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An Indecent Obsession

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An Indecent Obsession

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

AN INDECENT OBSESSION

By Aaron L. McIntosh, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010.

Major Director: Susan Iverson
Professor, Department of Craft/Material Studies

The title of my thesis is appropriately borrowed from a romance novel title, as my work proposes to mine the content, design and culture of romance novels and other erotic texts in order to excavate my own queer romance narrative. The body of work includes large-scale drawings of “stand-in boyfriends” stolen from romance novel covers, pieced fabric text works based on the titles of erotic texts, and a couch covered in erotic reading material. Drawing attention to the ubiquity of heterosexualized images and texts by deconstructing them, my work critically questions larger social constructions of normality and deviance, pleasure and disturbance, and high and low culture, as they pertain to ideas of love, romance and sexuality.
1

Background
Appalachian
Queer
Nerd
Boy

A seeming disparate grouping/list of words, these are nonetheless the four words that sink to the core of my identity up to this point. My upbringing in the mountains of East Tennessee. My growth as a queer person. My never-ending quest for idiosyncratic knowledge. And my unavoidably boyish nature, clinging to an extended adolescence. My art serves to connect these facets of my identity.
I was born in 1984, in Kingsport, Tennessee, a medium-sized factory town in the rolling foothills of the Southern Appalachians. The industrial landscape created by Eastman-Kodak Chemical Company was a stark contrast to the rising mountains nearby. Inside these factories, my parents worked to put me where I am today. Despite my parents’ education and professional careers, my family was always connected to the poverty in which they grew up. As a child, I clearly remember visiting my Grandma McIntosh’s three-room log cabin home, in which she started a family of eight children at age 16 and spent over 70 years. I still have uncles, aunts and cousins that live “off the grid” in the mountains around Erwin, TN.

I come from two Appalachian families, whose resilience and innate abilities of self-expression have left a deep impression in my life. These are families of makers. My Grandma “Mac” lived in a home built by her then-teenaged husband, made nearly everything she owned, grew all of her food, and cooked on a wood-burning stove…well into the 1990s. For many of my relatives, the seasons are still defined by different means of food growing or preservation. My parents never gave up these roots: they bought a farm and we raised most of our food, too. My father is a genius woodworker, who not only built more than half of our house, but also made my baby crib, numerous toys, and a tree house for my brother and me. It was so important for my father to pass on handiwork skills to my brother and me, and over the years before I left home for college, the three of us had built four barns on our farm.

Quilters abound throughout my families. Both grandmothers were noted quiltmakers in their communities. I even had a great-grandfather who lived alone for over 50 years after being
widowed, lovingly making quilts for himself and his extended family. My grandmother McIntosh made me a baby quilt, just as she had done for all of her 30+ grandchildren. I remember piles of quilts on top of her unused beds, quilt tops under the sofa waiting to be finished, and brown paper bags of scraps to use in quilts. Quilts are revered by and passed down through the women in my family.

I also come from a family of tinkerers, hobbyists and hoarders. Probably due to my parents’ families’ Depression-era frugality, my parents were reluctant to throw anything away. Like quilts, discarded materials comprise a base of my visual vocabulary. Piles of moldy fabric, yellowed newspapers, canning jars, rusty tools and other relics are the backdrop of my sensory understanding of home. Additionally, my brother and I grew up wearing hand-me-down clothing from other kids, and my family spent a considerable amount of time in flea-markets, junk stores and salvage yards.

It is difficult to think of myself as a typical child of the 1980’s - 90’s, because so much of my childhood seemed old-fashioned, more similar to the narratives of the Little House on the Prairie books I read than that of Punky Brewster. My childhood memories are not from TV—they are of farm animals, food ways, quilts, sawdust. In fact, my families’ disconnect from popular culture was probably very conspicuous. We did not go to movies, watch cable television, or read magazines. The only music I remember from childhood was country radio during breakfast.

It is important for me to remember these families, their lives and traditions, and to reconcile my place among them as an outsider. What was once an intimate nucleus of kin has disintegrated from the generations and cultural dams between us. Their quilts, such humble coverings made from discarded materials, have illuminated my understanding of family and
helped me probe my own personal history. Quilts are one of the few points of connection I still have with my family.

My mother and father love each other, but it is not something they exhibit. They do not hold hands and kiss in public. It is an old-fashioned kind of love—certain things are known but not discussed. I have never heard my parents utter the word “sex.” There were no “birds and bees” talks. My parents are of another era, as my many friends would point out over the years. Largely for the lack of pop culture reference points in my early life, I didn’t know anything other than the love and relationship of my parents. I remember simultaneously having sexual thoughts of men and planning for a wife, kids and family home. This was what I knew—everyone in my young life had this experience and subsequent goal. The idea of two men having a relationship never occurred to me because I had no clue such a relationship existed.

Still, something was out of place. Even at an early age, I never felt very aligned with men or boys, I was always more comfortable with my mother and girls, and so my playthings were always girl-oriented. Would a woman love a man that secretly wanted to wear dresses and re-decorate his room over and over? I guessed that things would work themselves out…

When I was a teenager things began to change. I got into hippy music and listened to the Beatles a lot. I discovered Andy Warhol’s work and Pop Art. I still had no friends through middle school and read a lot. When I started high school, I was almost immediately plunged into the punk scene: Renee Bliss made me throw away my hemp necklace and gave me a dog collar.
In these formative teens, I found my community in punk and riot grrl fans and other outcast characters on the fringes of my high school social fabric. Essentially, I was "raised" (in punk fashion) by those for whom "normal" society was not enough. Only very recently have I understood this community as profoundly shaping me in queer ways.

But my ultimate decision to "come out" was an incredibly personal decision, and didn't happen exclusively by peer influences. In fact, my "coming out" was marked more by what it was not, than what it was. I did not have emotional break-downs or blubbering confessions to everyone I knew. I did not experience an intense moment of enlightenment. I simply realized that the feelings I had always had for men could be real... and not exist only in my imagination. A quiet humming revolution. A tremor of self-actualization.
2

Early Works
My early art experience focused on painting and drawing, and I became an avid painter during my teenage years. I was obsessed with the figure, especially the appropriated figure. I did many paintings from photographs of my friends, as well as a series of paintings of Playboy models without heads layered over abstract-expressionist-inspired blobby patterns, drips and taped lines. I didn’t exactly understand why I was painting these women, but I know they were explorations of my nascent sexuality.

Painting was never materially satisfying for me though. Paint only had so much texture, and physical paint from a tube is not imbued with a material history. At some point, I became fixated on mentally organizing all the junk in my parents’ house. My parents’ clutter, which was fascinating to a child, became suffocating for a young adult. I started thinking about creative ways to use these scraps. I made collages and ‘zines out of old papers and magazines. I taught myself how to sew, and designed and made my own funky wardrobe using old clothes and scrap cloth. Ultimately, this fixation led me away from an interest in painting to fabrics and sewing. Piecework brings together fragments to produce a more profound presence in order.

Under the impression that I wanted a more “traditional” craft education, I landed eventually at the Appalachian Center for Craft, where I majored in Fibers for three years. After two years of rigorous training in weaving and surface design for cloth, I “came back” to the quiltmaking I grew up around. My exploration of quilting as a medium of expression in my time...
at the Craft Center was initially a response to my family background, but it became a forum for my academic interests in Appalachian studies and gender issues.

With quilts and quiltmaking as my conceptual ground, I delved into the relationships between material associations, social arrangement, group and individual identity. In my first body of work, *arrangements*, I translated different systems of social arrangement, such as family trees, social class charts and employee rank diagrams, into two-dimensional fiber pieces and sculptures utilizing quiltmaking’s inherent scheme of order to piece small bits of cloth, book pages and vinyl. The various levels of organization rooted in these processes add another layer of meaning to what it means to be grouped, to be inside or outside a social system.

All this thinking about social fittings was directly connected to my new queer identity. At this small traditional craft school, I was one of three LGBTQ students in the entire student body. In some ways this quaint community was the perfect place to come out as a queer person—the

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*The critique is destined to be a let-down. No one is making conceptual work. Everyone is showing printed floral and geometric patterns and I am showing a quilt with a “disturbing” drawing of a nude man and woman. The instructor asks why the man’s penis is erect, and tells me that makes it pornographic. It is a large sloppily-drawn image, and so I disagree. I am encouraged to use more symbols for these things, be more symbolic. I never use another nude male image.*
wide-openness and scenic isolation allowed me to explore myself as I never had before. On one hand, I had few queer friends or mentors in those woods, and I often faced a lonely path trying to figure out my new identity in a small community of mostly straight folks. On the other hand, I didn’t have the pressure to conform to gay norms and sacrifice my weird artist personality. But the Craft Center with its traditional leanings was probably not the best fit for me. I was definitely steered away from sexual-identity-based works and encouraged to pursue my ideas through symbols rather than direct images. Even my artist statement was tweaked by my faculty to read “less gay.”

In the two years after graduating from the Craft Center, I worked on several projects that dealt with recontextualizing common symbols or objects that are inextricably linked to either sexuality or gender or both. Patterned cloth, handkerchiefs, romance novels, children’s toys, and more subtle symbols such as targets provided potent material for which to gender-bend, or queer, the object and its original meaning. I saw this method of working as a way to subvert the relevance of rigid gender codes associated with these objects and allow them to exist in a different time and place. In the body of work, Targets, I reimagined the common symbol as something less powerful and masculine, less goal-oriented, less about hunting and endpoints. The targets I created are soft, inviting and meditative. They are pregnant targets, targets in communion, hundreds of targets with new identities and narratives.
3

Romance Novel Beginnings
I was a very inquisitive child, and continue to be an inquisitive adult. I have always been full of questions and nosy for answers. I could read at a very early age, and became an avid reader of anything I could get my hands on. I was as fascinated by books on animals as teen mystery novels. But I was most fascinated with early pioneer works of fiction, such as the Laura Engel Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* novels—partly due to my old-fashioned upbringing, partly due to the romantic appeal of Wild West adventures, and partly due to the exacting intimate descriptions of relationships between the characters.

Reading has been so important to my person. In many ways, reading has informed who I am. The book is a powerful tool. The written word is part of my realized world. It comes as no wonder that I turn to books as a material. I am drawn to the materials, objects and spaces of popular culture that embody sexual identity. Searching in popular culture for a more content-laden material than the cloth I had been using, I turned my eye to the thrift store heaps of discarded romance novels. Romance novels highlight this sense of sexuality more than any other material I have previously used. The romance novels have proved to be a potent, visceral and blunt material—a material that is sexual by connotation, and sexual in its written content.

I had used romance novel pages as material before coming to graduate school, but they were initially used as pure aesthetic material for the pattern of text and yellowed pages, and as symbolic material to represent heterosexuality and feminized objects. I had also used romance novel pages only in conjunction with quilts or quilt-like projects.
I made a body of work called *Peepholes*, after reading John Ibson’s *Picturing Men: A Century of Male Relationships in Everyday American Photography*. Ibson has collected vintage photographs of men together from the past century. Even though they are sitting on one another’s laps or holding hands, these men are pictured in period-appropriate heterosexual formats. However, their sexualities are blurred or unknown, and they are most certainly viewed in a queer context in present day. John Ibson offers: "The photographs are quite silent about the sexuality of their subjects…but the photographs do speak, often unmistakably, about a matter of perhaps greater importance than sex in human interaction: genuine intimacy."1 Ibson argues in his book that we must blind ourselves to these men’s sexualities, as they are not explicitly known and most likely these men were best friends and experienced a certain intimacy unknown in today’s male friendships. But why couldn’t they be queer? The same justifications for their probable heterosexuality can be used to justify their questionable homosexuality. The only given is that there are many layers to these men’s stories, which one assessment of a photograph cannot ultimately reveal.

Thinking about the subjective history of sexuality and the idea of reinvestigating historical material using a “queer lens” is what prompted me to make this work. I chose to focus on the hidden layers of sexuality and the multiple barriers and facades that obscure them, or don't. I became fascinated by the concept of the “peephole,” a part of an incomplete barrier revealing what is hidden behind the surface. I pieced together torn pages from heterosexual romance novels to create a “straight barrier” through which only a glimpse of the potentially queer subject matter is revealed by peepholes. These quilt-like panels function as screens of altered concealment, creating one layer of distance from the pictured men and the heterosexual

material, and another layer of distance between the queer subject matter and the viewer.

**Figure 2.** *Peephole Men 5.* 19"x26." 2008.
First Works of Graduate Studies
During my first semester at VCU, I set out to significantly challenge my use of the romance novels in this way, and get away from my reliance on traditional quiltmaking. I was still very interested in creating layered works, but wanted to push boundaries into other media while honoring the traditions of fiber art. However, I was prepared to not limit my work or process exclusively to fibers or textile techniques. I took a multi-disciplinary route and set out to explore the material realms of romance novels through a variety of formal solutions, by looking closely at the textual content, cover imagery, and the cultural niche of romance novels.

The genre of romance novels is complicit with consumerism and mass production, and this is a dimension I have tried to engage in my work. Why does sex sell? Paperback romance novels are simultaneously valued and devalued by our culture. A viable market of consumers purchasing the novels as sexual stimulants drives an industry that places them on the shelves of major retailers. But as objects, romance novels are poorly-bound paperbacks composed of flimsy paper that quickly yellows. Such cheap manufacture signifies the novels’ disposable status, and accordingly these books are discarded in mass. Yet, these novels are not simply thrown away—they still hold enough object-value as bound books with printed word to be sent off to second-hand stores, under the presumption that another person will find satisfaction in their pages. So the cultural valuation of romance novels exists in a peculiar loop.

For my 23rd birthday, Chris gifted me six vintage gay romance novels. He found them at a sex store in Knoxville. Best birthday gift ever! I read them over a few long weekends. They were so precious. They were talismans connecting me in some mythical way to gay camp glory days. I kept them on the bookshelf, covers faced forward like a prized collection.
Collecting material is an integral aspect of my work. Searching, I can find thousands of straight romance novels in used-book and thrift stores—there is an endless supply to my smallish demand. But I have to look harder for gay romance novels, usually perusing the discount bins at adult novelty stores. The difficulty or ease of these separate buying trips became tangible examples for me of straight versus queer space, and the ratio of heterosexual to homosexual persons in our culture. The gay material being “too risqué” for any place other than the sex store.

But yellowed paperbacks are yellowed paperbacks, despite the printed words within them. Straight women buy them for the same reasons gay men do: we all have lonely moments. Though they share the same form/format, there are wide differences between the readership-driven content of the two novels. The flow of the narrative, the length of chapters, the size of type-font, the ads in the back—everything about them is radically different. Romance novels written for women tend to be drawn-out narratives with more focus on all the details leading up to the sexual act—entire pages may read through to describe a mere glance. Gay novels, on the other hand, are typically written in large type and double-spaced for quick reading, have horribly loose narratives, and a sex scene occurring every couple of pages. I became fascinated by this concept of material resemblance but subject opposition.

In my first works in graduate school I played with juxtaposing the ‘straight’ and ‘gay’ romance novels to highlight their culturally-referential differences, but also suggest a commonality between the two. I also wanted to mix and arrange the pages in large fields of yellowed paper, where the viewer had to spend time to discover these differences. Looking to artists such as Ann Hamilton, who use the power of one material to convey variations of an idea or evoke multiple emotions, I wanted to seduce the viewer with this vein of subtlety.
Out of my budding interest in text and language play, I started several projects using one action verb as a theme. I chose verbs that had multiple connotations, but some grounding in scientific or mechanical processes of separation and classification. The first project began with “extraction,” and the second one with “dissection.”

In Extraction, I created a field of scrambled text out of straight romance novel pages in which various-shaped genital-like protrusions with clear tubing spouts discharge streams and drops of gay romance novels. Alluding to bloodletting, queer content has been viscerally extracted from heterosexual objects. In another layer of repurposing the object-ness of romance novels, I have made visual references to newsprint-wallpaper and moonshine still spouts that hint at my Appalachian roots, of which I am an extraction. Thus, while the work is about extraction of queer identity in the straight world, it is also about the extraction of my identity, shaped by family, history and place as much as by gender and sexuality.

I was increasingly interested in how the acts of tearing out the pages and reassembling them in an illogical manner and a non-book format could become a way to not only deconstruct the heteronormative object, but also deconstruct sexuality along such binary lines of straight or gay. I was trying also to create visually the idea of the “mash-up,” commonly used in DJ culture to describe dance music tracks that pull song snippets from far-ranging music genres into a complex composition. I came to view working in this space of unorthodox meldings, of sexuality

Figure 3. Extraction. 56"x 80"x 9." 2008.
slippages as a queer working space, freed from the trappings of such a binary system of sexuality and classification.

In *Dissection*, I created a rectangular field of straight romance novels with circular clippings of gay romance novel passages pinned down in a scatological pattern. Although it was not my exclusive intent, these early works were very scientific in feel. Visiting critic Lydia Matthews questioned why I was locating the queer subject in a scientific vein, when science had historically been used to classify homosexual persons as mentally and biologically “ill.” This formative feedback from Matthews helped me see that the work could not continue to address these issues of identity using scientific metaphors alone. With my brief understanding of binary issues relative to queer theory, I knew that biological “proofs” for homosexuality and heterosexuality are bunk, but my work was basically supporting this binary ideology. I was forced to recognize the multiple facets shaping identity.

I still felt there was a conceptual nugget to work with in the framework of scientific containment, and the idea behind *Dissection* segued into *Island*. Attempting to make the work more human and weirder, I decided to engage the hypothetical intersection of scientific discovery and home hobbyism.

In this work, an island of ‘straight’ romance novels has been seemingly plunked down atop a puddle of ‘gay’ romance novels. In a rather unnatural act, the puddle has erupted into
several protrusions that penetrate the island of novels, and have simultaneously bloomed flowers of enlarged explicitly gay text. As if they were too delicate to thrive on this island, or too invasive to let escape, these blossoms have been contained under glass bell jars.

*Island* is the earliest work to address a domestic connection of the romance novels. I created this work with the romance novel reader in mind. What would the indulgent and potentially obsessed reader make when faced with their obscene amount of read paperbacks? Where would they situate this object of fantasy, and how would they craft it? I envisioned a model island crafted with love on the living room floor.

Seen from above, as the viewer is afforded an almost aerial view, this island becomes a surreal handmade microcosm. Small, pathetic and mimicking a hobbyist creation of a lonely romance novel reader, it exists in isolation from any natural island. The flowers have been placed under bell jars, referencing specimen collection and the simulated world of terrariums, both attempts to contain nature and miniaturize an environment. But while the eruptions and blossoms
are confined, the make-believe puddle freely seeps out below the island, eliciting a subversive liquid tension.

*Island* is something of a hybrid between the coded abstraction I relied on in works before graduate school, and the direct representation I would engage throughout the rest of my graduate studies. I was still offering vague notions of identity confusion, veiling them in metaphors of scientific containment. Conversely, pin-pricking salacious gay text under glass opened up a new fissure in my making. I knew there was no turning back to the conservative abstraction of my older work. This idea of isolating and highlighting sexually-explicit text led me to engage more risky subjects in my next works.

In *Packages*, vellum tracings of men taken from 1960s-era *Physique Pictoral* magazines are embedded in moth-eaten layers of straight and gay romance novels, silvered paper, and bow-patterned sheer cloth, and then pin-pricked by paper bows of enlarged fragmented text. In this saturated work, every image, text and layer of material is obscured by one layer or another, representing the many layers that must be mined to fully understand identity. In these layers, notions of secrecy, voyeurism and subversion, typically associated with male homosexuality, are offset by overt dissections and enlargements of gay text, bright coloring of undergarments, and an obvious nod to male desire in the double-entendre of the title.
Nearly naked muscle men posing! The queer image represents a queer subject. No more vague shapes and symbols. This way of working was so alien to me. Now I felt total freedom to appropriate these clippings from my own interactions with popular culture and bluntly use them to talk about queer identity.

Then the work got even more sexual. I went on to create that most visceral remnant of male sexual encounter: ejaculate. Using gel-mediums as a simulation, I made a series of “cum” splatters on the romance novels, and exquisitely cut them out to resemble strange doily-like blobs. I would combine these in various arrangements and installed them at crotch-level on the wall. These experiments led to cum drawings of text lifted from the romance novels. The nature of the simulated material left a beautiful staining effect on the romance novel pages, further enhancing the sexual presence of these works.

After these works, I got overwhelming responses that the work lacks personal intervention—*where was I in this work?* I needed to insert my own narrative. Also, there was something fundamentally missing in all this work: an acknowledgement of the culture of *reading* romance novels.

*Figure 8. Packages. Detail.*
5

Notes for Future Romance(s)
Romance novels may be ubiquitous and discarded in mass, but they are clearly successful among particular readerships. Who is this readership, what do they look like, how do they live? The common stereotype of romance novel enthusiasts is that of the overweight, lonely middle-class woman. But the symbolic language and image used in these books makes them appealing to a diverse population of readers. I found that many younger female friends of mine had read romance novels, especially during their teen years. And while I don’t know any gay friends who read the gay ones, I can imagine it is a sizeable male population. Despite my growing collection of them, I had never actually read through an entire romance novel.

I was introduced to the provocative work of Sophie Calle, a French conceptual artist whose practice engages real acts of obsession through “docu-performances.” Calle has compiled entire scrapbook-like novels documenting love affairs that may or may not have occurred, as well as hired a private detective to follow and document her everyday goings-on. Her work inspired me to “get real” with these novels. I had been critical of them as reading material for the several years I had been using them. But it was time to read them seriously—to give myself over to a romance novel fantasy.

I began reading five novels and surprisingly found my own stories in these novels. I would read situations that were similar to my own romantic experiences, minus the straight context. I became really intrigued by the small markings, repetitive cursive name writings, and underlining by previous readers I would encounter in the novels. This inspired me to start notating the novels, recording my own similar experiences, changing (i.e. queering) the text by

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At 25, I have been through three serious relationships—none of them perfect, all of them stabs at something serious. Returning to the romance novels, I began to see myself in them. Seeing myself not in the characters per se, but in the conversations and situations—in those tough throes of love. The bitter distance from them was no longer so great. They have started to look like my diary—notes for my future romance(s). One big blurry mess...
eliminating female pronouns, and devising a coding system for repetitive motifs. For instance, the written buildup to sexual climax gets highlighted in neon yellow, common words such as “cry” and “tears” are circled in light blue colored pencil, words that could be taken from my own life are violently circled in red ink pen. The choice of coding media here was specific in its widespread availability. Even though none of these media choices are archival, they are exactly the media one would use to write notes in a novel—something I could find at any convenience store.

When I felt I had enough novels coded, I started restructuring them into a large rectangle, referential of a quilt. Once they were all glued together, I began incorporating enlargements of text from within the novels to draw attention to particular passages that struck me. The text enlargements caused me to add enlarged titles, and the work started to look a lot more like a delicate graffiti wall, created with color pencil and paint pen instead of spray paint. At this point,

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 9.** Notes for Future Romance(s). 84"x 156." 2009.
the work seemed to grow in the vein of wallpaper, so I added additional panels to extend it, with the final work spanning nearly 18 ft. This marked a dramatic change in scale that I had previously not attempted. For a majority of my previous work, I was using what one might refer to as a “craft” scale—that is, the scale of a work has to do with the body and its use of a given functional object. Somewhat unconsciously, I had been making works relative to the size of a quilt. Notes for Future Romance(s) marked a new scale direction in my works—the scale of the room itself or that of the billboard. A handmade scale of this proportion clearly leans towards the obsessive, and that mirrored my romantic life of the time.

While using an overhead projector to enlarge the titles, I was startled by the accompanying enlarged images of the couples from the romance novels. Typically painted in a small scale with flourishes for figurative details, the gigantic images of men and women from these covers held a presence dramatically different from their source material. I couldn’t stop looking at these big men—now that they were closer to life-size—and imagining them without their women. I started extracting male figures from the cover art of the novels, separating them from their contextual relationships, and drawing these amplifications in that most mundane colored pencil.

After the large figures were rendered on the paper, I went back in and added bigger titles cut-out of other pages and simply taped these on the surface. This final layer of text flaked off
the work, and alluded even further to temporary flyers posted on walls. With so many cheap scrollings, stickers, fake cum drips and flaking paper titles, this drawing exists somewhere between a teenaged-girl’s notebook love scribbles gone overboard, and a trapped prisoner’s maniacal renderings of outside-world fantasy. A “triple-text effect” overwhelmed the viewer first with the original printed text of the novel pages, then with my overlay of diaristic text, and finally with enlargements of texts from all parts of the novels. Whereas works such as Extraction suffered from not drawing enough attention to the differences between different texts, Notes for Future Romance(s) held viewer attention with an overload of selected highlights. As Simon Morley states in Writing on the Wall, “here writing also becomes a vessel for some kind of desperate authentic communication, and carries a confessional tone that might short-circuit the banality of normal public discourse.”

Similar to the muddled layers of Packages, Notes for Future Romance(s) was an attempt to dump a lot of ideas, texts, images and materials into one piece. A perfect compliment to the many messy changes in my personal love life, this work came to perfectly represent the sort of “delayed adolescence” I was experiencing during my transitional year in this new environment. Additionally, this work helped me break into a vein of working in which the line between fiction and narrative is increasingly blurred. When is the viewer reading a regular translation of a

Figure 11. Notes for Future Romance(s). Detail.

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romance novel, and when are they reading a translation of the artist’s experience? When does the straight text become a gay text or context? These were the new concerns I explored in Notes for Future Romance(s).

In researching graffiti culture connections to Notes for Future Romance(s), I came across the work of Tim Rollins and his collaborative project, Kids of Survival (KOS). Rollins and KOS sought to bridge the divides between the artistic avant-garde, mass media and underprivileged groups. The work produced by this collaboration “became a meditation on the future of the book and reading in an era increasingly dominated by television, a situation that was intertwined with broader issues concerning the future of a materially rooted language in the age of electronic media.”³ The group’s work included “paintings” composed of caricatured drawings of political figures superimposed on the dismembered, pasted pages of such canonical texts as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, George Orwell’s 1984 and Animal Farm, and Herman Melville’s Moby Dick. While these works carried political messages, they were “characterized by an ambiguity towards the host text, which, while being defaced, nevertheless in one way or another served as the source of the subject matter of the team’s activities.”⁴ While wholly different in content, the

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³ Morley, Writing on the Wall, 2003, p. 172
⁴ Morley, Writing on the Wall, 2003, p. 172
work *From the Animal Farm I* bears a striking resemblance to my *Notes*, in its use of novel pages with enlarged images and descriptive text.

The evolution of artworks created during my first three semesters was centered on this examination of material culture intersecting with personal identity. The romance novel acted as a Magic 8-Ball of sorts—I had a plethora of questions, to which I would look to the romance novels for answers. In this way, the works created during my first year are more or less extensive material studies. Engagement with conceptual concerns was always present, but nearly every concept was spawned first by my interaction or imagination of the physical material.

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*Making the piece for candidacy felt like giving birth. It was such a be-labored over piece. There is so much personal shit in the notations. A lot of the writing is angry letters to that boy who broke my heart. TJ is the first boyfriend after Chris, making him my second ever. He broke up with me in the middle of March. Two of the men drawings from novel covers look exactly like TJ. I intentionally/unintentionally shape their noses to look like him. My friends look at it and know immediately. I feel so transparent. Even though I invite him, TJ does not come to the opening.*
6

Unpacking Notes
While the first year of graduate studies was marked by material investigation, my second year has been molded much by historical, critical and theoretical studies relative to my practice. Before coming to graduate school, the bulk of my critical reading/thinking revolved around queer culture studies, with a skimming over of queer theory. During grad school, I delved deeper into queer theory and its post-structuralist roots. I have been influenced by Jacques Derrida’s post-structuralist writings on language and the notion of decentering culture; Michel Foucault’s works on selfhood, sexuality and deviancy; Eve Kosofsky’s thinking on the temporality of “coming out;” and Judith Butler’s theory that gender and sexuality are performed rather than innate. Further exposure to postcolonial and decolonial theory and visual studies has introduced me to the breadth of writers and thinkers working to introduce deconstructive criticism into the major culture frameworks.

Since my work has queer identity as a major subject, I constantly answer the question of whether or not my work and research are intended to moralize. Reading art theorists such as Johanna Drucker, Suzi Gablik, Robert Hughes or Donald Kuspit has given me a grasp of artistic production and implications of a moral imperative. These writers have served as guideposts in understanding the social implications of the work I make. Through their individual thoughts, I can now frame my own studio practice as producing works that challenge society to think about the implications of personal identity, without putting forth my own moral agenda.

I was particularly influenced by Johanna Drucker’s writing. Drucker serves to activate our current art dialogue by cutting loose the threads of the avant-garde, which sought to separate the artist from culture. Drucker states: “a veritable catalogue of possibilities for reinventing traditions of art making and of shifting the relation of critical opposition to mass media into a different key can be enunciated, one in which the pleasures of consumption are an acknowledged
part of aesthetic production rather than a repressed one.”⁵ Essentially, Wal-Mart and laundry baskets may have as much to offer us as Picasso and oil paint in post-modernity. Her assessment that the contemporary artist must consider their societal role in conjunction with popular culture holds weight in consideration of my own use of appropriation. Drucker’s invitation to join the culture industry is as refreshing as it is hard-to-swallow.

With enhanced critical familiarity, my ideas and concepts began to focus more clearly on examination of popular culture and its influence on our private lives and public consumerism. Whereas my work before graduate school pivoted off a personally abstract axis, my growing interest in cultural deconstruction has shaped the ideas in my current work using an internal-reflexive lens. My graduate thesis project is concerned with this deconstruction of cultural imagery in order to reconstruct a personal identity. My thesis prompts us to look at the instances in which desire is written for us, projected as an image upon us, or sold to us through advertisement—and fundamentally to question those instances.

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7

Boyfriends
I have been consistently intrigued/appalled by the culture industries’ perpetual rendering of “Love.” As ubiquitous as the air we breathe, pop culture representations of relationships, romance and sexuality abound in Western culture. A man and woman kissing are seen on everything from movie billboards to bank account advertisements. Now, in 2010, I can visit a remote stretch of Texas highway and see a billboard advertisement for a gay TV show, depicting two men caressing. The institution of “coupledom” prevails. This is the culture that still produces and consumes cheap trade-paperback romance novels, straight and gay. Out of this smorgasbord of figure-images, we are prompted to navigate our desire and sexuality.

Each one had a complicated reason for not wanting to be with me. Though I gave them each a considerable portion of my heart. This town has been nothing but missed connections in the love department. 2009 was the loneliest year of my life.

Responding to loneliness and the lack of stable romantic relationships in my personal life, I am creating a series of larger-than-life boyfriends appropriated from romance novels. These flimsy cut-paper men of the Boyfriends Series are attempts to fill the voids of unattainable love—they are the “stand ins” for boyfriends I cannot attain in real life. These boyfriends are “stolen” from their female counterpart in the romance novel covers. So what does it mean to take

Figure 13. Captive Heart Boyfriend. 94”x 35.” 2009.
these men away from their women? I do not hate these women…I am just jealous. Not only do I want the men they have, but also I want the same representation in popular culture that their desire merits. In eliminating the women from these cover relationships, I am choosing to highlight what is absent rather than present. Through mediation of the silhouette, the black-out and censor bar, these artists focus on the liminal space between the subject/object and its perception, between the seen and unseen.

My deconstruction of popular images is in a vein similar to the work of John Baldessari and Candice Breitz, In these artists’ works, absence, through means of deconstruction or censorship, functions as commentary on the manufacture of image in popular culture. John Baldessari uses found photographs from magazine advertisements and “white-outs” whatever aspect of the image he doesn’t want the viewer to pay attention to. Candice Breitz’s work is

Figure 14. Boyfriends Installation. 2009.
concerned with extraction of the human elements of pop culture that are often amiss in its presentation, via music videos, Hollywood films and television.

As opposed to my own, in Baldessari’s work is almost a pure erasure of emotional content. Whereas I am working with the specificity of an absence, Baldessari more or less uses absence as a basic formal tool. In Karen Wright’s 2009 *Art in America* magazine interview with the artist, Baldessari states, “I’ve had a longtime fascination with the meaning...of a part, the meaning of a whole. They can be interchangeable, and that just drives me crazy. How much of a whole do we have to have before we can no longer think of it as a part?”6 The bulk of his commentary centers around the fact that he grounds his imagery in magazine culture, making the viewer pay attention to what he or she is not supposed to pay attention to, the space that is not a lifestyle on display or for sale. Still, Baldessari returns again and again to the figure in his work, which I believe grounds his work in a deconstruction of identity. While Baldessari does not engage absent or censored identity in his writing on his work, he does offer this: “we put a priority, in vision, on looking at a person’s face when we see figures. Some of the faces of the figures didn’t interest me. It was their stance or the ambience and so on that did. I said, ‘Well, if that’s not necessary, why do I have to use it? Instead of looking at things, look between things.”7

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In drawing attention to the negative space, Baldessari has reimagined the way we interpret simple images, perhaps calling into question how simple any image can be.

In contrast to Baldessari, Candice Breitz openly engages identity as it is written for us by Hollywood. In her work, Breitz pulls apart the tight narrative of a blockbuster script and isolates particular character moments that are so grounded in a stereotype that they function outside of the movie’s context. In her multi-channel video installations, individual characters are presented on a black-out background, having conversations relative to their movie, but absent the other characters. This sets up the character’s speaking as epic monologue. Breitz’s work also focuses on presence and absence of sound. In works such as Babel, Breitz isolates elemental sounds of grammar from pop music videos. For example, a clip of one of Madonna’s hits is
condensed into the repeating gutterals “baaa baaa baaa.” In other extractions, Breitz selects whole words to repeat. And in her works Mother and Father, Breitz has extracted pop cultural iconographic mothers and fathers from Hollywood films and isolated them by blacking out their background environments. With most of her work existing in multi-channel formats, viewers are typically overwhelmed by so many isolated figures that are also part of one big conversation. This relational device that Breitz uses is powerful because it questions the whole idea of individuality within community. In a modern age, we know ourselves as individuals, but so much of our identity is determined in how we are grouped socially and culturally.

Composed of diaristically notated romance novel pages and painstakingly rendered in colored pencil, the Boyfriends are evocative of the obsessive nature of desire and longing. In these saturated works, notions of secrecy, voyeurism and subversion, typically associated with male homosexuality, are offset by larger-than-life amplifications of desirable men. I use the obsessive quality of teenager colored pencil sketches to exquisitely render these larger-than-life men. Made by fusing novel pages to canvas, these men, when installed, have a flimsy paper-doll quality about them as they appear to peel off the wall. With Journey Into Love and Captive Heart Boyfriends, I also used the flimsiness of the material to play with the accompanying text of the covers. Letting “Love” and “Heart” fall to the floor in these works strips them of their charged

Figure 18. Candice Breitz. Video still from Mother. 2005.
context, and parallels the absence of the female figure. The fragile nature of the installed works goes against permanence, and adds to a sense of isolation from the missing figure.

Absence in my works also speaks to the voyeurism that often accompanies desire. In written voyeurism, the motif of the peephole, window or portal is usually a key part of the storyline. As Susan Stryker writes, “the popular ‘peephole’ style of cover art, suggesting stolen glimpses into exotic interior territories at once psychological and geographical, literalized the voyeuristic appeal of early postwar paperback art.”8 The idea of a peephole is yet another device to present only part of a whole. The image one sees through a peephole might be staged, even purchased, but the peephole serves to blind the viewer to the rest of the world, a way to look from the outside in. The lure of looking through the peephole is total immersion in an inner world, while the outside world fades out; “the covers seduced readers with the imagined pleasures and forbidden knowledge within. They supplied a porous, emotionally charged, two-way boundary between the hidden and the seen.”9

I chose to create at least one boyfriend in the series that mimics the peephole style of romance novel covers. *Wings of Love Boyfriend* was my first foray into painting the figure, my first time to use a radial starburst of pieced pages, and most importantly, the first boyfriend to be

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accompanied by his background setting. I chose to extract the female partner at close-to-center of the composition, making her the awkward focus of the peephole. I created something of a double-portal, a situation where the viewer sees this larger-than-life portal containing two lovers, but is forced to look/think beyond that portal and locate the portal into which the woman escaped. This is the only work I have created so far in the Boyfriend Series that invites the possibility of a viewer interaction, although implied. The work is reminiscent of those wooden cut-out figures behind which tourists pose for corny pictures at theme parks and historical sites. It is my hope to engage the viewer physically with this looming absence.

After the creation of these first three boyfriends, I felt a strong urge to make a boyfriend that would have been a hunky archetype from my own Appalachian background. I came across Mountain Lovesong, whose cover depicted the warmest mountain man I had yet to encounter in the cover art.

Figure 20. Wings of Love Boyfriend. 84"x 86." 2009.

Figure 21. Mountain Lovesong Boyfriend. 42"x 61." 2010.
He was perfect—the image depicted him embracing a woman by wrapping his arms around her. I also wanted to experiment with incorporating personal home textiles in *Mountain Lovesong Boyfriend*, so the novel title is made from a worn pillowcase of my grandmother’s. The multiple associations of the dirty pillowcase with desirable men and homespun identifiers make this work dynamic in interpretation.

The incorporation of textiles in *Mountain Lovesong Boyfried* notwithstanding, the *Boyfriends* marked a distinct foray into the territory of image-based drawing. The *Boyfriends* also harkened back to my early interests in figure drawing and painting. I found myself looking at the use of figurative imagery and composition in works by artists such as David Hockney, Andy Warhol, Robert Longo, Richard Prince, and Kara Walker.

Andy Warhol and David Hockney’s early works of the mid-century include multiple images of youthful men as either sexual object, close companion, or both. The simple contour line quality of both of their works delineates the cursory aspect of the teenage doodle-turned-desire. The hundreds of small pen and ink drawings Andy Warhol created in the early 1950s for his “Boy Book” collection are voyeuristic, yet childlike. David Hockney’s practice has always engaged the tradition of portraiture, and his many male portraits throughout his career attest to an interest in the isolated male form.

Having viewed these artists’ work since my own teenage years, I have often returned to them as provocative images of queer desire. Simple, yet vigorous in their line quality, these male drawings capture the tenuous gender line gay men often tow. In his essay for the monograph,
David Hockney Portraits, gay literati Edmund White begins with the statement: “Hockney took up gay subject matter before almost anyone else.”

White makes this acute observation with the knowledge that there previously have been scores of men who made artworks about male-male desire, but very few of them were afforded the benefit of openly declaring such queer love in a non-lurid context. White states that Hockney wasn’t painting pornography as much as domesticity—he wanted to depict the “dailiness of male-male couples” or the “appealing insouciance of a sleeping young man’s exposed bum.”

Voyeurism aside, Hockney wanted his viewers to simply look at these men with eyes as familiar to them as his own.

I discovered Robert Longo’s major work, Men in the Cities, well after I had begun the Boyfriends, but there are many connections between our works. Longo has subverted the staid image of the businessman by capturing him in the midst of dancing. These large-scale photo-realistic drawings white-out all other information but the figure, and allow us to contemplate a

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complex male identity in corporate culture. Because of their scale, Longo relates to his works as sculpture, and this has guided me to think about scale, space and site for the Boyfriends series.

![Figure 24](image.png)  
*Figure 24. Robert Longo. From Men in Cities—Men Trapped in Ice. 1980.*

The works of Richard Prince and Kara Walker have prompted me to consider the possibility of the appropriated, but distorted image. Walker takes the antique craft of cut-paper silhouette portraits and morphs it into a storybook-cum-nightmarish medium for portraying slavery-era stereotypes of African-American femininity, sexuality and servitude. In Richard Prince’s more recent body of work, “Nurse Paintings,” the artist has deconstructed pulp novel covers from the 1960s – 70s depicting nurses in various themed fantasies: “Surfer Nurse,” Naughty Nurse,” “Dude

![Figure 25](image.png)  
*Figure 25. Kara Walker. From The End of Uncle Tom. 1995.*
Ranch Nurse.” Prince enlarges these covers and then smears out everything but the nurse, veiling her in smoky layers of paint to push even further the over-eroticization of these female figures. Both artists pick through the rich world of cultural characterizations, highlight their own favorite stereotypes and disfigure them. The works of Walker, Prince and Longo all capitalize on exaggerative silhouetted figures, and I draw connections to my own use of the dramatized figures of lusty reverie.

Installation of the Boyfriends works is something I knew would be very particular to their contextual success. When installing the works around my studio, I immediately saw them as reliant on the given architecture. The figures are very large, but so flat that they are easy to hide around a corner to be discovered by unsuspecting viewers. Despite their flatness, these men had the ability to provoke. I became interested in the idea of the Boyfriends lurking in the shadows, like men cruising around gay bars.

Researching the artist Simon English, I was attracted to the artist’s large-scale scatological drawing collages of male nudes, which curator Bill Arning describes as similar to:

“walking through a cruising park or the endless cubicles at a bath-house the urge, to walk through quickly, scanning each body once, seems the correct way to begin the process of committing to someone, but it never works…the most attractive silhouettes have dissolved into the shadows of the trees. When one has done enough laps that the faces are all familiar, a depressing self-awareness creeps in, how the lust to touch a few more bodies has compelled another night of walking in circles, like the characters in a Samuel Beckett play.”

This motif of “cruising” is evident in Simon English’s hundreds of sketchy drawings of men, but still too literal for my taste. I saw a great opportunity to engage the idea of cruising in my installation of the Boyfriends by placing them in the awkward spaces of the Anderson Gallery’s meandering three-story stairwell. Here the men would be placed in unlit, shadowy narrow landing spaces, referential of those desperate waiting men on the prowl. But here the context is subverted because instead of spying a seedy-looking hustler type, the viewer comes across elegant, polished men in romantic poses of embrace. The immediacy of the gay male “meatmarket” bumps into the timeless idyll of the romance novel. It would be like meeting the man of my dreams in a sketchy alleyway and getting a warm hug.

I decided to bring this sense of comfort and intimacy to another space not typically associated with such traits: the men’s bathroom. Within the odd mezzanine of the Anderson Gallery is a small, aged bathroom with a porcelain urinal that drops into the floor. The intimate size, vintage fittings and gendered space make this a perfect backdrop for installing a boyfriend specifically to engage male eyes. I wanted to create my first boyfriend taken from gay source

Figure 27. Simon English. Jean Plaidy. Detail. 2002-2004.
material and make him so large he would overwhelm the space. When I came across a phone sex ad in a gay magazine for a handsome construction worker titled “White Trash Trade,” I knew he would be the perfect boyfriend for this installation. Hunched over, shirtless, with big warm eyes and a flowing mullet White Trash Trade Boyfriend looms over the urinal glancing just above the head of the viewer urinating. In this all-male space, the enormous drawing is created on gay romance novels and erotic pulp, covering the wall to mimic the look of gay bathrooms pasted over in personal ads, club flyers and graffiti. White Trash Trade Boyfriend exists within a juxtaposed installation of straight versus queer space and intimate versus aggressive space. I want the viewer to be both confronted with the overt sexual male object, and also feel somewhat calmed by his meek stare.

Figure 28. White Trash Trade Boyfriend. 116”x 58.” 2010.
8

Getting Texty
All the while *Boyfriends* are being created, I crafted large text works to accompany or compliment them. I select passages and titles from romance novels to draw attention to the perceived weight of these words. In the context of the romance novel, such words transport the reader to a mythical, fantastical world of lusty, overwrought passion—romance with all the trappings of pastoral settings, blushed cheeks, exposed flesh, handsome men, and buxom women. Isolated from their context, though, these words stand as inane substitutions of the acts or emotions they represent, and their meaning is simultaneously heightened and deflated.

I became interested in how even the specificity of typography in these novels reveals much about the intended reader experience. Stories that are more “romantic” typically use a serif font, and occasionally have even curlier additions. Many of the gay erotica novels use stark, bold san-serif fonts, for easily communicating sexual encounters.

In Western culture, there is a certain universality of text. Text is our foremost concrete communication tool. For centuries, and before the advent of photography, text has outweighed image in truth determination for Westerners. That’s why advertising has always relied on text to sell ideas or products since its inception. Text, via formats of the ad or signage, is an institution of pop culture.

However, because it’s widespread use, and sometimes culture specificity, text can also be completely ambiguous. Sometimes the multiple connotations of a word or phrase can render an intended meaning useless. Of course, there can be a huge divide between the public and private
readings of texts. We often have a blunted response to oversized, mass-produced text because of its impersonal qualities. The same text, however, may personally inform in the intimate reading space of a novel.

Of course, when images are combined with text, they work together to more strongly communicate ideas. However, their effectiveness in informing one another is debatable, sometimes ironic. Relationships between text and image are easily messed with by artists, and the notion of sending mixed-messages is a familiar tactic of contemporary art practice. Simon Morley, in his book, *Writing on the Wall*, discusses how contemporary artists “steal” text for myriad ways of subverting meaning:

“In place of the linear, hierarchical and segregated relationships between reading and writing, and between the seeing and reading that characterize normal practice, [artists] can be said to engage with what has been called ‘topographic’ space—a space in which “writing is severed from its role as mere verbal description and is experienced instead as both a verbal and a visual phenomenon. By doing so, artists have sought different organizations of the spaces and contexts within which word and image appear. Artists make a series of incursions from the domain of the culture dominated by the rigid and constraining protocols of the book.”^{13}

Ed Ruscha and Lawrence Weiner are two artists whose use of text has relied on commercial advertisement and hackneyed sayings. Ed Rusha’s prints, drawings and paintings draw upon advertising conventions of isolating and elevating the most important words to sell an idea. Ruscha’s work also focuses on bringing a material, albeit graphic, quality to words. His typography for the word mimics its real world signifier. Lawrence Weiner’s work is more concerned with communicating ideas on the scale of architectural commercial advertising. In many installations that use the billboard as a reference

![Figure 29. Ed Ruscha. *Mind If I*. 1984.](image-url)
point, Weiner places plain but bold phrases that have no specific correlation to one another, except in their uniformity. Both Ruscha and Weiner employ self-styled conventions of abbreviation. In Weiner’s works, several phrases read as unfinished thoughts, but in the end, come together to read as one rambling, poetic idiom. Ruscha often clips and illustrates just one word or group of words from an advertisement, leaving the meaning of the word unexplained and open to interpretation.

Annette Messager, on the other hand, uses a visual vocabulary of hobby crafts to create puffy throw-pillow-like word arrangements and enlarged stuffed sculptures. While Messager’s work reminds us of the obsessive organization and maintenance of domestic tasks, it also critiques the role of language and text in “women’s work.”
With these artists in mind, I set out to create works where the text becomes the image, functions on it’s own or compliments other images, such as the Boyfriends. Similar to Annette Messager, I have returned to using the clothing, domestic textiles and traditional quilting materials of my Appalachian background for these works. Returning to this homespun aesthetic is a conscious effort to move away from the stark minimalism of text-based artists such as Ed Ruscha and Lawrence Weiner, and push the texts into a feminized or queer space.

In The Raptures of I have stripped a novel title of its only romantic word—‘love’—and left a provocative fragment in place. “The Raptures of” could refer to anything: the raptures of a sexual encounter, the raptures of the Apocalypse, or the raptures of a dark chocolate dessert. Upholstered in brown and blue plaid, this text might read as “the raptures of manly plaid.” My use of the plaid was to contrast the high dramatics of the word “raptures” with the potential comfort of a fatherly plaid shirt.

In gasped & grunted, I turned to the interior text of one of the novels, and lifted a string of words at odds with each other. The physical act of a gasp varies significantly from the act of grunting. I tried to match these physical qualities of the words by their placement on the wall.
Installed in a gallery corner, referencing the open book, “gasped” is placed above the viewer’s head and the letters spaced far apart. “Grunted,” on the other hand, is placed at crotch level, and the letters are tightly packed next to each other. Made from a quilt, the words spark an uneasy conversation about what actually happens beneath quilts.

This notion of the ambiguous phrase being further confused by domestic referents is fleshed out in the other text works for *An Indecent Obsession*. Engaging the approximate scale of billboard advertisement, *Dream of Darkness* is composed of the t-shirts and boxer shorts from my teenage years before I came out as a gay guy. This unadorned contrast between bold graphic sign and very humble, once-loved garments, plays up the ambiguity of the title phrase. What is a “dream of darkness”? A potential nightmare, a daydream of sexual reverie, a desire for deviancy? For me, the phrase conjures fears of coming out of the closet and not knowing what the gay world would hold for me.

![Figure 33. The Raptures of. 26” x 34” x 2.” 2009.](image)

![Figure 34. gasped & grunted. 13” x 90.” 2009.](image)
I had been only using text and titles from the novels, and concluded that I should embrace the wider world of text I encounter everyday. This meant embracing the smorgasbord of hypertext that is the internet. In the work MANHUNT©, I took the title of a well-known gay networking/dating websites and enlarged it to small signage size. Composed of various pre-internet gay erotica pages and images, the text is mounted atop thrift-store-found afghans. I wanted to disjoint the furtive searching of online cruising from the computer screen to the living room couch. As gay men, despite forays into virtual fantasies of man-on-man action, we are often still surrounded by the products of our domesticity, the cherished accoutrements given to us by our mothers.

Figure 35. Dream of Darkness. 42"x 80." 2009.

Figure 36. MANHUNT. 18"x 58." 2010.
The Couch
At this point I am using straight and gay romance novels, erotic magazines and novels, and the message gets confusing. The one quality binding them all is the reading space of romantic or sexual material: the domestic setting. These print materials must be written with the home in mind, since it is the most private space for which to escape from workaday drudgery into romantic dreaminess or sexual fantasy. Don’t we all want to be somewhere more idyllic? Of course, the hunky guy and svelte young woman are what we all wished we looked like—their passion probably more titillating than our own messy or boring love lives. It is from the couch or bed that these fantasies take flight. After completion of several Boyfriends and text works, I still felt a strong urge to engage a specific reading site in the home. While the bedroom is an obvious setting for lusty yearnings, the pedestrian living room is another charged site for such fantasy.

The most logical conclusion for me was to redesign a living room couch for direct reading of all these print materials. I wanted the couch itself to be a readable object. Again seeking an oppositional relationship between the object and its materiality, I chose a very grandmotherly couch which would be covered in hundreds of racy print pages. As opposed to using the authentic material, these print materials were scanned and digitally printed on fabric, so as to be wholly functional as an upholstered couch. There is a “homey” look of patchwork, and from a distance is inviting, warm yellow in color and well-worn. But stepping closer the viewer is confronted with a barrage of homoerotic titles, colorful

Figure 37. The Couch. 37"x 72"x 45." 2010.
straight novel couples, illustrated gay men *en flagrante*, and text from both straight and gay sources. While some images and titles might be aggressive or over-sexualized on their own, they are dulled by the conflation of so many disparate desire-driven images and text. There is no hierarchy—the work becomes a real “mash-up.”

I read Armistead Mauphin’s *Tales of the City* during the making of *The Couch*, and I was inspired by his carnivalesque descriptions of 1970s San Franciscans’ dating and sex lives. With gay and straight characters sharing the plot, distinctions between sexualities that are typically exacerbated are blurred in Maphin’s work, and I believe this free-form narration of relationships found its way into *The Couch*. As a visitor to my studio would point out: “There’s something for everyone here!”

While my original intention with the couch was to make a functional object about reading and taking in desire, the final form began to feel much more personal. I realized, as I composed these images from straight and gay culture and everything in-between, that I was composing my own meandering sexual and romantic journey. My experience being as colorful as the collage of images and texts, the couch now feels like a translation of my own weird romance novel. *The Couch*, thus, is the first work I’ve made that goes around a queer-specificity and engages the spectrum of signs and symbols shaping identity.
With *The Couch* and the text works, I began to see my work moving towards a dialogue concerning domesticity, identity, sexuality and potential dysfunction. I draw connections between my work and artists such as Mike Kelley and Tracey Emin, who have both worked with a strong vocabulary for the domestic abject since the 1980s. I also identify with like-minded textile artists Mark Newport, Lacey Jane Roberts and Josh Faught, who employ the ‘lower crafts’ of knitting, crochet and macramé to delve into issues of domestic complexity.

Mike Kelley’s practice has run the gamut to include sculpture, painting, installation, performance, video and theatrical productions. Kelley is an artist who has used found textile objects in projects as various as floor installations, flags, banners and costumes. In his work, *1,000 Love Hours That Can Never Be Replaced*, Kelley has arranged and sewn children’s stuffed toys, crocheted blankets and plant hangers into a macramé -like conglomeration. Calling attention to the mass-abandonment of these handmade keepsakes, Kelley reminds us that childhood is just as negligible. Tracey Emin’s earlier work included large blankets with cut-up fabric words glued or sewn onto them. Deeply personal, Emin “appropriated ‘low’ media, placing her own name and

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**Figure 39.** Mike Kelley. *1,000 Love Hours That Can Never Be Replaced*. 1987.
autobiography at the center of her work” (Morley 188). And as Simon Morley suggests, “the appliqué style Emin has used relates to traditionally ‘feminine’ practices, and signals in uncompromising terms the work’s
distance from institutional and commercial design. This places it instead within the unsophisticated and less supervised sphere of the domestic and amateurish.”

Both artists force us to rethink the psychology behind such motherly labors of love.

Mark Newport has chosen the comic book superhero as a site for investigating gendered textile practice. Newport effectively subverts these hyper-masculinized images by translating them in the slow homespun tediums of knitting and costume-making. As textile curator Sarah Quinton points out, “Whereas domestic knitting traditions include making mittens, blankets, sweaters and scarves for others as a gesture of love and intimacy, Newport knits outfits for himself: costumes that may be the kryptonite of his soul.” And when “hung on coat hangers, they stretch, sag and distort under

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14 Morley, *Writing on the Wall*, 2003, p. 188.
their own weight. These now-flaccid symbols of strength and masculinity are tragically emasculated by virtue of their handmade acrylic-ness, bursting the bubble of powerful fantasy.”

Knitted graffiti and brightly-colored acrylic yarn chain link fences comprise the work of Lacey Jane Roberts, whose hobby craft interventions in urban spaces become perfect metaphors for various barriers existing between the status quo and the marginalized, high art and lowly crafts. Josh Faught’s large messy installations of screenprinted images, knitting, crochet, weaving and macramé, often with stringy unfinished edges, heralded in the term “sloppy craft.” According to Faught, his main subject is “the suburban panic sparked by true crime novels and docu-dramatic tragedy.” He creates “work that calls on the darker side of craft and craft making in order to explore our personal sides of domestic dysfunction. Radiating the notions of hysteria, objects are reconfigured over codes of depression, desire, illness, loss, tragedy and criminality. Combining the formal concerns of textiles, collage, drawing and sculpture, my intent is to invoke

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notions of failure and strategize sexual difference.”¹⁶ Incredibly noteworthy for my own practice, these queer artists’ works point to similarities between the marginalization and identity struggles of craftspeople and those of queer people.

Figure 43. Josh Faught. How to Beat the High Cost of Living. 2009.

10

Some Conclusions
My thesis project, *An Indecent Obsession*, is an investigation of identity and desire through a deconstructive lens of popular culture. The body of artwork for my thesis exhibition is threefold, and includes large-scale drawings of “stand-in boyfriends” using pieced together romance novel pages, text signs of various scales and materials using words and titles lifted from the romance novels and other erotic texts, and a fully-functional couch covered in digitized romance novels and erotic texts. My critical/theoretical research has focused on deconstructive, queer and postmodern theory. Art historical research has explored figurative works, representations of desire and sexuality in contemporary art, and domestic craft interventions with popular culture.

In an interestingly cyclical pattern, my practice has grown from a textile-heavy, quilt-based approach to an exploration of romance novel paper and image-making, and returned to embrace quilting and domestic textiles in text pieces and the couch. I have been looking at fiber art and artists for many years now, and I have always questioned where my own work fits in. I come from a quiltmaking background, but I always tried to push the quilt into a sculptural direction. My work with romance novels as raw and conceptual material has at times engaged a fiber/textiles dialogue, and at other times engaged a painting or drawing dialogue. Everything I create is rooted in material investigation. My experience in graduate school has helped me to realize my artistic practice as one that moves first through a fusion of material and idea, and second through a fusion of form and process.

Upon conclusion of my body of work for thesis, I realize my practice as still connected to a fiber/textiles sensibility, but in the specific vein of artists using domestic or hobby craft textiles as a point of entry for their ideas. Connecting my work to a wide variety of visual artists has been
helpful in finding shared research resources, as well as locating my place in a wider art world
dialogue of which I will participate.

My work is deeply personal, but my practice concerns a broader critical dialogue. With
my engagement of personal and selected texts and images, I offer up myself, my experiences and
my desires to viewers, knowing that my story is worth the world knowing. Simon Morley,
writing on the proliferation of contemporary art that breaks down image and text, offers:

“Such works suggest that [in postmodernity] many artists [feel] compelled to explore a more overtly
subjective idiom, one in which word and image [are] now inextricably linked. And whether the message
[is] conveyed through the visual or the verbal [is] less important than ensuring that some kind of
comprehensible message [is] actually communicated at all” (Morley 188).
Bibliography


Aaron Lee McIntosh was born on January 4, 1984, in Kingsport, Tennessee, and is an American citizen. He graduated from Dobyns-Bennett High School, Kingsport, Tennessee in 2002. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Fibers from The Appalachian Center for Craft, Tennessee Technological University, Smithville, Tennessee in 2006 and subsequently maintained a studio practice in Knoxville, Tennessee for three years. He received a Master of Fine Arts from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2010.

**Education**

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Program/Institution</th>
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<tr>
<td>2008 – Present</td>
<td>MFA Candidate, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003 – 2006</td>
<td>BFA, Appalachian Center for Craft, Tennessee Technological University, Smithville, TN</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002 – 2003</td>
<td>Art Foundations Program, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA</td>
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**Teaching**

**Institutional**

**Virginia Commonwealth University**

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<th>Classroom/Workshop</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Course: CRAFT 491 Text/Textile</td>
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<td>Spring Semester</td>
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<td>Course: ARTF 139 Project: Craft/Material Studies (Fibers)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008 – 2009</td>
<td>Summer Semester</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Course: CRAFT 491 Quilt, Surface, Content</td>
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<td>Spring Semester</td>
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<td>Course: ARTF 139 Project: Craft/Material Studies (Fibers)</td>
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**Workshops**

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<td>2009</td>
<td>“Pieced Paper Coasters,” DIY Thursdays at MAD In collaboration with Etsy.com, Museum of Arts &amp; Design, New York, NY</td>
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Exhibitions

Solo
2011  The Vault, Quirk Gallery, Richmond, VA
2010  Boyfriends, Gallery 5 Project Space, Richmond, VA
2008  Peepholes, Fluorescent Gallery, Knoxville, TN
2007  Targets, 1010 Gallery, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN
2006  arrangements ii, 1010 Gallery, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN

arrangements, BFA Thesis Exhibition, Gallery One,
  Appalachian Center for Craft, Smithville, TN

Group
2010  New Waves 2010, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA,
  Juror Steven Matijcio, Curator for the Southeastern Center for Contemporary
  Art
Say Love: An Exhibition of Love & Hate, Gallery 5, Richmond, VA, Curator
  Amanda Robinson, Director, Gallery 5
2009  Quilt National 2009, Dairy Barn Cultural Arts Center, Athens, OH,
  2009 – 2011, Jurors Sue Benner, Katie Pasquini Masopust, and Ned Wert
Punch International Juried Exhibition, Punch Gallery, Seattle, WA,
  Juror Marisa Sanchez, Curator Seattle Art Museum
Fiber Inspirations, Duluth, GA
TEXTERE, Florissant Valley Community College, St. Louis, MO, In
  conjunction with Innovations in Textiles 8 Symposium, Curator Jeanne Brady.
Art of Fine Craft, Elder Gallery, Nebraska Wesleyan University,
  Lincoln, NE, Jurors: Jason Briggs, Sonya Clark,
The “C” Word: Graduate Candidacy Exhibition, Metro Gallery,
  Richmond, VA
1708 Gallery Graduate Student Forum Exhibition, Capital One
  Corporate Gallery, Richmond, VA
Blend, Graduate Artist Association Exhibition, FAB Gallery, Fine Arts Building,
  Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2008  Sleight of Hand, A National Juried Craft Show. Gallery 5, Richmond, VA
Tattered Cultures, Mended Histories, University of Hawai’i, Honolulu, HI,
  in conjunction with the Textile Society of America’s 2008 Symposium,
  “Textiles as Cultural Expressions,” Curator Mary Babcock
2007  Boys Don’t Cry, Works by Aaron McIntosh and Geoff Teague.
  Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX, Curator Rebecca Finley
2006  American Friends of Pojagi, Heyri Artist Village, Seoul, South Korea,
  Curator Chunghie Lee
Appalachian Center for Craft: Faculty, Artists-In-Residence and
  Student Work, Southern Highlands Guild Exhibition, Folk Art Center,
  Asheville, NC
Spotlight 2006, American Craft Council/Southeast Regional Annual
  Juried Exhibition, Kentucky Museum of Art + Design, Louisville, KY,
Juror Bruce Pepich

2005

52nd Annual Mid-States Art Exhibition, Evansville Museum of Arts, History & Science, Evansville, IN

Awards

2010

Honorable Mention, New Waves 2010, Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA
Graduate School Dean’s Thesis Dissertation Fellowship, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, Tuition Remission and $6,000 stipend

2009

American Craft Council Student Scholarship, 2009 Conference: Creating a New Craft Culture, Minneapolis, ME
Work-Study Scholarship, Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC
Niche Student Award Finalist: Decorative Fiber, The Rosen Group

2008

Graduate Fellowship, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, Tuition remission and $15,000 stipend
Lenore Tawney Technical Assistant Scholarship, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME

2007

Technical Assistant Scholarship, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME.

2006

Windgate Undergraduate Fellowship, Administered by the Center for Craft, Creativity & Design, $15,000

2005

Annual Bacchanal Award, Appalachian Center for Craft, Smithville, TN
Bob and Sara Davies Award, 52nd Annual Mid-States Art Exhibition, Evansville Museum of Arts, History & Science, Evansville, IN

Publications

2010


2009


2008

Knoxville Voice. Exhibition review. Denise Stewart-Sanabria

2006

Conferences Attended

2009  
Creating a New Craft Culture: American Craft Council 2009 Leadership Conference, Minneapolis, MN  
Inspired Design: Jacquard and Entrepreneurial Textiles, Center for Craft, Creativity & Design, Hendersonville, NC

2008  
Materiality and Meaning: A New Understanding of Fiber & Textiles in Contemporary Art & Culture, International Fiber Symposium, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA

2007  
Mind + Body: 14th Annual Surface Design Association Conference, Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City, MO

Service

Institutional

Virginia Commonwealth University

2008 – 2009  
Visiting Artist Committee Chair, Contemporary Craft Society  
Organized lecture and workshop with Deb Todd Wheeler; Workshop consisted of students recycling bottles and bags for one month and then creating a 20 ft. long string instrument. A video documentary was made in conjunction with workshop.

Also organized lecture and student workshop with Cal Lane; Students learned welding techniques and received individual critiques with her.

Co-Treasurer, Graduate Artist Association

Public Lectures

2010  
James Madison University Visiting Artist Lecture, Harrisonburg, VA

2008  
1708 Graduate Student Forum

2007 – 2008  
Founding Member of Birdhouse Laboratories, Knoxville, TN (Additional Founders: Katie Ries, Brian Formo, Holly Briggs) community arts space and artist-run studios I co-directed the exhibition gallery space

Memberships

2007 – Present  
American Craft Council

2008 – Present  
Textile Society of America

2007 – 2008  
Birdhouse Laboratories, Knoxville, TN

2006 – 2008  
Surface Design Association