts. This article,

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<sup>1</sup> Sue McAndrew and Tony Warne, “Coming Out to Talk About Suicide: Gay Men and Suicidality,” *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, Vol.19, No.2 (April, 2010)

“Coming Out to Talk About Suicide: Gay Men and Suicidality” is not stating that because a person is gay, this person automatically is depressed, and will attempt suicide, in fact, McAndrew states that homosexual orientation itself is not an indicator of suicidality and it is not linked to emotional problems, which one can argue that homosexual populations do have higher risks of suicidality because of our society’s belief that being gay is a sin and is non-acceptance of gay groups.

Questioning my beliefs freed me from feeling guilty of exploring my own sexual identity, and the level of mental and spiritual independence from the Catholic Church that I was able to reach allowed me to create a Self-Portrait of myself. My artwork *Self-Portrait* (2012), a ceramic male figure with a red wooden cross inserted through the anus, is unconventional as it explores the Catholic institution and the way the church forces me to believe that my sexual identity is a sin. My piece is representing rape. The cross represents anti-gay religious beliefs and the color of the cross represents the power of the church. The sculpture is in missionary position implying knowledge of the violation going on. The act of the forceful penetration represents the anti-gay religious beliefs forcing me to feel unaccepted.

By creating ‘*Self-Portrait*’, I opened the door to create more work that criticizes Catholic institutions. The ‘*Syringe*’ was born after watching a documentary addressing the therapy that is available for gay people to become straight or to suppress their feelings. These organizations use religion to administer “therapy” as the way of salvation. One of the aspects of therapy consisted of administering a substance through injection that would make the patient nauseous and vomit. As the nausea starts to kick in, the therapist would play homoerotic images to associate disgust to homosexuality along with constant reminders that homosexual feelings are a sin, an abomination, and therefore unnatural, as dictated by the Catholic Church. As my commentary for the therapy

used to “cure” homosexuality, ‘*Syringe*’ (2012) consists of a 4 foot tall syringe made of blown glass, ceramic and wood, and filled with small red crosses in the glass chamber. Most of the patients that come out of these institutions tend to commit suicide or live a depressed life.

Through art making and research my courage grew when I was able to analyze my feelings independently from my Catholic beliefs, which lead to my quest in understanding sexuality and its hierarchy of power.

My work deals with ideas of power by referencing and contrasting dynamics between oppressor and the oppressed and how this dynamic produces hierarchies that establish control . But what is power? Standard dictionary definitions suggest it is an entity that possesses and or exercises authority or influence. I want to focus on this idea of exercising authority, which one can argue we need, but hardly explain why – do we need an institution of authority to prevent chaos or is it to control a society? What about the exercising of influence? Do we need an influence exercised upon us? Or does that make us subjected to another person’s subjective point of views? These are questions that I directly or indirectly ask through my work in relationship to gender and sexual orientation and in relationship to heteronormative stereotypes.

I am very interested in Judith Butler’s theory, that as we are all performing our gender, one accepts and assumes a social hierarchy of power depending on what gender we are performing. If I am a man performing as a man then I am treated differently by society than if I am a woman performing as a woman. But what happens if I am a man performing as a man who prefers men as lovers, or a woman who prefers woman as lovers? In what context is this situation accepted by our society? And is social acceptance different between men and women? And why? What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman, within the context of desire

in gender performance? Then taking it a step further I argue that even political positions are performed through subjective ideas constructed by subjective social norms.

In thinking about heteronormative stereotypes in relationships within gay culture I'm perplexed by the question I am often asked "who is the woman and who is the man in the relationship?" I ask myself; what is the point of that question? So naturally I became very interested in the implications of sexual preferences and as a gay man, where I am placed in the hierarchy of social acceptance. I became interested in the idea of sex and desire as it relates to power. The roles assumed during sexual intercourse parallels the positions of power assumed in society. For example; if I tend to be more aggressive during sex (regardless if I'm being penetrated or not) I will be more aggressive or more dominant in the way I live my life. If I am more submissive during sex (regardless if I'm being penetrated or not) I will be more submissive in how I interact with people. I'm not saying that that's the case with every single human being, it is just an observation of my experiences in my relationships.

Echoing sex and status as one's place in society, I came up with the idea of photographing men's anus, enlarging the close-up and placing the image inside of dinner plates that viewers could actually use for consuming food. With this piece I'm interested in the submissive state that comes with the vulnerability associated with femininity (as constructed by society). My process begins by asking "may I take a photograph of your anus?" to random men and gaining an understanding through the response I get. I am analyzing the responses that are generally expressed through the lens of social norms pertaining to the body, specifically the male body with in the context of masculinity, hierarchies of power and sexual orientation. The response can be contrasted with heteronormative stereotypes. The series of plates are displayed on a kitchen countertop that I developed. The Installation Untitled (2015) is a kitchen

installation made of plywood, housing the plates until the viewer uses the plate to eat. I created performative engagements with the installation, serving food on them to viewers at the reception and throughout the course of its exhibition.

Simultaneously, I have also been working on a piece consisting of over 350 oversized erect penises. The penises are red, white, and blue and form the American flag. The piece is 8 feet tall by 16 feet wide. My goal is for the penis to no longer be a penis but to represent a symbol of power. The penises in the piece are oversized to metaphorically represent oversized power, and that with power, oppression is inevitable, arguably making our democracy ineffective. The penises are hung on the wall aggressively confronting the viewer.

Artists that have made work related to ideas that I'm interested in with my own work are David Wojnarowicz, Peter Huijar, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Robert Mapplethorpe, Charles Ray, Jeff Koons, and Robert Gober to name a few. David Wojnarowicz and Peter Huijar were interested in photographing people who were pushing the boundaries of sexual orientation and identity. They arguably gave a face to the gay community of the 80's. Robert Mapplethorpe as well, was a photographer who, through his work consisting of black and white male nudes, has inspired me in embracing the use of imagery relating to my interracial relationship within the context of who is the man and who is the woman in the relationship. In the sculptural realm I have been influenced by the explicit content of Jeff Koons, specifically the work titled "Dirty Jeff On Top", I'm interested in exploring the lines defining art and pornography in displaying the sexual dynamics my relationship. And I have also been influenced by Robert Gober who uses Catholic iconography to set a dramatic mood for his sculpture and installations.

Growing up I was not very vocal in what I needed, whether it was understanding my sexuality, or dealing with bullying at school, or asking any questions regarding life in general, in fear of not being accepted. Art has always been a part of my escapism, and I realize now that I have been using art as therapy in search of acceptance. This is of course, not cohesive with the modernist belief in an objective, detached art-making. From when I was younger, my work has evolved from creating objects where I focus on the beautiful aspect of the piece, and now I am creating work that has become very confrontational. When I was younger, my work helped me escape to a place where I only thought of beautiful landscapes allowing me to suppress my real emotional state, which in retrospect was a dark one. Now that I'm older, independent, and more confident in myself, I am able to make work that confronts and questions my ideas and beliefs without the need of being accepted. Life is a journey where change is constant, and I am happy in the state I am in where I can be who I am unapologetically