



Parallel Closets

by Aaron McIntosh

Patchwork quilts of polyester pants and feedsacks filled spare rooms in a rough-hewn house full of hand-carved cradles, toys, and cabinets with smooth poplar floors. I remember musty fabrics, the smell of sawdust, and the taste of earth in our food. Carpenters, farmers, quiltmakers, storytellers, hunters, grandparents, and parents: artisans built my young life. Kingsport, Tennessee, did not have an art museum, nor did I grow up hearing “art” or “craft” or “culture.” My family of makers was its own culture-producing institution. With conviction, my parents introduced us to a world of useful, frugal skills guided by religion and traditions. My brother and I helped build barns and cabins, raise cattle, and tend our subsistence garden. When I was 12, I latched onto the needle arts of family women and started sewing small quilts, clothes for dolls, and for myself.

When I was 11, I encountered a small pile of sex ad clippings from gay porn magazines on a toilet tank in a bathroom stall at the Wendy’s. I shoved them into my soccer shorts and took them home to examine later. The images were titillating. They were a start button. From adolescence forward, an attachment to printed male erotica persisted alongside sexual and romantic exploration with girls. I was a teenage collector of men’s body-building magazines from the grocery store and even found my uncle’s 1970s gay porn stashed at my grandmother’s house.

Is it impulsive that I feel the need to come out, to tell the world of my difference by calling out disparate materials, sensations, and communities that have shaped this strange *thing* that is me? Regardless, I have a few proclamations. I went to a traditional craft school and now make non-functional art that sometimes devalues time-honored skill. I was raised in a socially-conservative Southern family, and have emerged a non-conformist gay. I am a contemporary artist who continually turns to traditional craft forms as content in my work.



“Weeds: Briars,” 2013. Gay erotica and personal ads printed on cotton/silk, piecework, crochet, found books and magazines, 13 × 27 × 21 “. Photo: Terry Brown.

And a few other confessions:

I am queer. Mostly a gay guy.

I now relish hot glue, paper-maché, and quick connections.

I have working class roots but now live an urban life of moderate means.

I am promiscuous. Kinky, too.
I love the impulses behind hobby craft.
I tilt towards the femme in many respects.
I am drawn to Mike Kelley more so than William Morris.
I like to top from the bottom.
I really love the satisfaction of sewing a perfect hem.

It feels great to come out of closets. They are tidy containers for only so long. Though I must admit, I am suspicious of limiting definitions, narrow terms, and binary relationships: closeted/out, gay/queer, art/craft, hand/mind. Complexity is my reality. I am most interested in the personal space that surrounds one's creative practice—the complicated identities we bring to the table when we leave oppositional binaries at the door.

Due to my upbringing, my relationship with craft is intrinsic—since birth I have known the look, feel, labor, and community that surround tradition, handwork, and skill. Of course, I had to *learn* the skills set before me, but there was no second-guessing the idea of a “right way” to do something. As a child and in college, I was sometimes even forced into submission by craft. Spanked because I continually failed to lay a shingle the right way, or told to throw my piecework away because my seams were sloppy. I accepted this as part of the tradition. Divergence was a path earned only once you proved your chops.

My sense of sexual self is primary, but the form has not always been so clear-cut. It became clear through representation. Those hunks, jocks, military guys, and older men didn't exist outside of the pages of pornography until I started college. And it took some time for me to understand that a desire formed around looking at naked guys was actually a yearning to be sexually, emotionally, and intellectually connected with men off the page. As I embarked on my first gay relationships, this desire, once mediated through printed matter, became palpable and took shape.

Whereas craft feels like something I was born into and at times must unlearn, my queerness has been crafted by degrees, somewhere between extrinsic and instinctive. This area of my identity was uninitiated, flailing, fumbling, looking for role models, anxiety-riddled. Vividly, I recall the specific instances that imprinted my desires and sexual appetites. There are distinct moments of seeing, hearing, tasting queerness that impressed on my senses, a sense of belonging. Alterations were tenderly made.

Thankfully, I never developed an antagonistic relationship to craft. Craft felt like it was “in my bones”—something I couldn't escape, even if I wanted to. At various moments in my artmaking I have questioned, poked, and even dumped craft. But I know that to distinguish between being a craftsperson and an artist would be tantamount to taking a scalpel to my body. The body movements, the energy, and the language of



Detail, “Weeds: Briars,” 2013. Gay erotica and personal ads printed on cotton/ silk, piecework, crochet, found books and magazines, 13 × 27 × 21 “. Photo: Terry Brown.

that house were embedded in my body by people who lived according to their traditions. Traditions which—I would later learn—are queer to the world outside of them. Craft’s possibility as a language, form, and tool make it a strong platform for my multivalent content. Because of our familiarity, craft can be on autopilot while I let desire, history, and strangeness pour in.

In fact, I have come to understand identity better through the lens of craft, as something I work on, obsess over, and tend to with care. A work-in-progress, my ethnicity, gender, race, class, and sexuality are all constructed, figured, modeled, shaped, performed, and informed. Moving forward from the realization that I’m not the type of iconic gay man featured in those magazines, I have adjusted, refined, and crafted an identity around queerness that makes sense to me. Queerness crafted is contiguous with my manner of making things as an artist, which is that it occurs without conscious volition. It is available to me because it has always been there.



"The Couch," 2010. Romance novels and gay erotica printed on cotton, quilting, upholstery, found couch, 35 × 35 × 72 ". Photo: Terry Brown.

My craft identity and my queerness were inversely formed. Today, they are beautifully entangled—their paths and patterns of growth strangely parallel. These identities both complement and complicate each other. Impulses guiding my craft and my queerness are “unthought knowns.” By the time I recognize what I’m doing, I’m already in it. The gesture of putting porn in soccer shorts is the same gesture that I use in my studio to this day, where fabric scraps, gay erotica, quilting, and sculpture are united organically. The craft traditions, family, schooling, iconic gay materials, queerness, sexual encounters, desires, perfect hems, and critical distance are seamlessly constituted. They are all in the studio with me, inextricably and without hierarchy—guiding my hand in happy perversity.

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AARON MCINTOSH is a cross-disciplinary artist who works in textiles, sculpture, drawing, collage, and photography. His work has been exhibited nationally, internationally, and most recently in “Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community” at the Leslie-Lohman Museum in NYC. He lives and works in Baltimore, MD, where he teaches Fiber at the Maryland Institute College of Art.
