

03.29.2023

Issue 10

Volume CXXIX



THE

FREDONIA LEADER

SUNY Fredonia's Student-Run Newspaper

The Mason Edition
In honor of my beloved friend
Mason C. Campbell



www.fredonialeader.org



@LeaderFredonia

THE LEADER

5206 Williams Center, Fredonia, NY 14063

www.fredonialeader.org

Email: leader@fredonia.edu

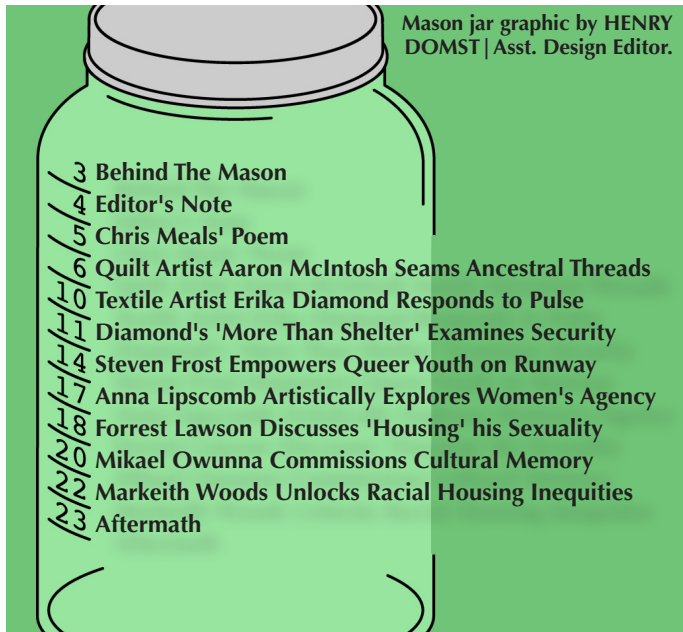
Twitter: @LeaderFredonia

Instagram: @leaderfredonia

Facebook: The Leader - SUNY Fredonia

The Mason Edition

What's in this issue?



Editor in Chief
Will Karr

Managing Editor
Chloe Kowalyk

News Editor
Abigail Miller

Asst. News Editor
Open

Life & Arts Editor
Open

Asst. Life & Arts Editor
EJ Jacobs

Sports Editor
Maxwell Hamilton

Asst. Sports Editor
Matt Volz

Sports Photographer
Kayla Welsh

Scallion Editor
Matthew Baum

Asst. Scallion Editor
Megan Kidby

Chief Copy Editor
Alyssa Bump

Asst. Copy Editor
Sierra Mills

Web Editor
Open

Design Editor
Alyssa Bump

Asst. Design Editor
Henry Domst

Art Director
Quinn Spook

Asst. Art Director
Alina Marsh

Photo Editor
Drew Paluch

Asst. Photo Editor
Open

Business Manager
Breanna Orologio

Asst. Business Manager
Madison Vadnais

Ad. Sales Manager
Tucker Rouse

PR & Event Chair
Travis Joyce

Asst. PR & Event Chair
Open

Social Media Manager
Audrey Erickson

Community Relations
Capri Cibelli

Adviser
Elmer Ploetz

Front and back cover: Will Karr walks through forest in Fall 2020.

Photos by CORIN CARPENTER | Special to The Leader.
Instagram: @corincarpenterphoto



The Leader is funded through advertising revenue and a portion of the mandatory student activities fee. It is published by the students of SUNY Fredonia. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means except as may be expressly permitted in writing by the editor in chief. All opinion writings in The Leader reflect the opinion of the writer, with the exception of the editorial, which represents the opinion of the majority of the editorial board. Letters to the editor must be 350 words or less and have a deadline of 4 p.m. on Friday. The Leader is printed by the Post-Journal in Jamestown, New York and is distributed free on campus and in the surrounding community. Press run is 1,250.

"Nothing has shaped my life like grief has. So when people say 'when will you get over it,' I hope never." – Allyson Dinneen

The **Mason** behind 'The Mason'



Image of Mason surrounded by mason jars in 2015.

WILL KARR

Editor in Chief

This magazine is dedicated to my friend Mason C. Campbell. Mason and I were both raised in the same religion. After he came out as gay, Mason was ostracized and disfellowshipped from the congregation.

Disfellowshipping is a religious practice where a member of a church community is shunned. Although disfellowshipping is often seen as an act of love, it operates as a form of social control that inhibits a person's agency and freedom. I refer to disfellowshipping as a living death.

After leaving the church, Mason tried to live life on his own accord, but it was difficult for him to navigate through it without having a support system. While Mason always had a big smile on his face, he was experiencing intense emotional pain, shame and suffering underneath it all.

I remember when Mason first left the church and no one would give me any explanation as to why. Everyone just looked at each other like they knew some little secret that my teenage self couldn't quite understand at the time. I remember casually inquiring about Mason and being told to stop asking questions about him.

In the blink of an eye, Mason suddenly disappeared. It wasn't until months later I realized Mason had "come out" as gay.

At the time, I had to look up the word gay on Google because I didn't even know what it meant. But the way Mason was quickly forgotten about overnight just didn't sit right with me, yet I felt voiceless and helpless to speak up.

After eventually leaving the church myself years later and discovering my own sexuality, I reached out to Mason for guidance through the process. Leaving the church gave me the power to reconnect with people who I had lost touch with.

However, shortly after Mason came back from the dead, I soon lost him once again. But, this time there was no getting him back, he was gone forever — forever winter.

After Mason committed suicide, I was having a hard time dealing with the permanence of his death. In November 2021, two months after his death, Taylor Swift released a song titled "Forever Winter," about her friend who committed suicide. I liked how Swift compared losing someone to living in this "forever winter" season.

One line that really stood out to me was: "I'll be your summer sun forever, forever winter if you go." I started thinking about how I could apply the analogy to my own personal life. I was so used to falling back on religion to make sense of death that I didn't have anywhere to turn to anymore.

I eventually came up with an analogy for life that I call "The Mason Jar." The analogy conveys the idea that every experience in life for better or worse ultimately shapes who you are. Every waking moment adds something to your jar of life experience and becomes a part of your story.

Even though Mason is no longer physically here today, a part of his soul and essence will still always live on in spirit and memory.

"The Mason" is the name of this edition of The Leader for many reasons. Not only is it Mason's name, but it references the idea of how Mason jars were originally created during the 1800s to preserve fruits and vegetables for the winter after the summer season had ended.

Similarly to the intended function of the Mason jar, I view art, writing and memory as tools for preservation. They can provide hope, inspiration and meaning during life's darkest moments; they can immortalize the human soul even after the physical flesh and body have perished.

Editor's note:

The stories in this edition of The Leader are all written by Will Karr and feature inspiring artists who he's met since Mason's death.

The stories all discuss poignant issues now facing our world today: housing inequities, gun violence, self-ownership, marriage equality and religious indoctrination.

Growing up as a Jehovah's Witness, I always felt isolated — trapped in the woods from mainstream civilization.

During Christmas concerts in the spacious school auditorium, I would always sit alone at a desk between the confines of bookshelves in the library. Anytime one of my schoolmates invited me over to their house or a birthday party, I knew that I would never be allowed to go because “good Christians” do not break bread with “worldly people.” I was taught to ultimately fear the outside world around me, but then one day I entered into the thing that I feared the absolute most.

I remember being at a church convention during one summer at the Blue Cross Arena in Rochester, N.Y. surrounded by 8,000 other witnesses when a startling video appeared on the screen. In the video, a woman was being urged to wear a free rainbow bracelet in support of a gay marathon by an employee and customers at a department store. However, she refused to wear the bracelet, stating that she is ultimately one of Jehovah's Witnesses and the Bible said that “[love] should only be between a man and woman.” Everyone in the audience applauded the woman with a standing ovation, meanwhile, I was sitting in my seat, crying on the inside. The video eventually went viral on the internet. I knew deep down that I was living a lie that I could no longer hide — I had no choice but to eventually come out of the woods.

After I left the church, I lost everything that I had ever known. Close friends who I had known since childhood suddenly forgot my name and I had to rebuild many aspects of my life from scratch.

Ever since I left, I have been trying to find a new sense of belonging, purpose and meaning — home. This edition of The Leader documents my process of trying to make sense of the world that I have now chosen to be a part of; my arduous journey in trying to find new meaning, stability and connection in our ever-changing and uncertain world.

All the subjects in my magazine reference the notion of home in some shape or form, showing how we are equally trying to find our place in the world, both physically and metaphorically.

If I had to describe this period of my life as a season, I would consider it to be a fall. I constantly feel caught between two different conflicting emotions — warm feelings of summer and cold feelings of winter.

The stories in this edition of The Leader were all written by me and feature inspiring artists who I have met since Mason's death. The stories all discuss poignant issues now facing our world today: housing inequities, gun violence, self-ownership, marriage equality and religious indoctrination. We currently live in a world where women don't own their bodies and the black body has a looming expiration date — a world where gay and interracial marriage are currently up for Senatorial debate. These are the inequalities and injustices that many of us have become descendants of.

However, the artists in this magazine have found healthy ways to overcome the circumstances and realities that they've been subjected to, showing how we don't have to let what we have inherited define or consume us. They have transformed surface cracks into glistening glitter and gold. They have turned their own struggles, pain and insecurities into immortal art to inspire others. They have found ways to transcend.

I hope that you enjoy each of these magical humans' stories as much as I loved writing about them all. It is now time to open the Mason jar.

Wishing you peace, love and positivity,
Will Karr

If we had reached out our hands,
 Would you have taken it that day?
 Could we have made you feel better?
 Could we have made you okay?
 Could we have pulled you away?
 From the dark into light?
 Brought you right back to a safe place
 And just held you tight?
 Why didn't you shout louder?
 Why couldn't we hear?
 You were all alone that morning,
 All alone in your fear.
 I know we could have saved you
 If we had just seen
 You stuck in that pain and torment
 How long has it been?
 Your burden you carried
 In an invisible case
 You suffered in silence
 With a smile on your face
 So many questions we have.
 So many words unspoken
 Why didn't we know
 That your life was so broken?
 We miss you each day.
 We try to understand your choice.
 If we close our eyes, try hard,
 We can still hear your voice.
 We know you are free now,
 Free to fly high.
 We imagine we see you,
 When we look up at the sky,
 We can't turn the clock back.
 We can't change time.
 But oh how we wish we could,
 Sweet sunshine of mine.
 We know you are still with us,
 Watching, keeping us safe.
 And one day we'll all meet again,
 In a heavenly place.

- Chris Meals, in honor of Mason

While flying towards the sun usually represents death, if we think of the Mason as the "Sun," he is flying towards himself and who he is — a place where he can finally be himself and be at peace.

The graphic also represents the process of letting go of past traumas and looking forward to sunny days in the future.

Graphic of a Mason jar with angel wings flying towards the sun by DICE YANDOW | Staff Artist.



Jefferson Davis monolith overtaken by fabric and wire-crafted Kudzu leaves covered with queer stories.

INVASIVE

AMASSING SOUTHERN LGBTQ STORIES



Images of McIntosh's "Invasive Queer Kudzu: Richmond" exhibition in Richmond, Va.

Aaron McIntosh seams ancestral threads with patchworks of personal identity

Aaron McIntosh grew up surrounded by quiltmaking in the wooded foothills and shallow creek beds of rural Tennessee. His childhood home was filled with his grandfather's quilts, showing him that quilting does not have to be gendered.

Now, as a queer quilt-maker and cross-disciplinary artist, McIntosh is carrying on the threads of tradition that his ancestors have sewn for him, while still finding ways to stitch in patchworks of his identity.

"I didn't really grow up with a gender paradigm around quilting," McIntosh said. "... Many people typically associate quilting with women, but I just didn't really grow up with that."

McIntosh is a fourth-generation quiltmaker from Kingsport, Tenn. His grandparents were well-known quilters in the Appalachian Mountains.

His work primarily draws inspiration from his grandparents' quilting practices, while juxtaposing them with contemporary themes, techniques and ideologies. His work intersects and combines family tradition with personal desire and sexual agency.

In his work, he often draws creative inspiration from his personal experiences growing up as a queer man in the American South. While some of his quilts follow more traditional conventions, others challenge existing notions of what ultimately constitutes a quilt.

"I am interested in embedding quilts with my identity, queerness and queer desire ... thinking about quilts as a desirable object or as something that can hold desire.

Working with images of gay male desire in a quilt has the ability to get to the site of one's sexuality perhaps more than painting can do — something that is image-driven to situate desire in the domestic space," McIntosh

said. "... In quilt-making, you don't have quite a rich history of either male-bodied people responding to quilts in a different way ... or much about identity [in general] other than place."

In his series "Boyfriends," McIntosh specifically discusses the significant difficulty queer people often face in finding stable romantic partners. McIntosh isolates images of men on the cover of romance novels from their female counterparts, establishing a "queer male gaze."

The cutouts symbolize the boyfriends that he can not attain in his personal life.

In his series "Twin Beds," he prints sexually suggestive images of men from vintage gay adult magazines onto more traditional-looking quilts.

In his piece, "Road To Tennessee," he discusses how his sexuality was caged against the backdrop of his Southern upbringing.

Although McIntosh often incorporates personal experiences into his work, he also now strives to document the experiences and stories of others.

In his recent series "Invasive Queer Kudzu," McIntosh explores the themes of queerness, sexual agency, bigotry and homophobia. Through the project, he documented LGTBQ+ individuals' experiences growing up, living and surviving as queer in the South.

"In a post gay marriage cultural climate, ["Invasive Queer Kudzu"] was a project to gather stories from queer people and really a kind of project designed in the queer South about the queer South," McIntosh said.

In 2015, in the case of Obergefell v. Hodges, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that all states are federally required to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. However, the historic and landmark decision did not come without statewide resistance, as many states



Artist Aaron McIntosh covered in Kudzu leaves.

**"In quilt-making,
you don't have quite a rich history
of either male-bodied people responding to
quilts in a different way ... or much about
identity [in general] other than place."**

— Aaron McIntosh

Continued from previous page.



"Road To Tennessee" quilt artwork by McIntosh.

have not been willing to recognize gay marriages regardless of federal sanctions and mandates.

"Some Southern states still have some of the most restrictive and homophobic legislation, and this continues in the light of gay adoptions, not always recognizing same-sex marriages, and the fall of *Roe v. Wade*," McIntosh said. "A lot of these protections are now fragile."

For "Invasive Queer Kudzu," McIntosh had queer people write their stories on cloth Kudzu leaves. He sews the leaves together. Then, he attaches them to a series of vines and other leaves, made out of queer archives from the South, intersecting past and present histories in the process.

"Something that is common with all of my practices is this concept of piecework: working with scraps as a way for understanding our identity, as we are pieced together by our connections, cultures and scraps that come together to make us who we are," McIntosh said.

Kudzu is a plant species from Asia that was originally brought to and planted across the American South from the 1930s to the 1970s by the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, to reduce soil erosion, replenish nutrient-poor soil and feed livestock. However, Kudzu is now considered an invasive plant species.

McIntosh explained that efforts to cultivate and maintain the vine ultimately failed, causing Kudzu to quickly become an unwanted and undesirable crop due to its fast-growing nature. Before the U.S. Federal government recognized the potential dangers of the vine, its mythological and perceived benefits had already become firmly rooted in Southern ideology.

At the time, the U.S. Department of Agriculture did not take into account the impact that Kudzu would have on other areas of the United States, as now it is no longer merely situated in the South and is spanning areas across the Eastern coast.

Kudzu grows exponentially — upwards of a foot per day — and can overpower native plants, preventing them from photosynthesizing, killing them and limiting biodiversity.

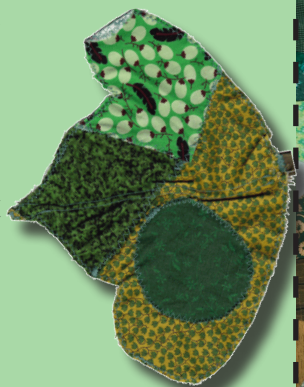
Once Kudzu was rejected by Southerners, it began to be used for other purposes, such as to soak up drainage along the roads. In the series, McIntosh reclaims the vine as a positive symbol of the resiliency and determination of marginalized groups in overpowering Southern conservatism.

Through the project, McIntosh wanted to show that there are queer people currently living in the South and calling it home, despite anti-gay agendas.

"[The project] is a way to think about this idea of invasion and invading narratives," McIntosh said. "If you're from the Northeast and you think of the South, you'd probably think that it is an extremely racist place ... really backwards ... that there aren't queer people or 'progressives' who live there. But, being from the South, there is a lot more going on [than meets the eye]. I think the last few years have shown the rest of us that racism is alive and well in places other than the South."

In "Invasive Queer Kudzu," McIntosh overall draws parallels and similarities between Southern attitudes towards Kudzu with Southern attitudes towards queerness. In the South, Kudzu often evokes negative connotations and mythology.

"A lot of Southerners have a very negative relationship with Kudzu. With this series, I was trying to make people think about what it means to be labeled a weed or unwanted."



I wanted to draw a connection to queerness in the South, homophobia and xenophobia, and to the fact that weeds are only weeds because of human-made decisions. Weeds are plants that grow at their very own volition, very much like queer people."

— Aaron McIntosh

McIntosh explained how weeds are only weeds when humans label them as so, as Kudzu has transitioned from being considered a “miracle” to a “menace” throughout history. Similarly, queer people are only inferior when society considers them to be so.

Although Kudzu is often viewed negatively in the American South, McIntosh explained how it also simultaneously carries other associations across cultures, paralleling how queerness is viewed differently across spaces and environments.

Kudzu has been used positively in the American South to make jewelry and jelly and in the Korean Peninsula for medicinal purposes. However, Kudzu has also been historically referenced by writers of color from the South in metaphors to depict and describe the ubiquity of racism.

Today, Kudzu often evokes different meanings depending on the setting. In 1973, African American writer and author of “The Color Purple” Alice Walker described racism in the South as “a local creeping Kudzu that swallows whole forests and abandoned houses — if you don’t keep pulling it up at the roots, it will grow back faster than you can destroy it.”

Walker said this to show that the fight against racism will be a continuous, ongoing and evergreen battle.

The “Invasive Queer Kudzu” series was divided into two separate iterations. For the first installation of the series, the Kudzu vines overtook a recreation of The Hippo, a historic gay bar in Baltimore, Md.

The bar was a cornerstone and pillar of the city. The Hippo was one of the oldest gay bars in the United States until it was closed and turned into a CVS pharmacy around 2015. The Hippo remained open for 40 years, surviving through periods of time when being gay was more stigmatized and taboo than it is today.

The second iteration of the series involved taking over a recreation of the statue of Confederate leader Jefferson Davis in Richmond, Va. The monument represents the persistence of racist zeitgeist in the South despite efforts to combat it.

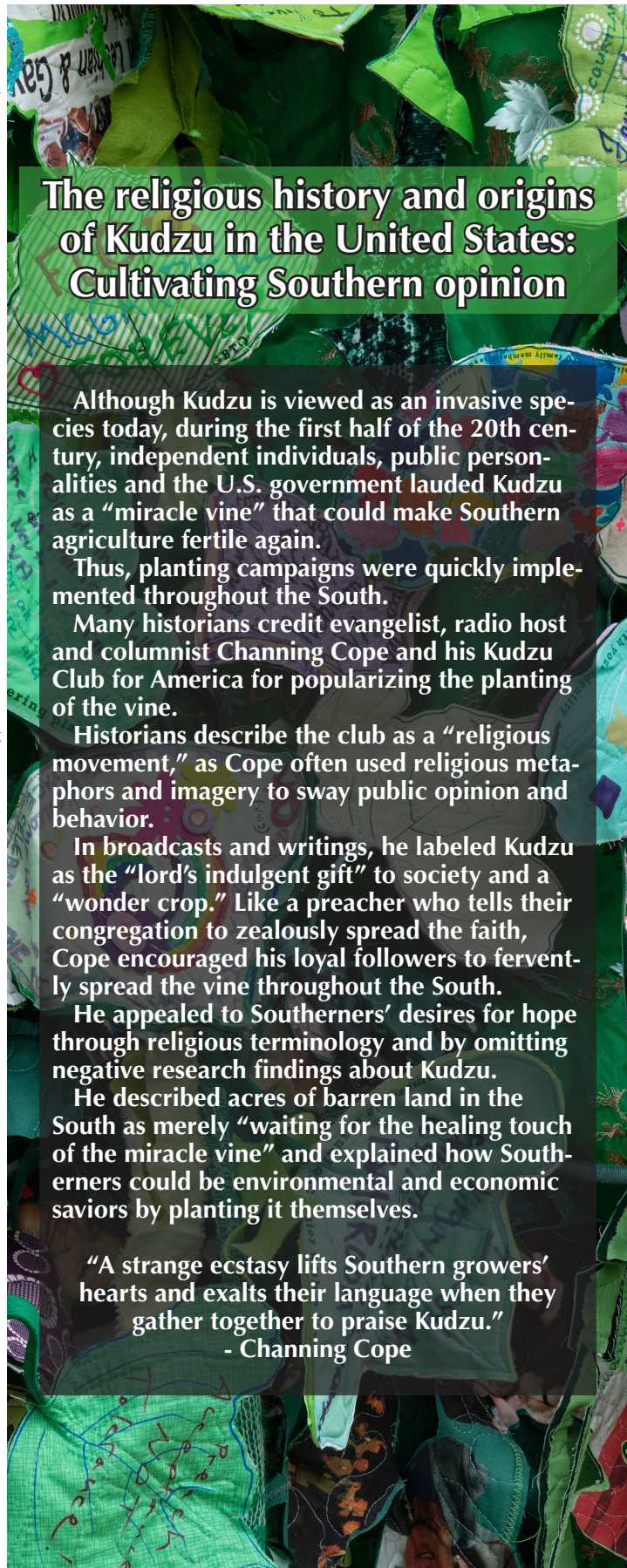
In the series, the Kudzu vines encapsulate and envelope a toppled-over version of the statue. The work incites viewers to consider and contemplate the problematic nature and racist implications of the monuments.

“The [real Jefferson Davis] monument is now removed,” McIntosh said. “After protests in 2020, people came together and got all of these Southern confederate monuments removed. Interestingly, I did the project almost a year before the actual monument would come down, which is just wild, bizarre and wonderful.”

In his work, McIntosh focuses on the intersectionality of identity by creating a comprehensive fabric of the struggles that marginalized groups experience in the South. Overall, McIntosh turns quilts, traditionally static objects, into catalysts for social change and agents of protest.

“I’m interested in when people think of quilts, they don’t usually think of anything radical about them. They think of them as domestic objects or grandma crafts,” McIntosh said. “They don’t think of some of the more radical histories that quilts have had. ... I’m interested in the radical potential of quilting as a medium.”

All images of McIntosh's artwork retrieved from invasivequeerkudzu.com.



The religious history and origins of Kudzu in the United States: Cultivating Southern opinion

Although Kudzu is viewed as an invasive species today, during the first half of the 20th century, independent individuals, public personalities and the U.S. government lauded Kudzu as a “miracle vine” that could make Southern agriculture fertile again.

Thus, planting campaigns were quickly implemented throughout the South.

Many historians credit evangelist, radio host and columnist Channing Cope and his Kudzu Club for America for popularizing the planting of the vine.

Historians describe the club as a “religious movement,” as Cope often used religious metaphors and imagery to sway public opinion and behavior.

In broadcasts and writings, he labeled Kudzu as the “lord’s indulgent gift” to society and a “wonder crop.” Like a preacher who tells their congregation to zealously spread the faith, Cope encouraged his loyal followers to fervently spread the vine throughout the South.

He appealed to Southerners’ desires for hope through religious terminology and by omitting negative research findings about Kudzu.

He described acres of barren land in the South as merely “waiting for the healing touch of the miracle vine” and explained how Southerners could be environmental and economic saviors by planting it themselves.

“A strange ecstasy lifts Southern growers’ hearts and exalts their language when they gather together to praise Kudzu.”

- Channing Cope

Erika Diamond creates bullet-proof fashion in 'Imminent Peril - Queer Collection'



Pieces from Diamond's "Imminent Peril" collection. Left to right: "Francis Vest," "Aaliyah Vest" and "MB Vest."

In June 2016, queer artist Erika Diamond was in Chautauqua, N.Y. when a shooting occurred over 1,000 miles away at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Fla. She recalls how the people around her at the time weren't too alarmed by the incident, galvanizing her to take action.

"At the time, [Pulse] was the largest mass shooting in U.S. history. To know it was at gay nightclub was particularly disturbing, and that it happened in a place where you are supposed to be having fun," Diamond said. "It wasn't like it was happening out in the open; people are just trying to enjoy themselves in a contained environment that is supposed to be safe."

Diamond was perplexed by the apathetic attitudes of the people around her, as they did not seem to be as stirred up about the incident.

She hypothesized that maybe it was because the event didn't impact a community that they could personally relate to.

"Anytime there is a mass shooting at school, parents will feel particularly upset about it. You know, just name the place really and there's a group," Diamond said. "I think it just all awakened me to this idea of having to take care of one's own community."

After the tragedy, Diamond called up her queer friends across the country to check in with them to see how they were feeling.

Two years later, while participating in an artist-in-residence program at the arts activism organization PlatteForum, in Denver, Colo., she created a series inspired by the shooting titled "Imminent Peril - The Queer Collection."

For the series, Diamond made bulletproof Kevlar safety vests, tailored to the measurements and personal styles of her queer adult loved ones, in an effort to raise awareness of the lack of safety protections for LGBTQ+ individuals in the United States.

"Up until [the Kevlar Vest series], most of my work had to do with fragility, like working with eggshells or silk. My work just overall felt more ephemeral," Diamond said. "And so this series was a big shift for me to now use something that is supposed to be talking more about permanence and protection. Kevlar is interesting because it is a manufactured material and not natural."

Through the series, Diamond said she was interested in exploring the idea of how it is ultimately a luxury and privilege to be safe, as Kevlar is typically only worn by police, military personnel and other uniformed individuals. The project ultimately calls into question who is afforded the ability to be safe.

"Kevlar is very expensive, so it is kind of a privilege to have this safety equipment," Diamond said. "It is only for the privileged to be safe."

Although Diamond could have gone out and purchased actual bulletproof vests, from the crop tops to short-sleeve hoodies in the series, she wanted to design pieces that an individual could metaphorically wear out to a night at the club.

After a tragedy, it can be easy to feel fearful and become reserved. However, Diamond emphasizes the importance of ultimately continuing to find beauty, peace and fun in life despite enervating events.

"If someone goes out to the club, they are going to want to still look good. It will never be at the expense of personal fashion or identity," Diamond said. "So it's all about trying to be safe, but still finding ways to protect who you are ... how can we be fashionable if this is how it is going to be? One aspect of being part of the queer community is acknowledging [that] this negative thing happened, but what do we do about it now?"

**"At the time,
[Pulse] was the largest
mass shooting in U.S. history.**

**To know it was at gay nightclub
was particularly disturbing, and
that it happened in a place where
you are supposed to be having fun.**

**It wasn't like it was happening
out in the open; people are just
trying to enjoy themselves in a
contained environment that is
supposed to be safe."**

— Erika Diamond

Diamond talks creating space for queer youth in group exhibit 'More Than Shelter'

Each of the designs in “Imminent Peril” is unique to one of Erika Diamond’s models. When creating each individual piece, she asked project participants what makes them personally feel the most safe and protected.

Many individuals, about 90%, answered that being at home is what makes them feel most comfortable. However, Diamond then started contemplating how the household is not a sanctuary and oasis for everyone. The answers inspired her collection “More Than Shelter.”

“I began thinking about how adults can often make the home what they want it to be. The home has become the safest place that many of them have,” Diamond said. “But I kept thinking about how that is not true for everybody, especially kids, who don’t have control over their home environment.”

As many of her previous initiatives involved adults, Diamond set out to do a project that specifically involved queer youth. She was eventually approached by curators at the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art about participating in a group exhibition titled “More Than Shelter.”

The exhibition overall challenges the idea that shelter has to merely be a physical place or space. Rather, shelter can also symbolize the communities and environments that make us each personally feel the most safe and comfortable. Queer people often have to create their own homes and find their own chosen families.

The exhibit establishes the idea that a person can have physical shelter, without necessarily feeling psychologically, mentally and emotionally safe and nurtured. Exhibiting artists show that all things necessary for human survival are not tangible or material — that shelter can be both a verb and a noun.

Oftentimes, humans tend to think of the things they need as physical objects: food, water and shelter. However, they don’t think about the intangible things that they need: love, compassion, tolerance and acceptance.

“They, [the curators], had shown some of my Kevlar vests previously and they were interested in how the vests were like a form of shelter,” Diamond said. “I didn’t have to talk about shelter in terms of, you know, merely a house. They asked the question about what other forms of shelter are needed.”

Each artist in the group exhibition was paired with an organization in order to explore a topic different from the work they have done in the past. Diamond partnered with Stand Up for Kids Hampton Roads (SUFK-HR), a chapter of the SUFK organization outside of Virginia Beach that aims to help youth who are experiencing homelessness. Unlike many groups, SUFK serves youth up to the age of 24 — six years past the standard age out of 18.

“(SUFK) didn’t have a queer meet-up until a year ago,” Diamond said. “There was nowhere for young queer folk in the area to go, who were at-risk youth unless they went to Norfolk, Richmond or really far away. There weren’t even any resources until recently.”

According to the Gallup Poll, 10% to 15% of total youth in the U.S. identify as queer, and according to the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, nearly 40% of the total homeless youth population in the U.S. identify as queer. The latter statistic inspired Diamond’s quilt piece, “40%,” in the exhibit.

Diamond contributed three different pieces to the exhibit: the quilt, a backpack and a hoodie. All of the pieces are made out of vinyl.

40%
of the total
youth homeless
population
in the U.S.
identify
as queer

Continued onto next page.



Mirrored vinyl textiles installed in “More Than Shelter” at Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art in Virginia Beach, Va.

Continued from previous page.

When many children and individuals arrive at shelters they have nothing or only a backpack in their possession, so being given a blanket or a warm article of clothing can truly change their lives.

The ombre rainbow-jacket, “Hoodie for Queer (In)Visibility,” highlights how many issues facing queer communities have evaded the public’s attention.



Diamond’s “Hoodie for Queer (In)Visibility” jacket at VMOCA.

“With my materials, I am always looking for a metaphor. ... I was trying to figure out how to make something become invisible through material,” Diamond said. “I was hoping that the reflective quality of the vinyl would show how you can become a mirror of everything around you and just sort of fade away. The real reason I was interested in the vinyl is this idea of becoming invisible if you wear this blanket, hoodie and backpack and how the contents of what is inside can become invisible.”

According to Stand Up for Kids, while nearly 55% of the total U.S. homeless queer youth population have run away from home because of mistreatment or fear of it, about 40% were abandoned and/or kicked out of their homes.

“It is mostly the queer kids who are ending up without homes,” Diamond said. “From what I am understanding, there are actually a lot of compounded reasons for that. You know, somebody gets kicked out of their home because their parents disagree with who they are. Then even if they end up in the foster care system, ... it’s only this pipeline to more trouble for them basically.”

When children get into fights in the foster care system, Diamond explained how it is often the queer kid who is blamed and is subsequently removed from the household, leaving them without any home.

Through the project, she thought about how society can ultimately make households more safe and welcoming for queer youth. She spoke with Dr. Lisa Griffin, a clinical psychologist, who works with gender-diverse children. The conversation

inspired her to create the quilt “40%,” and its backing is lined with rainbow pronoun fabric from Joann Fabrics.

“I learned the that number one thing that parents can do to avoid mental illness, self-harm or suicidal tendencies [in their children] is to just use the pronoun that the child is asking them to use,” Diamond said. “It seems obvious, but that little thing can get that kid to have an easier time dealing with all the other stuff if at home their pronouns are being used.”

Even when the home is a safe space, in the exhibition Diamond calls attention to how there are still other spaces that have also limited the expression and agency of queer youth, including legal institutions and religious environments.

“Each piece represents a little bit of something different. The backpack in particular has to do with the fact that even though you have shelter at home, when you step outside you are also supposed to be safe,” Diamond said. “But, depending on what state you live in there’s [the] ‘Don’t Say Gay’ [Act] ... there’s all this legislation about trans kids wanting to go to the bathroom or wanting to play sports in school. So even if you have all your basic needs covered [at home], there is this validation of your existence that you don’t get to have outside of the home.”

Diamond said that the backpack functions as a figurative form of “mobile shelter,” giving youth a sense of protection as they transition from the home into the world.

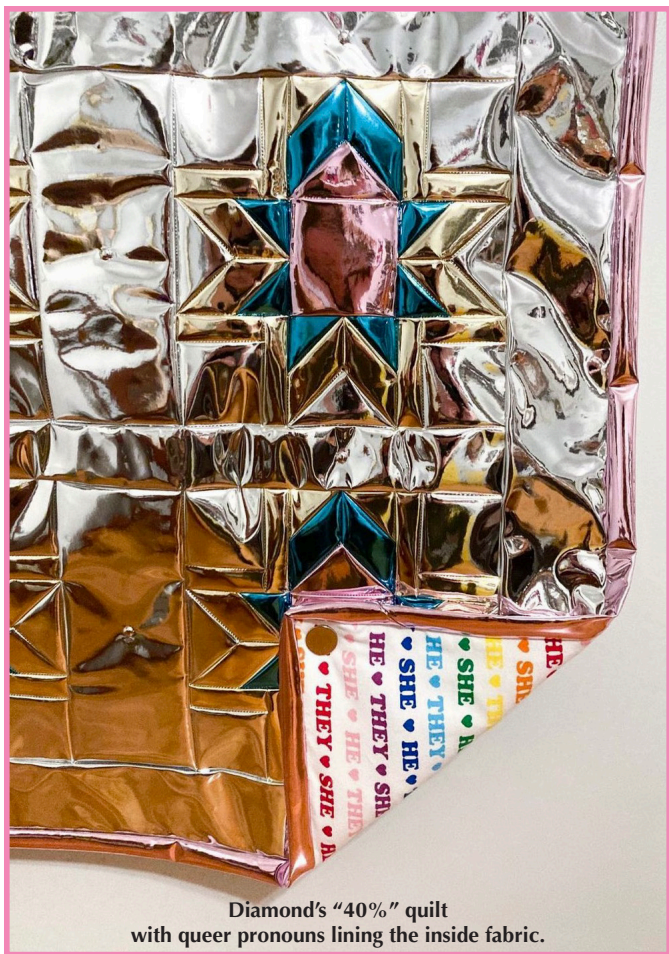
The vinyl backpack, “#SayGay,” contains banned books, which references the legal restrictions that have been enforced on many educational systems that prevent them from now openly discussing topics related to identity and queerness. The backpack references how queer youth specifically often have to repress facets of themselves at school to fit in and avoid the repercussions for authentically expressing themselves.

“A backpack is maybe where you keep the things that you don’t want other people to see ... For a trans kid, that could be makeup or ... those little secrets ... that you aren’t sure other people can handle. In a way, the backpack is like a safe space for all the things that a person isn’t able to share openly.”

- Erika Diamond



Diamond’s “#SayGay” backpack.



Diamond's "40%" quilt
with queer pronouns lining the inside fabric.

For the project, Diamond hosted a weaving workshop after hours at the museum with over 40 kids from the Hampton Roads Stand Up for Kids queer meetup. Local government officials and LGBTQ+ liaisons attended the event.

"We wanted to do something for the [youth] in a space that they could feel safe," Diamond said. "I just wanted to make the point of saying, 'I'm queer. I'm making the things I want to make and saying the things I want to say and you can do that, too. And here are all these people that can help you along the way, too.'"

Although there are still forces attempting to limit the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, Diamond overall said that she is inspired by the continued resiliency and determination of queer youth and individuals throughout time. She believes it is important to continue to help create spaces for queer youth.

"Growing up, I had the fortune of being in circumstances that tore down barriers that might have been there through religion or other aspects of culture," Diamond said. "So that seems like the key part that I am working on is how do we make spaces accommodating for others in the same way that those spaces maybe were for me."

If you are interested in helping Stand up for Kids support Hampton Roads and Virginia-area youth, you can connect with them on Instagram, @standupforkidshr, or email them at hamptonroads@standupforkids.org. You can also find ways to help, donate and volunteer by visiting SUFK's website. Donations are always welcome – one blanket, coat or jacket can help keep a young person sheltered.

The Q Nightclub Shooting: Nov. 19, 2022

A few hours after I finished writing the article about Pulse, on the evening of Saturday, Nov. 19 and approximately week after my interview with Diamond, a 22-year old gunman opened fire on "The Q," a popular gay night club in Colorado Springs, Colo. with an AR-15 style assault weapon shortly before midnight.

Five people were murdered and 18 others were injured in the shooting.

The Big Q?

As I turned my television screen on the morning after Nov. 19, I prayed and hoped it was all just one bad dream — A fleeting nightmare, not an actuality.

I clicked on queues to find a digital oasis
Full of unbothered and untethered feeds
— Living in ignorant luxury, oblivious to crimson scenes.

History repeats itself time and time again,
When will the violence and bloodshed finally end?

Q

Say their names:

Derrick Rump
Daniel Ashton
Ashley Paugh
Kelly Loving
Raymond Green Vance

All images of Diamond's artwork retrieved from
erikadiamond.com.

#SLAYGAY:

Steven Frost on queer fashion



On Sept. 1, 2009, right before they came out, textile-based artist Steven Frost was waving traffic flags at a construction site. They were in Vermont on the day same-sex marriage was legalized in the state, and a car freely drove by them with a pride flag embossed and emblazoned with bold letters — “JUST MARRIED.”

Meanwhile, standing in the middle of the road, Frost felt trapped in a lion’s den, forced to repress his sexuality.

“I remember people I was with at the construction site saying terrible things. That day was a celebratory day, but I was also terrified,” Frost said. “It was scary because I felt like I was in the heart of the lion.”

Frost grew up in the state of Vermont. They graduated from high school in the early 2000s at a time when it was less socially acceptable to be queer. They said that they did not come out until after high school due to prevailing media narratives surrounding queerness.

“I think there was definitely a fear that if you came out as queer, you would be disowned by your family at the time,” Frost said. “The few queer people that I knew often came out early and had radical leftist parents who completely supported them, were educated and had queer friends, or they were completely disowned by their parents, left to live on friend’s couches. These were my two dichotomies.”

Frost said that they didn’t feel safe to express their queerness in their hometown. Through their work, they now endeavor to create spaces where new generations of queer youth can be their authentic selves.

Frost graduated with a bachelor’s degree in visual arts from Alfred State College in 2004 and currently serves as an assistant professor of media studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder (UCB). They are one of the creative minds and co-founders behind “Slay the Runway.”

“Slay the Runway,” which first launched in 2021, is a two-week summer workshop that teaches diverse youth about

fashion design, performing and sewing. The workshops take place at Longmont’s Firehouse Art Center and the Boulder Public Library’s 61 Makerspace.

“[We] try to think about the idea of the house or the tradition of the house,” Frost said. “I am not pretending that our workshop is a [literal] house, but we certainly draw from that [ideology]. We have 12-year-olds to 18-year-olds and they all sort of come together ... everybody is at different places in their journey.”

After the two weeks, resident students participate in a professionally produced runway show at UCB, where they work with makeup artists, choreographers and other talents to showcase the looks they created and to prepare for their runway debut in front of friends, family and mentors. The program will be going into its third season this upcoming summer.

“Part of me working with queer youth here in Colorado is thinking about creating communities where people can use the pronouns they prefer, names they prefer and be themselves in an intergenerational setting,” Frost said. “We have queer adults working with youth, which is important. I’ve met some amazingly supportive parents.”

Frost said that they met a mother who was once heavily entrenched in her religion, but after her child started identifying as non-binary, it changed everything for her.

“Everybody started treating her child very negatively. She was a very intelligent and strong woman, and she was like ‘we’re leaving this church that our family has been a part of for generations,’” Frost said. “... Parents are, at this point, the biggest allies of most of the students. From the school system culture to walking down the street, there are all these other dangers and things that our queer youth now deal with in modernity.”

Although Boulder is often regarded as one of the Great Plains’ most progressive cities, Frost said that they don’t always personally feel comfortable openly expressing their gender identity on the streets. They described the city as “gender-conforming,” quintessentially characterized by hiking boots and Patagonia-brand apparel.

“We live in a town where there is a rainbow sidewalk on Main Street, but people walk over that sidewalk. It doesn’t make it equal for everyone — there is still a hierarchy on that sidewalk.

Every problem isn’t solved because there is a rainbow sidewalk or a Black Lives Matter mural.

... I think that there are so many people that stop there.”

– Steven Frost

Since many people do not feel like they can openly express their identity in public, they have resorted to doing so in more private and secluded environments like bars and nightclubs. However, today, these private spaces are under attack.

Days before my interview with Frost, on Nov. 19, 2022, just before midnight, a gunman opened fire on “The Q,” a gay nightclub in Colorado Springs, Colo., only about 100 miles away from Boulder.

“Colorado Springs is right down the road from us. We have members of our local community that cross over with the Colorado Springs community for sure, especially people who are performers,” Frost said. “Club Q is a big spot for people who are drag and burlesque performers. Colorado has some of the best drag performers in the Front Range area. But I think it’s also at this hotbed for conservative ideology, which is really damaging for queer people.”

In their work, Frost aims to amplify marginalized voices and encourages communities to create their own individual forms of representation. Frost references how queer people have often had to use nonchalant symbols, “queer badging,” to secretly communicate with each other throughout history when their voices have been silenced.

They emphasize how fashion has become a form of resistance, recognition and counterculture for queer communities.

Frost explained during the period of World War II, in major cities across the U.S., queer men would often wear red ties in public parks and places to signify their sexual desires and preferences to other gay men.

However, they highlighted how today, red ties are ironically mostly worn by Republican and “anti-gay” politicians, showing how symbols have shifted throughout history.

“I am constantly asking myself if there is an aesthetic that is quintessentially queer culture and the answer is obviously no,” Frost said. “I think that the cool thing about queer culture is that it shifts, adapts and changes over time.”

In his series “denim on denim,” made in collaboration with artist Frankie Toan, Frost highlights how queer individuals helped first reinvent denim in the U.S. from the 1970s to 1980s by shaping it into a fashion statement. In the series, Frost creates denim shields to visually display how denim has functioned as an armor for queer communities.

Clothing hasn’t always been a mode of self-expression in the U.S., as it used to be about uniformity and fitting into social stratification.

“With denim, the original way that it was used is rugged and it comes from the American cultural tradition of the working class,” Frost said. “[But], there’s a way in which queer people first adopted denim ... as something that was not only cool, but also that was kind of sexy. There were ways in which different cuts and designs were clearly a part of the queer community.”

From pins to patches, to shiny jewels and spiked studs, denim has become an article of clothing that individuals can easily personalize and tailor to themselves

“I think that denim is the first place where young designers kind of learned to alter something to themselves or learned to make it into a subculture,” Frost said. “I think that when you are a part of a gender and cultural minority, there’s a way in which everything is made for a generic human. [With denim] you can go in and alter it. I love that part of fashion — when we take something on and make it our own.”

In addition to denim, queer people have often taken other existing symbols in society and have made them their own throughout history. In their piece “Obergefell v. Hodges,” Frost subversively colors and appropriates the American flag with a queer rainbow flag they bought at a pride festival in Long Beach, Calif.

“I think a lot about fabric and symbols, and after 9/11, I have honestly never really liked the flag because it became very much a tool about colonialism,” Frost said. “To me, the

Upper right: Steven Frost speaks during “Slay the Runway” event in July 2022. Below: LGBTQ+ teens walk in a professionally produced runway in Boulder, Colo. Photos by Elliot Whitehead and retrieved from colorado.edu/atlas/slay-runway.



Continued from previous page.

American flag was a symbol of blind patriotism to a country that was not recognizing me as a full human or citizen.”

In the piece, Frost references legalizations of same-sex marriage across U.S. states before the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2015 federal ruling. They colored in each star on the flag with a pink marker every time a new state legalized gay marriage. However, when Obergefell was enacted, they rolled up the project.

“I like how the stars on the flag now represent those early states that maybe took the leap before they had to and were progressive,” Frost said. “I love the flag as a reminder of that time period.”

Growing up at the turn of the century, Frost said that they never thought that they would be able to marry someone that they truly loved.

“I thought that gay marriage was not a thing that could happen in my lifetime, but I think that speaks to people being able to envision a future that is more radical,” Frost said.

On Dec. 20, 2013, Frost’s dreams came true when his partner of 15 years proposed to him on the mountains of Zion National Park in Utah surrounded by mountain goats. Hours later, on the same day, gay marriage was legalized in Utah.

Frost’s partner is from Utah and grew up Mormon (LDS). The two got married in California in 2014, before the Supreme Court’s decision nearly a year later.

“I always think about this time of year, what that experience was like and how that resonated so much with these historical markers,” Frost said. “I feel very grateful to be a part of this generation.”

When asked what advice he would give his younger self now, they said it would be to find and foster a community. From New York, Washington D.C., and Vermont, to L.A., Chicago and Colorado, Frost explained how they have moved around a lot during their lifetime, leaving them feeling like they never had a solid home growing up.



“Obergefell v. Hodges” by Frost.

“Every time I moved, I would be so depressed because I had to start over again with a new community,” Frost said. “I think that one of the things that I learned is that [in every place], I would build community ... I think that my advice would be to build community wherever it is and that includes all sorts of types of people. What I mean by that is not to just show up somewhere, but to be a person who builds that community ... and if you’re building a community, it also means building it for your absence — for it to exist without you.”



**Shield pieces from Frost’s “denim on denim” series.
Images of Frost’s artwork retrieved from stevenfrost.com.**

Artist Anna Lipscomb unveils inhibitions on women's sexual agency

At the age of 15, artist Anna Lipscomb would frequently watch Wanda Sykes' comedy special "Leave My Pussy at Home," where Sykes jokes about wishing she could have a break from being a woman for a day. As a young girl growing up in the inner city, the humor resonated with Lipscomb.

"In the special, Sykes is obviously being hilarious, but at the same time she is also talking about really serious things," Lipscomb said.

Lipscomb graduated with her Master of Fine Arts in visual arts from Columbia College Chicago. Lipscomb also has a Bachelor of Fine Arts in contemporary sculpture, and much of her work is sculptural. Through her clay creature sculptures, she aims to combat more sexualized views of women, which she said ultimately prevent their agency, freedom and self-expression.

"As women, we ultimately have less freedom to go out at night, or really anywhere in the world," Lipscomb said. "In my work, I focus on anonymity — being able to transfer your body parts when necessary."

From simply walking across the street to riding public transit, women are often subjected to unwanted advances and comments. By removing, disguising and interchanging her sculptures' body parts, her pieces provide women with newfound feelings of safety and anonymity in spaces that have typically objectified, villainized and sexualized the female body.

Lipscomb calls attention to how women are often held responsible for the inaccurate perceptions of their character. Women are forced to limit their sexual agency, self-expression and desires for fear of sexual violence, aggression and even death.

Lipscomb came up with the concept for her pieces after her college adviser asked her what specific message she wanted to convey through her art. She said that she often creates her pieces first and then comes up with symbolic meanings afterwards.

"When my advisor asked me what my art is all about, I just said that I make little dolls and creatures — that's it,"

Lipscomb said. "However, she kept insisting that I had something deeper in the back of my mind. I then started thinking about what it's like being a woman in the city and how harassment has always been a big issue."

In her pieces, women are given the power to act as chameleons, who can segment and hide their body parts as a safety mechanism when traveling between different private and public spaces.

"I'm definitely not the first person to be delving into interchangeable body parts, but I am trying to do it in my own way," Lipscomb said. "I sometimes do feel kind of pigeonholed into this body part feminist kind of thing, which I have no problem with ... conceptually; I just don't know if I want to keep being known as the 'moving boob woman' — it honestly seems kind of funny to me."

Although Lipscomb discusses more intense topics in her art, she said that she overall doesn't want her art to be taken too seriously.

"I hope that it comes through in my art that it is not super serious. I am writing about it very seriously. I am trying to find that sweet spot of 'I am not a serious person' and 'this is a serious subject,' but let's also have fun with it," Lipscomb said. "I feel like that's extremely difficult [balance] to do in the art world because everything is often so serious."



"As women, we ultimately have less freedom to go out at night, or really anywhere in the world. In my work, I focus on anonymity — being able to transfer your body parts when necessary."

— Anna Lipscomb

House versus home:

Forrest Lawson talks 'housing' his sexuality and finding home in art

In grade school, Forrest Lawson would sketch portraits of nude women in his spiral notebook to pass as straight. In the protected solace of his earbuds, he would listen to Rhianna's "Rated R," which he describes as his "gay awakening."

Now, as an openly queer multi-disciplinary artist, Lawson is sharpening the points of his authentic colors and is not allowing his identity to be erased. He is unapologetically using art to embrace his sexuality.

"At first, I began doing art as an escape," Lawson said. "But, then I started to realize that I could use it as a tool — a tool for self-liberation."

Lawson is from Florida and graduated with his Master of Fine Arts in interdisciplinary studies from the University of Georgia. He is now based in Washington, D.C. His art primarily draws inspiration from queer and feminist theories.

"The pieces and symbols I make are very personal but they also relate to the [larger] queer experience of being in boxes and the closet," Lawson said. "I started talking about my experience in hopes that it would be a bridge of solidarity for queer people. I hope that people will be able to see themselves or attach themselves to the narratives and understand that there is some overlap."

In his wax sculpture "Johnson," Lawson establishes a clear distinction between a "house" and a "home." The physical space he grew up in acted as a cage that constrained and housed his budding sexuality — a structure built on bricks of abuse and shame.

Although the space operated as a house, to Lawson it was not home. His experience emulates how a person can have a physical shelter without feeling psychologically and emotionally safe.

"The whole reason I started the work that I am doing now is because I was going through intense complex post-traumatic stress disorder recovery," Lawson said. "I was trying to untangle my own childhood abuse, physical and emotional abuse, with homophobia being the center of the house and reattaching them to different things as a way to express myself more authentically."

In the sculpture, limits on Lawson's sexual agency are metaphorically and materially represented by the wax. The house now represents a space that his liberated and freed sexuality can no longer occupy.

From separating himself from the prime site of abuse,

Lawson's sexual agency and autonomy are restored and freed. Lawson discusses how violence and abuse can prevent an individual from being themselves. As a permeable material, wax melts over time, paralleling how he has come to terms with his sexuality and the abuse that he experienced during his childhood.

However, trauma often revisits the mind as an unsolicited menace regardless of efforts to combat it, which parallels how wax strives to preserve itself against fluctuating conditions and temperatures.

"With sculpture, I was often working with materials that didn't last, were really fragile, or had some sort of impermanence to them,"

Lawson said.

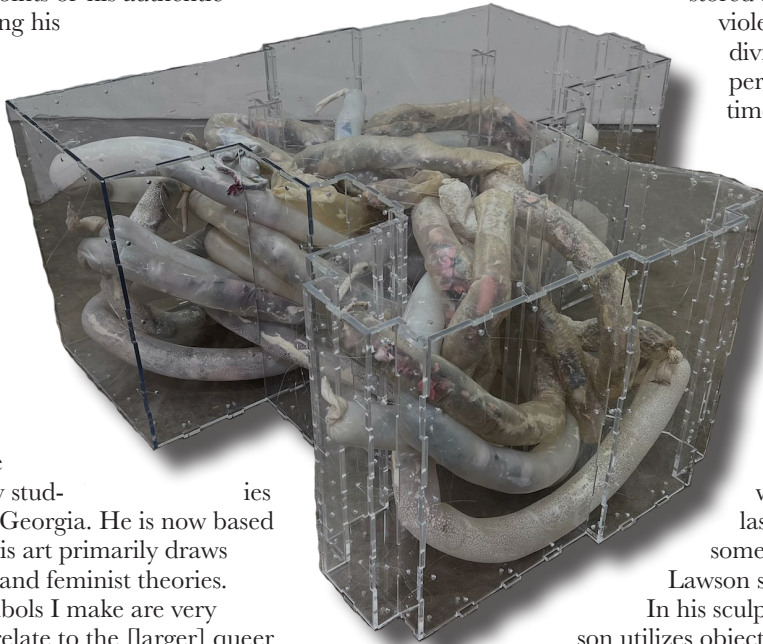
In his sculptural piece "Sausage Fest," Lawson utilizes objects like condoms and cow intestines; he discusses how queer individuals often have to self-satisfy and self-regulate their behavior.

"For 'Sausage Fest,' I used acrylic with cow intestines and [you can see how] they are sort of drying out, decomposing and exposing things inside," Lawson said.

In "What are We to You?" he discusses the ease with which straight people have been able to historically donate blood in the U.S. compared to their queer counterparts, regardless of their unprotected sexual histories.

In his series "Closeted," he casts molds of LGBTQ+ individuals' hands, highlighting the "limp-wrist" stereotype, which has plagued queer communities. For the project, he interviewed participants about the moments they recognized that their life experiences would be catastrophically different from others due to being queer.

However, in his current print-based work, Lawson works with perennial materials and combines aspects of multiple media. He said that he wants the pieces to simultaneously function as sculptures, prints and paintings, representing the fact that different nuances of personalities exist under the umbrella of the queer community.



"The whole reason I started the work that I am doing now is because I was going through intense complex post-traumatic stress disorder recovery.

I was trying to untangle my own childhood abuse, physical and emotional abuse, with homophobia being the center of the house and reattaching them to different things as a way to express myself more authentically."

- Forrest Lawson

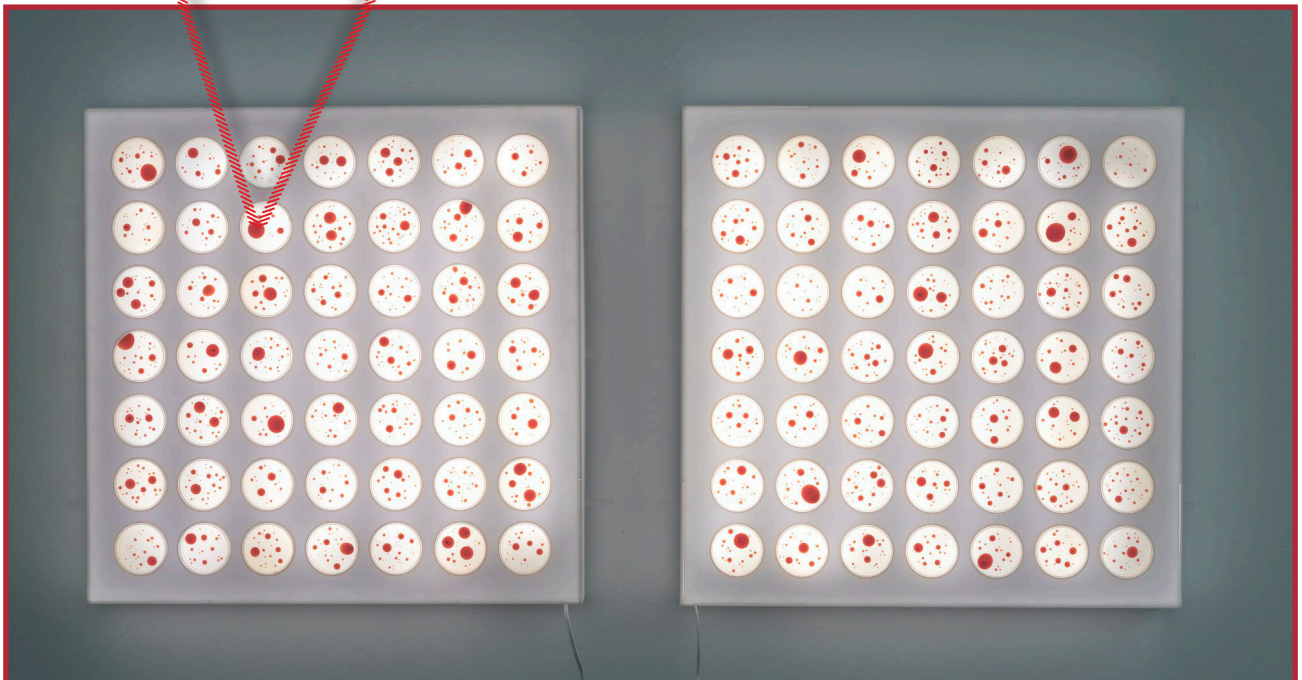
"I like the idea of playing with both print and sculpture, and how they communicate with each other because there is layering in both metaphor and material in both, which I am really interested in," Lawson said. "I am being really playful with these prints. They provide an opportunity to have fun."

In each piece, Lawson hodgepodes different queer elements and symbols, creating a web of queer subjectivities, interests and passions.

"When we grow up, we often think that we have to be the perfect gay and not stand out in ways that might get us hurt," Lawson said. "I think these pieces are my way of not having to rely on the perfectionist outlook anymore."

Overall, Lawson is hoping his work will resonate with other queer individuals.

"With the work I was making before, I think I centered the queer experience, but I didn't center it in a way where the queer viewer could fully engage with the work," Lawson said. "I was being more confrontational with the straight community. ... I'm making this work for my community, with my community. Hopefully, it helps someone sort of come to terms with their own experiences."



Lawson's "What are We to You?" made out of acrylic, petri dish, parafilm, resin, queer blood and LED light. Images of Lawson's artwork retrieved from forrestlawson.com.

Mikael Owunna commissions cultural memory

Queer Nigerian-American artist Mikael Owunna grew up isolated from his cultural heritage in Pittsburgh, Pa. Upon visiting Nigeria before college, he was put through a series of exorcisms in an attempt to cleanse himself of his queerness.

“I grew up feeling a lot of tension between my sexuality and my African identity,” Owunna said. “I was put through a series of exorcisms to drive the gay devil out of me. That put me into a spiral of a lot of anxiety and depression. I felt like I didn’t have a right to exist.”

In his work, Owunna now imagines realities where members of marginalized communities can be their authentic selves, without any earthly inhibitions. Art does not only help make sense of the world as it currently exists; it can also imagine new worlds and alternative realities.

In his art, Black and queer bodies transcend the realities, circumstances and positions they have been subjected to and enter alternate extraterrestrial realms and universes of limitless and infinite possibilities.

“With my current series [‘Cosmologies’ and ‘Infinite Essence’], I was really drawn to using African cosmologies as a way to transmit our notions of the human body itself to the cosmos, and then connecting each of those pieces into these myths and principles from African cosmologies,” Owunna said. “I feel like all my work draws on my experiences as a queer African person.”

In his pieces, Owunna offers the viewer an alternative vision of the Black body. In his series “Infinite Essence,” he highlights creation myths from the archives of the African diaspora.

Owunna created the series to counteract the existing images and constructions of Blackness in the media. He began to explore the impact on Black people’s psyches when all they see are negative images of themselves.

However, in his work, Black bodies are no longer depicted as sites of death, suffering and pity. Rather, they become effervescent sites of magic, wonder, beauty and immortality. His images are

evocative of the cosmos, the stars and the universe.

Owunna first starts out creating each image by hand-painting detailed patterns on the models’ bodies with fluorescent paints. Then, he gets out his camera.

Using his engineering expertise, he created a camera flash that only transmits ultraviolet — a light that is not visible to the eye.

“Then, in total darkness, I click on the shutter,” Owunna said. “For a fraction of a second, the models’ bodies are illuminated by these cosmic patterns back to the origins of the universe itself.”

In his 2020 TED Talk, “Transcending the Body,” Owunna expresses that through the visible spectrum, humans have established systems of oppression — racism, anti-Blackness and homophobia. But, he said, if individuals can work to transcend what is only visible to the human eye, they can see the beauty that inhabits Black and queer bodies, and all other marginalized bodies.

“It was really exciting for me to build my own camera flash,” Owunna said. “There’s this perspective of Blackness in my photographic images that I couldn’t do within the visible spectrum or with the tools that were readily available to us.”

Growing up as a queer African immigrant in the early 2000s, Owunna internalized the prevailing narrative in contemporary African culture that it is “un-African” to be queer. After being outed in high school, news quickly traveled back to his family in Nigeria.

“When I was outed, a lot [of] my family in Nigeria were telling me that [being queer] is not [part] of our culture and that I had been corrupted growing up in the West,” Owunna said. “I started to think that maybe they were right. Maybe there were never any queer people [in Africa]. Maybe I am an aberration. ... Maybe there is something wrong with me.”

As a result of growing up in the United States away from his heritage, Owunna experienced heightened



feelings of uncertainty, leading him to ultimately question his position in African culture. From negative reactions to spiritual spells, a clear message was being sent his way, silencing his budding sexuality.

However, Owunna soon found his voice in a silent manner — a camera. Photography and fantasy worlds provided him with a sense of relief and escape.

“The camera became a voice for me at a time when I felt voiceless,” Owunna said.

After conducting his own research, Owunna came upon a transformative and restorative revelation — that queerness hasn’t always been socially stigmatized in African society. Prior to Western colonization of the African continent, queer people once held some of the most coveted positions in African culture.

Through researching pre-colonial understandings about sexuality and gender, Owunna found that in traditional African societies, there was a cultural concept of queer people as the “gatekeepers.”

Owunna said that the concept has been described by West African elder Malidoma Patrice Somé from the Dagara community in Burkina Faso.

“Because the creator was primordial, androgynous [and] Black, queer people were seen as being able to vibrate both feminine and masculine energies. We therefore (according to Somé) preserved a special connection to the creator,” Owunna said. “... We were the diviners, the healers, the priests and priestesses — the ones who stood at the gateway between the physical and spiritual worlds. That (revelation) was transformative for me because it formed the way I thought about creating work that elevates these gatekeepers.”

However, Owunna said that this traditional understanding has been forgotten in many modern day African societies due to efforts to eradicate Indigenous culture.

“I started with a sense of estrangement, but then I had the opportunity to understand the basis of the culture outside of the contemporary skewed colonial vision that has been imposed on us,” Owunna said.

Owunna explained how colonization of the African continent continues today through the work of religious missionaries, who often promote anti-gay agendas and propaganda.

“There’s really a direct connection between Uganda’s [2009] anti-gay bill and the work of a white missionary, [Scott Lively], who was going to Uganda to meet with political leaders who proposed the bill,” Owunna said. “There’s now a renewed link between missionary activity from a U.S. evangelical pastor and the results of legislation being passed to criminalize LGBTQ+ people on the African continent.”

Owunna said how many African ministers have now adopted Western and non-Indigenous religious ideol-

Images of Owunna’s “Nommo Semi, Guardian of Space” on the left and “Lébé and His Articulations” below.



Owunna’s artwork retrieved from www.mikaelowunna.com.
ogies as their own, unbeknowingly rejecting their own cultural values in the process.

“I think what it all comes down to is white supremacy and control,” Owunna said. “I think it’s a form of control because you go into the community and destroy the nerve center — the people who hold all of the ancestral knowledge. Then you can then define those people and their culture in a way that you see fit. ... It really shows how colonization can transform cultural memories completely.”

However, Owunna is working to revitalize cultural archives and to spotlight the existence of queer Africans.

After attending college, Owunna spent six years documenting the experiences of about 50 LGBTQ+ African immigrants and diaspora across North America, Europe and the Caribbean for his series “Limitless Africans,” showing that the two identities don’t have to cancel each other out.

In addition to being an artist, Owunna views himself as a “gatekeeper” of traditional African cosmology, culture and spirituality. He said that if he could tell his younger closeted self one piece of advice, it would be to remember that there is a spiritual purpose for him on this planet and that “your identity is a part of your spiritual mission.”

Through his work, Owunna is showing that the gravities of life can eventually lead to limitless possibilities and infinite agency.

“The universe is infinite. And just as the universe is infinite, you are infinite and can embody the totality of the universe,” Owunna said. “You are as independent as the universe.”

Artist Markeith Woods unveils racial housing inequities in 'Still Segregated'

In society, people of color are often not in control of their own image. However, through his paintings, artist Markeith Woods is working to take back control.

“I want the viewer to walk away with a certain level of empowerment and new understanding about the figures and subjects they are looking at,” Woods said.

Woods is from Pine Bluff, Ark. He specializes in painting and works with the medium as a visual language. He uses materials such as charcoal, graphite, acrylic and oil pastels.

His work highlights wealth disparities and racial inequalities. In his current series, “Still Segregated,” he paints images of his Black subjects sitting outside of their apartments. He said that many people of color have historically been excluded from systems of wealth, often forcing them to forego home ownership and rent instead.

“With this series, I was thinking about wealth gaps and how hard it really is for us — people where I’m from — to own a home,” he said. “I started going out into my community and asking people if they wanted to participate in this project. All they have to do is sit outside of their apartment.”

In his paintings, his subjects subvert the viewer’s gaze. The subjects look away from the viewer pensively into the distance, never making direct eye contact.



Artist Markeith Woods.

Image courtesy of Art Ventures Northwest Arkansas.

Woods said that he believes the gaze is a powerful artistic statement because people of color are often not in control of how they are perceived by society, and yet, they are the ones who are held responsible for perceptions that have been perpetuated.

He described Black people as always having to be in the psychological state of “survival mode” due to systems of oppression and inequality — racism, health disparities and unem-



“Kicked Out Again” painting from Woods' series “Still Segregated.” Images of artwork retrieved from markeithwoods.com.

ployment — and that survival mode inhibits Black individuals’ agency and freedom.

But in his paintings, the subject is finally at rest. By not submitting to the viewer’s gaze, the subject is taking back power and control over how they are viewed.

“We often come to images or situations with these already made-up myths and perceptions of how this person made the wrong decision and judging a situation without having all the facts,” he said. “In my work, part of taking the ownership and power back, and putting it in the hands of the subject, is that they are not looking directly at the viewer.”

Woods offers the viewer a different perspective of Blackness, creating positive representations for Black communities.

“Perception is everything,” he said. “I work to tell a correct view of the subjects from my lens, as I have experienced judgments from an incorrect perspective.”

In addition to his studio practice, Woods enjoys working as an art educator. He served as an elementary school art teacher for two years. He said that he didn’t take his first art class until seventh grade, so he appreciates being able to now foster an appreciation for art amongst younger generations.

“Being exposed to it, it’s definitely going to shape their minds,” he said. “They’re always going to have some level of appreciation for art. I’m always thinking about how I can inspire and cultivate experiences for the next upcoming generation of art professionals.”

Aftermath:

Three months later ...

It's 9 p.m. PST, and I am at an airport getting ready to board a flight home from San Francisco with my best friend Alyssa Bump. The trip from coast-to-coast was an amazing, magical experience. My friend James took me to my first gay club, I learned all about the region's queer histories and even saw the Golden Gate Bridge. My heart feels so full right now.

I wrote *The Mason* in the fall during such a transitional period of my life. On one hand, I was in the process of completely severing ties with people from my past. On the other, I was going through all the fun emotions of a college student. I gave myself permission to feel for the first time without any inhibitions.

The project was so rewarding on so many different levels. I'll never forget the first week when I told someone in the class about my upbringing. My peer mentioned how they had close friends who were heavily religious, and they felt judged by them for being queer. We were both surprisingly from the same area. In that single moment, I realized that I wasn't alone and the power of human connection. I will always be forever grateful for that person.

Since the fall, I've been able to accomplish so much such as becoming Editor in Chief of *The Leader*, celebrating my birthday for the first time and flying across the country to the West Coast. I am literally the happiest I have ever been.

However, getting to this point hasn't been easy and the healing process certainly hasn't been linear. But at the end of the day, I can definitely say I've lived, learned and loved — my Mason jar is full for better or worse.

At Pier 39 in San Francisco, I bought a tangerine quartz crystal necklace, which felt very overall representative of this chapter of my life with graduation looming. Tangerine quartz gives an individual the courage to release past issues and traumas that no longer serve their purpose.

As we grow, we must inevitably shed old layers and versions of ourselves that no longer suit the individuals we are becoming even though it may be painful. However, we will always carry memories of people with us into the future.

I am eternally thankful to Elmer Ploetz and the Fall 2022 Editing & Design cohort for giving me the space to create this project and to work through my grief and emotions in a safe, healthy and constructive way.

For now, it's time to close the Mason jar. Summer is on the horizon. The sun is shining. May is coming.

Wishing you happiness, healing and growth as you move into your next chapter of life,

Love,



Will Karr

