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New Zealand’s Gay Leather Culture

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SkiNZ: “Patience,” Personal Narratives of Identity within New Zealand’s Gay Leather Culture

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Abstract: This paper discusses several artists and authors working with image-dominant cultural coding and gay leather culture. My most recent painting from the SkiNZ project, “Patience,” is also presented. Image-dominant cultural coding plays an important role in how we perceive culture. Culture coding exists in many areas, including, but not limited to, advertising, education, news, and popular art. I argue that most artworks about gay leather culture have focused solely on the “in-scene/erotic” aspects of the culture, rather than the “out of scene” lives of the people participating, thus creating a very narrow cultural code. The SkiNZ project responds to this issue with a desire to expand knowledge and discourse of this minority sub-culture. My questions therefore are “How can I create images capable of expanding our knowledge of gay leather culture, creating new discourse?” and “How can I create meaningful artworks worthy of being created in the first place?” SkiNZ: “Patience” is my latest response. “Patience” provides a visual fusion of the everyday lifestyles of gay New Zealand leathermen, both in and out of character. The resulting image portrays duality of lifestyles, creating a new visual coding that is capable of expanding our understanding, by painting visual traces of truth, gathered from personal photoshoots and interviews.

Keywords: Visual Culture, Leather Culture, Leather Artists, Personal Narratives, Cultural Coding, Digital Painting, Traces of Truth, LGBT Arts, BDSM, Gay Culture, Leathermen

Visual Culture

Visual portrayals of leather culture, sit inside wider portrayals of visual culture. Visual culture often finds itself framed within Modernism and Postmodernism in a futile argument about truth, and truth myths (Gardiner 2003; Jameson 1983; Fischman 2001). I argue that personal narratives contain great value through their unique contributions, which ultimately enable a better understanding of the world around us. As such, personal narratives must not get lost within the modernism/postmodernism debate.

Visual culture is often driven by the expansion of capitalism (Fischman 2001) and our desire for better forms of entertainment (Jameson 1983). Similar influences affect the portrayal of leather culture. Whether we like it or not, politically screened portrayals of a particular point of view (Gamson, et al., 1992), both reflects our culture, and affects our culture (Berger 2000). I argue that for my images to gain legitimacy, they must sit outside of the common commercialised portrayal of leather culture; erotic. I chose to paint digitally in order to reduce attention from physical value, focusing rather on narrative value. I agree with Fischman who believes visual culture needs to inform us of who and what we are in our ordinary, everyday life (Duncum 2001; Fischman 2001; Williams 1981; Mirzoeff 1998). “Culture is seen not as something that is high and refined, but, rather, as Williams (1981) says, culture is ordinary. Culture is an everyday experience” (Duncum 2001, 103).

The SkiNZ project was initially inspired by one very specific, unexpected encounter, during “Autumn Farm’s, Gay Summer Camp, 2005,” located near Takaka, New Zealand. Early one morning, I was sitting on the veranda outside the kitchen area, eating toast and jam for breakfast. Out from the kitchen came a large muscular man made up in leather costume. Leather harness on top, leather bottomless chaps down below. He stood smiling, looking out into the countryside, whilst sipping on a cup of coffee. A cow mooed in the distance. Taking in the scene before me, I remember being quite confused. Was this moment “surreal,” or, “ordinary”? With the benefit of hindsight, I believe the answer is a good mix of both. Surreal, in that for me experiencing the moment, it was quite unexpected and new. Ordinary, in that “Gay Summer Camp” means all

facets of gay can mix side by side, and we mostly do all attempt breakfast. Before me, I witnessed a visual fusion of both “in” and “out” of leather culture that absolutely fascinated me. My initial desire to create paintings that portray this fusion was born.

An immediate concern was whether or not, people would accept my idea of studying gay leathermen as a serious project. Gardiner argues that images need to be grounded in sincerity, to legitimately be made in the first place (Gardiner 2003). I have done my best to portray these men faithfully. I do not seek to expose a new truth, but rather to reveal honest traces of truth, capturing a historical moment in time, by observing specific but otherwise unexpected events, in the lives of these people. A view shared by (Shultz 1992). My paintings hope to preserve a cultural snapshot of a constantly changing culture, creating new narratives, worthy of inclusion in future discourse (Green 1993).

Gay Leather Culture

“Leather people,” is a term for those who identify with a community, generally centred on the sexualization of leather and domination” (Getsy 1998, 69). Leather exists in many cultures but it is most visible within the gay community. As such, many attempts have been made to define “Gay Leather Culture” (Getsy 1998; Mosher, Levitt, and Manley 2006; Graham 1998; Devolt 2004; and Townsend 2000). For the purposes of this project, the focus is on “gay” leathermen. The term “gay” is used specifically to describe men who “identify” as being gay (Homosexual: Men attracted only to other men). Whereas, this project does not include “heterosexual” leather people, or purposely target “queer” leather people—a wide ranging group that includes people who “identify” as being either gay, bi-sexual, transexual, transgender, takatāpui, fa’afafine, intersexed, or men who “identify” as being straight (Heterosexual: Men attracted only to other women) but are also attracted to men—”closeted.”

Erotica, kink, and leather, has a long, well documented history. An excellent example of this can be seen within the “history timeline” found online at the “Leather Archives and Museum,” Chicago. Although many hundreds of examples appear chronologically from 5000 BCE forward, it is not until 1920, 8th of May, anything relating to the modern gay leather scene occurs. The birth of Finnish artist, Touko Laaksonen, who later went on to become the most famous leather artist, under the English translation of his name, Tom. Commonly known as “Tom of Finland.”

“The modern leather scene as we now know it formalized itself out of the group of men who where soldiers returning home after World War II, (1939–1945)” (Baldwin 1993, 107).

The story goes that after the Second World War, gay men discharged from the Armed Forces stayed in the debarkation port cities of New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles. They brought with them the camaraderie of the military experience, the concepts of discipline and service, even surplus equipment like the motorcycles and the leather jackets and caps. They lived and loved in secret clubs and dungeons until the swinging liberated days of the sexual revolution found them (Devolt 2004, 54).

However, Devolt refers to this more as a myth than actuality. In the early 1950s an attempt was made to define a set of guidelines, based on current gay leather habits of the day. The document was known as the “Old Guard,” a name borrowed from Napoleon’s Imperial Guard (Baldwin 2006). Much debate still exists on just how many people actually followed this guide, or if it is possible to still do so. In 1954 the first gay motorcycle club (The Satyrs) started, nine years after the end of the war, but coincidentally, the same year that Marlon Brando appeared as a leather clad rebel in the pop culture movie “The Wild Ones” (Devolt 2004). Leather bars first started to emerged in 1960, the same time that mainstream culture was experiencing the sexual revolution of the swinging 60s. Gay biker clubs and leather bars quickly became a model for others around the globe to follow (Ridinger 2002; Townsend 2000). Artists such as Tom of Finland were later responsible for refining the visual, with the emergence of the gay erotic arts. Over time, leather

clubs mostly moved from motorcycle clubs, to more of a men's Sadomasochism and Masochism (SandM) club, or fetish organisation, often held at bars or private club rooms (Townsend 2000). However, there are still strict rules, dress codes, and behaviours (Baldwin Retrieved 2006). One of the most common catchphrases of leather culture, and "Bondage, Discipline, Sadomasochism and Masochism" (BDSM) in general, is to keep everything "Safe, Sane and Consensual" (Wikipedia 2014; Submissive Guide 2014). I can only speak from my own experience. All twelve participants I met as part of this research project were very safety conscious, appeared quite sane and intelligent, and happily consented to each other's requests. However, the culture allows for self-expression (Townsend 2000), and as such, it cannot be so easily defined and contained by a set of guides and codes. There are also differing degrees of commitment, as leather may only be a small part of a person's life. Most gay leathermen are also involved within the mainstream gay/queer scene (Graham 1998; Mosher 2006). It is the uniqueness, yet commonness, of how each individual lives, in and out of leather that ultimately creates the narrative I portray through my paintings.

Gay Leather Culture in New Zealand

The 2013 census put the population of New Zealand at 4,242,048 people (Statistics New Zealand 2013). Historic records of many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) events have been archived at the Alexander Turnbull Library, as part of the National Library in Wellington for the past few decades. Unfortunately, only a few entries relate to gay leather culture. One of the earliest entries is the Forty-One South Motor Club (Ercolano 1995). Although the gay motor club no longer exists, it does show how global leather culture has become, spreading to New Zealand.

Many participants in this project spoke of traveling internationally and learning about leather culture overseas as a first experience, later returning, to share their knowledge. So it is no surprise to find a gay men's motorcycle club as one of the first recorded entries. Leather culture in New Zealand, like other places world wide, mostly only congregates in large cities (Townsend 2000). In 2014, Auckland was the only New Zealand city to have both a predominantly gay leather/bear bar "Urge" (Closed early 2015 due to unsustainable cost increases), and leather/bear/fetish cruise club "The Basement." In smaller towns, leather people would socialize as part of the general mixed gay/queer crowd. Through this project I have also meet a number of rural leathermen, who live and play in the country.



Figure 1: Murray Lyndon (c. 1978)

Source: Photograph supplied by LAGANZ, used with permission.

On a visit to the Alexander Turnbull Library, I was inspired by an early photo of Murray Lyndon in his home. Looking at this photo (fig 1.), I began to appreciate the individual differences of expression, one particular leather man could offer. Such an important narrative, created through his personal styling, and home environment of a 1970s leatherman.

The earliest published book about leather culture in New Zealand was in 2000. A small booklet called “Heavy Duty,” published by the New Zealand Aids Foundation. One participant photographed in that project happened to be the same leatherman I met at “Autumn Farm” summer camp, back in 2005. I also noticed at the time, he was wearing immaculately polished black leather boots from the contemporary and very popular brand of boots, CAT footwear of California. A bright yellow “CAT” tag was attached to the back. He could have cut this off to obtain a pure black aesthetic, a requirement under the “old guard” rules, but chose not to. The yellow tag may be an expression of fun, and playfulness. However, yellow, according to the hanky code, may also signal an interest in “water-sports” a fetish involving the sharing of urine during sex play (Chicago Leather 2014; Wikipedia 2014). The modern leather scene, according to Graham (Graham 1998) is no longer confined to leather culture alone and can commonly be seen in mainstream music videos, theatre, screen, and street wear. In exchange, I found leathermen are commonly borrowing influences from mainstream culture, to personalise, and update, contemporary leather culture.

Gay Leather Artists

The SkiNZ project is a mix of research and practice. On the practice side it is primarily a painting project. As such, I have also been looking at other artists who draw, and paint, artworks relating to gay leather culture. Initially, my searching was done online. I found excellent examples of artworks from artists such as Eitenne, Tom of Finland, Les Farnek, Nigel Kent, David Grieger, and Joseph Bean. However, websites change over time, and most of the specific pages found in 2006 at the “Leather Archives and Museum,” and “The Tom of Finland Foundation” have since changed.

Muller sites the Stonewall Riot of 1969 as being influential in motivating early gay erotic artists, to react against previous invisibility. (Muller 2004). The era of publically accessible gay erotic art had begun. However, this does not explain it remaining there. Eitenne was one of the earliest known gay leather artists; famous for his artistic humour. His whimsical cartoon style took leather straight into the realm of erotic fantasy. Eitenne, also influenced Tom of Finland. “Tom became, not only the most well know leather artist, but also one of the most well known gay artists (Lahti 1998, 192).” A talented commercial artist, he maintained a long career in gay erotic art, and became the most published.

Tom’s work influenced a lot of people. Many adapted their behaviour, and personal styling, to align with his art (Lahti 1998). Both Eitenne, and Tom of Finland, became increasingly concerned as time went on, that people might misinterpret what was meant to be fantasy, as reality (Eitenne, Leather Archives Museum). Tom, along with long time friend Durk Dehner, co-founded “The Tom of Finland Foundation” in 1984. A non-profit archive, dedicated to “protecting, preserving and promoting erotic arts” (from website 2006). Gay erotic leather art, covers a broad spectrum from very real, through to total fantasy. Examples can be seen at: <http://www.tomoffinlandfoundation.org/foundation/Annex/A002/A002.html>.

French couple Pierre and Gilles also dabble in fantasy images of gay leathermen (Marcade 1997). Their images clearly set out to entertain and delight us with erotic fantasy. With the Tom of Finland foundation set up to “protect, preserve, and promote the erotic arts,” and leather culture itself being about erotic portrayals of leather, it is not surprising that most artists portraying leather culture have created images of erotic fantasy. I argue this portrayal, although popular, is both culturally and commercially driven, contributing little to the general

understanding of this minority sub-culture. Larry Townsend says that “most written and graphic (pictorial) materials dealing with leather.. is pure unadulterated crap!...the writer nor the publisher is the least bit interested in how far from the truth their material may be, and most of it is sheer imagination” (Townsend 2000, 37). Baldwin describes these fantasy role models as more like icons, than real people (Baldwin 1993). Graham, points out:

The vast majority of the club’s members do not look like and show little inclination to become like these paragons of erotic and highly physical masculinity. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that such ideal bodies are attractive decoration and fantasy objects rather than an ideal everyone aspires to become (Graham 1998, 173).

Everyday Portrayal: Traces of Truth

In the context of art, most painters/drawers of gay leathermen, focus on erotic fantasy. Only a small group of photographers have produced non-erotic images. In 1978 US Photographer Robert Mapplethorpe exhibited nineteen black and white photographs in a show called “Censored.” Criticized at the time for looking staged; “a photographic masquerade” (Meyer 1990, 73), devoid of truth. However, Mapplethorpe managed to expose an otherwise hidden world to mainstream viewers, leaving us, at very least, with traces of truth of this otherwise invisible, unexposed sub-culture. Amongst these photographs is an image called “Figure 4: Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter 1979.” They pose for a photo in a living room setting (Meyer 1990, 71). This is the first “exhibited” photo I have found showing a glimpse of the wider domestic environment found within gay leather culture.

More recently another US photographer, Tom Atwood, released his ground-breaking book “Kings in their Castles – Photographs of Queer Men at Home” in New York (Atwood 2005). I found this book very inspirational in its non-erotic approach to documenting queer men. Locally, New Zealand photographer Mark Beehre has also produced a book that shows photos of gay men in domestic environments (Beehre 2010). On page 132 there is an image of Warren and Michael at home. Leathermen in their domestic environment surrounded by traces of truth, as to their life, in and out of leather.

These are the elements that I wish to bring to my paintings and give recognition to the value of personal, everyday narratives, and their importance in expanding discourse of contemporary leather culture, both in New Zealand, and around the world.

The SkiNZ Project

The project goal is to paint images that provide insight into everyday lives of gay New Zealand leathermen, in and out of character. To take the painted image beyond what can be achieved in a single photograph, bringing in multiple referenced elements, gathered during personal photoshoots. The resulting painting seeks to portray a duality of lifestyle, creating a new visual coding, that expands our understanding through painted traces of truth, referenced from their personal environment.

Process

I conducted this research as a senior lecturer in the school of Art and Design, AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand. As such, gaining ethics approval from the university required rigorous planning, and the need to clarify sensible processes for working with the participants and their images. This also included developing a very detailed consent form. New Zealand is a small country with a relatively small population, thus, finding participants was always going to be difficult. I advertised in the nation-wide Queer newspaper “Express.” That resulted in one participant. I sent out flyers to every gay bar and club in New Zealand. That resulted in one

participant. With only two participants, this project would never have started. Fortunately, I was introduced to the person in charge of an online group of New Zealand leathermen. He sent my flyer out through his network. This resulted in ten more participants, giving me a total of twelve. Photo-shoots and interviews were organised. I understand that this process may negate some spontaneity, as the participant is quite aware of my visit. To offset this, I did not ask them to prepare anything, just show me their everyday lives. This was a little bit “hit and miss” but I took the situation as I found it on the day. If the shoot was too heavily “in,” or “out,” of scene, more than one visit was required to gather a better balance of reference data.

The Painting SkinZ: “Patience” focuses on two participants, “Sean and Woof.” When I first met Sean he was living by himself in a small apartment. Swatches of cloth were pinned to the walls as he proudly displayed his love of sewing. One small sewing machine was squashed into a corner. He shared a photo of himself from five years earlier, (fig 2.) when he was a drag queen. Now he is strictly a leatherman. In the room next door to his bedroom, was a dungeon and sling-room. It was beautifully set up with soft black leather padding on the floor, mirrors on the ceiling and wall, camouflage netting and a small sectioned off area with glory holes in the walls for passing your genitals through. I photographed all of these things and more.

A little over a year later, Sean met his partner and requested another visit. This is when I met “Woof,” tied up, bound naked in a small room at the end of a long hallway. I took the scene in as I entered his new dwellings. I was about to say something, when Sean said, “Don’t worry about him, he’ll be fine. Come in and have a cup of coffee.” This took twenty minutes, during which time I thought, it is not easy being a slave, it requires a lot of “patience,” waiting for more important things to finish, than personal attention to one’s self. Ultimately, this led to the title of the painting.

A few months later, Sean had his house set up as his dream, sewing studio. He was very excited, having recently received a brand new heavy-duty sewing machine, capable of sewing material 8mm thick. Six other smaller sewing machines were scattered around the room. I made one last visit to take photos.

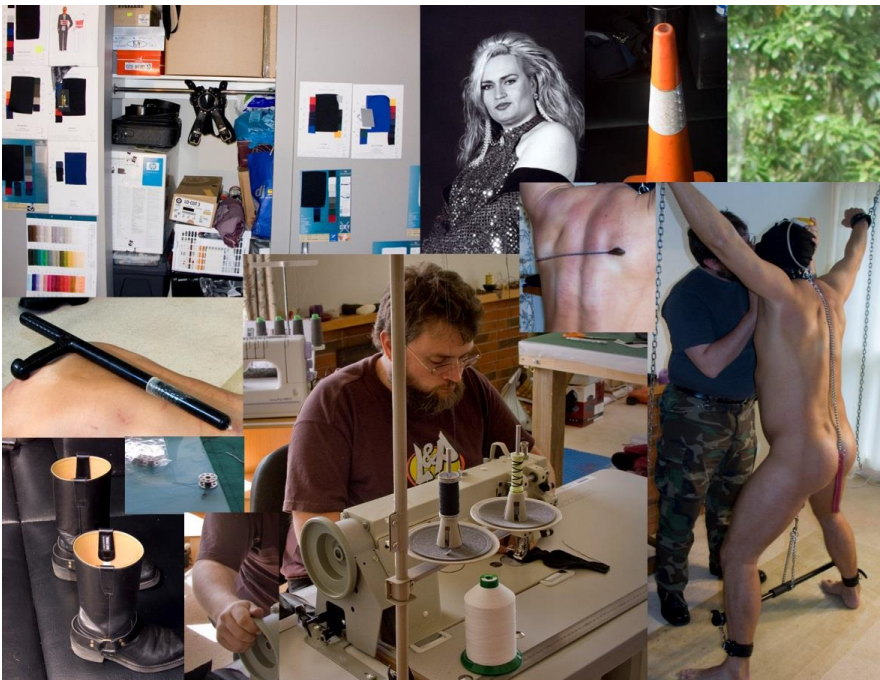


Figure 2: Reference images from photoshoots of “Sean and Woof”
 Source: Austin, Logan 2014

Painting Digitally

SKINZ: “Patience,” required recreating the sewing room in perspective space, in order to correctly place in as many influences as possible, referenced from the various photoshoots.

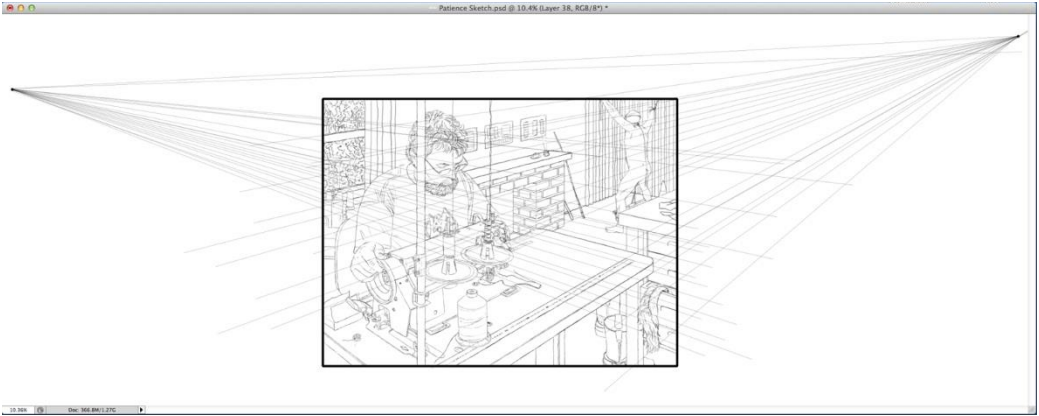


Figure 3: Recreating the Sewing Room in Perspective Space.

Source: Austin, Logan 2014

Painting was done in Adobe Photoshop using a Wacom tablet. I draw on my existing analogue training of traditional airbrush techniques. Areas are built up using masked shapes, and un-masked shapes, sprayed tones, and brushed textured details. Reference is used similar to life drawing, where the image is over to the side, and you paint what you see.

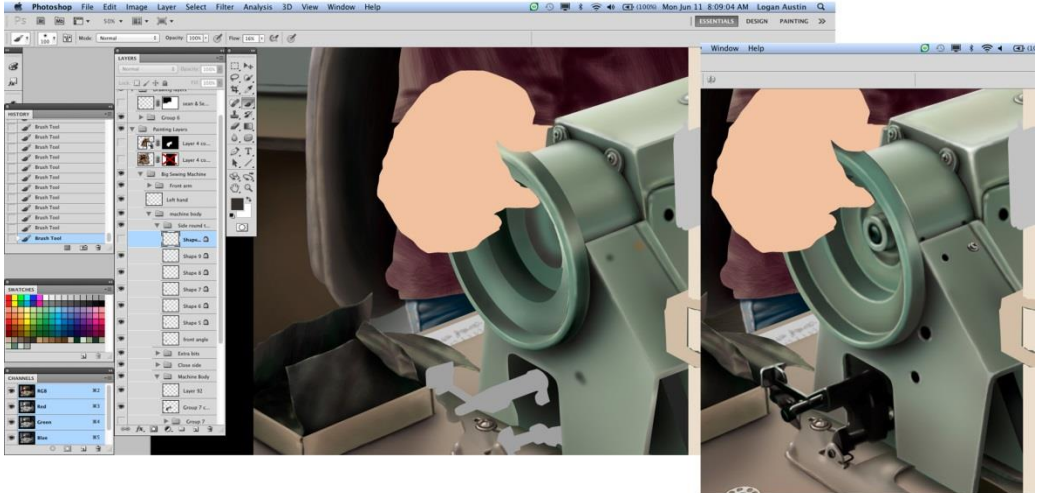


Figure 4: Traditional Airbrush Techniques, Used in a Modern Way.

Source: Austin, Logan 2014



Figure 5: Close-up Detail: Painting the face.
Source: Austin, Logan 2014



Figure 6: "Patience"
Source: Austin, Logan 2014

Conclusion

Modern day gay leather culture truly began to formalize with the first gay motorcycle club (The Satyrs) in 1954 (Delolt 2004). Leather bars appeared six years later in 1960, and erotic artworks of leather gained momentum in response to the Stonewall riots in 1969 (Muller 2004). Since then they have continued to flourish due to popular demands for more erotic fantasy. Real, everyday leatherman, do occasionally partake in erotic fantasy, but most of the time, live quite ordinary lives. Most art has not reflected this, and indeed, has created a very distorted vision of the culture, one that focuses on erotic behaviour.

The SkinZ project sincerely attempts to create a new narrative, providing an important, contemporary, historical snapshot. Culture undergoes constant change therefore, it is important that we constantly update our understanding. The painting “Patience” is also part fantasy, not of the erotic kind, but instead for the sake of the narrative. I dismiss any attempt at presenting an absolute truth. Rather, I offer the viewer multiple, highly informed traces of truth, fused into one painting, in the hope that it will stimulate further discourse around this minority sub culture.

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