Transcendence:

An Exploration Of Collage As A Voice For Non-Binary Identity

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Abstract

This practice-led, artistic inquiry considers the potential of queer collage as a visual communication device for expressing the identity and perspectives of a non-binary person navigating a world of gender conformity. The study is framed as an autoethnographic inquiry that employs heuristic methods to explore collage as a process of building and unbuilding. This process is actualised by reflective self-dialogue, iterative practice, and reflection on external feedback. The thesis contributes to emerging discourses and artistic practices related to contemporary non-binary gender identity and expression.

Key Words

Gender, Non-Binary, Queer Collage, Queer Lens, Transgender.

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Ezra Michael Baldwin
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Ethics Approval and Consents

This project did not require ethical approval because, being an autoethnographic inquiry, it only drew on identifiable content from the researcher. The study did not involve any other participants.

While there was no requirement for ethics approval, the researcher accepted that considerations for physical and emotional safety were necessary due to the intensity and personal nature of the work. Strategies to address this included attentive communication with supervisors and connecting with my peers within the transgender and non-binary community for support.

Introduction

Chapter 1

Research Question

On the 16th of June 2022, the Rainbow Youth Centre in Tauranga Village was torched in an arson attack (Figure 1.1). I watched the report on television and followed the aftermath in various news updates.

I realised that despite the protestations of our society that people who are queer, transgender and non-binary are accepted, we are still living in a state of fear and hypervigilance, where we are often judged, misrepresented and misunderstood.

As a non-binary artist, I think about how I might contribute to deeper understandings that can encourage greater levels of acceptance within society.

Accordingly, I ask the question:

How might one use collage to visualise and express a lived experience of a non-binary identity?

Figure 1.1 The Rainbow Youth and Gender Dynamix building after the fire at the Historic Village in June 2022.

Photograph © Emma Houpt (2022).

The event was reported by S. Conchie in the New Zealand Herald (29th Nov, 2022). https://tinyurl.com/yck2zrnn


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Rationale

According to a survey conducted by the New Zealand Health Promotion Agency, "Compared to the total population, Rainbow people report experiencing lower overall life satisfaction and are more likely to report being socially excluded" (2019, p. 1).[2]

In concord with this finding, data from the Youth19 survey indicated that:

Just over half (53%) of same- or multiple-sex attracted students reported significant depressive symptoms and half (50%) of this group reported that they had self-harmed in the past year.

Just over one in ten (13%) same- or multiple-sex attracted students reported they had attempted suicide in the past year. (Youth2000, 2019, p. 3).[3]

Such data suggests a need to heighten understanding about the lived experience of being queer, specifically of being trans/non-binary, both for LGBTQ+ people and the wider community. This study contributes to addressing this need through its ability to artistically express an embodied state as a young non-binary person in contemporary Aotearoa.

[2] This statistic related to 75% of the Rainbow population surveyed. It was also reported that 29% of Rainbow people surveyed experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress in the past four weeks (at the time the survey was conducted), and 56% of the sample reported having experienced mental illness over their lifetime, (this can be compared to only 30% of other populations recorded in the survey), (Health Promotion Agency Te Hiringa Hauora, 2019, p. 2).

[3] Data was gathered from a population of 7,721 highschool aged students from 49 schools and kura from Auckland, Northland and Waikato in 2019. (Youth2000, 2019, p.1). The survey reported that one in 100 students (1%) identified as transgender or gender diverse, and 0.6% of students were unsure of their gender identity. The study was conducted by Youth2000, a research initiative emanating from the University of Auckland, Victoria University, University of Otago, and Auckland University of Technology.

Significance

Given the prevalence of quantitative data available relating to trans/non-binary identity in Aotearoa, the study is significant because it makes an embodied qualitative contribution to what are largely quantitative understandings.

The study also contributes to a growing body of queer collage used as a vehicle for gender expression, created internationally by artists like Onya Hogan-Finlay (2011), Suzanne Wright (2014), Zach Grear (2017) and Ruben Guadalupe Marquez (2018).

However, the study's distinctiveness lies in the fact that the work produced in the project approaches collage as 'a whole that is in harmony with itself'.[4]

As such, it pursues a harmonious outcome with less obvious seams between elements.

However, it preserves the concept of a new, assembled whole that constitutes the physically 'impossible'.

The study also reconsiders classical sculpture[5] through a queer lens. Doing so acknowledges instances of non-binary gender depiction in classical mythology (Conner et al., 1997; Pequigney, 2002) while simultaneously challenging later revisionist readings where classical sculpture has been employed to epitomise binary gender identities.

[4] This is a definition I have developed for the thesis. It is discussed in this chapter under Key Terms Used in the Thesis.

[5] By classical sculpture, I refer broadly to sculpture from between 500 BC and 420 AD in Ancient Rome and Ancient Greece. The term also encompasses work originating from the Hellenized and Romanized civilizations under their rule or influence. (Agard, 1954) argues that such work is distinguished by its synthesis of naturalism, its amplification of simple planes, and its refinement of detail.

Key Terms Used in the Thesis

Given the positioning of this thesis inside a 'queer way of knowing', it is useful to clarify how certain terms are used in the study.

Cisgender
In this thesis I use the term cisgender to denote a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex. The word is an antonym of transgender.

Gender
I define gender identity in concord with the Human Rights Campaign (2022) as, "One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither. Thus, gender refers to how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth" (2022, para. 14).

Gender Non-Binary
The LGBTQ+ support organisation InsideOUT NZ defines non-binary as "An umbrella term and identity used to describe people whose gender does not fit into a binary of man or woman. A non-binary person may or may not identify with the term transgender." (InsideOUT NZ, 2020, para. 26). In the thesis, I utilise the term 'non-binary' to include genders that may fall somewhere in between. These may be a combination of two genders, a gender outside of man or woman, or an individual who does not perceive themselves as having a gender. [6]

Queer
Jones (2023) notes that the origin of the word 'queer' is uncertain but it was evident in English language use by the early 16th century, when it described strange, peculiar or eccentric behaviour. By the late 19th century, it was being used colloquially to refer to same-sex attracted men. Since that period the word accrued both derogatory and positive associations, but in contemporary use it is generally considered "an affirming term that is inclusive of all people in the rainbow acronym" (Jones, 2023, para. 21).

Thus, throughout this study, I use the word queer as an inclusive term that encompasses diverse sexualities and gender identities. The word can also be used as an individual identity for someone from multiple genders and people who are not cisgender.

This said, I acknowledge that not all people within the LGBTQ+ community are comfortable using the term or being referred to as queer.

In the study, I also use queer as an adjective to describe an act of considering something through a lens that makes it strange or culturally locates it as belonging to queer societies.

[6] I acknowledge that not all people who identify as non-binary also identify as transgender. This is because everyone's experience of gender is unique to them.

Queer Collage

Collage, whether it is made in an analogue format or created digitally, has been explored by several contemporary queer artists, including Zach Grear (1984-); Onya Hogan-Finlay (circa. 1978-); Deborah Kelly (1962-), Kumbirai Makumbe (circa. 1998-), Reuben Guadalupe Marquez (1990-); Ebun Sodipo (circa. 1998-) and Suzanne Wright (1968-).

Although the word collage generally describes a "technique and a resulting work of art in which pieces of paper, photographs, fabric and other ephemera are arranged and stuck down onto a supporting surface" (Tate Gallery, 2022, para. 1), I expand this definition to describe a process of 'drawing content from existing ideas, mediums, or media, then combining, amalgamating, layering, subverting or otherwise transforming the content (along with its existing connotations and associations) into a new body of work'.

When using the adjective queer in relation to collage, I refer to a state of queer embodiment where the artist approaches work with a non-heteronormative[7] or non-cisnormative[8] lens, using their lived experiences as a queer person to influence thinking and the emerging artefact.

Transgender

This term can have nuanced meanings. In this study, I expand on a definition used by Gender Minorities Aotearoa, that defines transgender as "... an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is culturally typically associated with the gender/sex they were assigned at birth" (Gender Minorities Aotearoa, 2022a, para. 2).

However, I expand this definition to encompass identities that journey from one gender to another (or more), regardless of which genders (or non-genders) they traverse or whether the person takes steps to socially or medically transition. The term is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five of this exegesis.

[7] Heteronormative "… refers to the deeply held institutional belief that relationships between heterosexual masculine cis men and heterosexual feminine cis women are normal/natural/right, while all other relationships are viewed as abnormal/inferior/or wrong. The word refers to systems and society being structured around this assumption" (Gender Minorities Aotearoa, 2022b, para. 25).

[8] Cisnormative (also referred to as cissexism or cissupremacy) is defined as, "… beliefs that cis people are inherently superior to trans, more real, more natural, etc. This often refers to systems which advantage cis people over trans people or unconscious systems of thought, rather than transphobic individuals" (Gender Minorities Aotearoa, 2022c, para. 41).

The Nature of the Research Practice

The practical component of this thesis is formatted as three 594 × 841mm digital collages, printed on matte-finish inkjet stock, designed for exhibition on a gallery wall, and two 290 x 420mm digital collages also printed on matte-finish inkjet stock.[9]

Although these prints constitute part of the master's degree submission, they are produced to be displayed in upcoming LGBTQ+ pride-themed exhibitions and events. [10]

[9] There are two reasons for this decision. First, an A1 print will 'hold' its own space in an exhibition with many other contributors, where the collages will need to be viewed from a distance. Second, the mana of the trans community and our art often isn't revered in the same way as that of cisgendered practitioners. By creating larger prints, I seek to assert a level of cultural confidence to ideas that are often considered on the 'fringe' of artistic discourse.

[10] These include potential exhibitions at Studio One Toi Tū in Ponsonby, Upstairs Art Gallery at Lopdell House, Titirangi, and spaces in Wellington including the Thistle Hall Community Centre and (Suite) Gallery, Te Aro. I have either been approached by these galleries or I am in negotiations with them at the time of thesis submission.

The Structure of the Exegesis

The exegesis' first chapter serves as an introduction to the study. As such, it discusses the research question, the rationale for and significance of the study, key terms used in the project, and the structure of the practice and exegesis.

The second chapter positions the researcher within the inquiry. Given the autoethnographic nature of the thesis, I discuss my upbringing and how this has contributed to the questions I address in the study.

Chapter Three contains a review of contextual knowledge. Although such a chapter might traditionally be described as a literature review, in keeping with emerging practice, I use the term 'a review of knowledge' to encompass both related written theory and artistic practices (Faumuina, 2022; Najafi, 2023; Sinfield, 2020).

The chapter considers three arenas: gender non-binary discourses, queer collage, and gender diversity in classical mythologies.

In the fourth chapter I discuss the research design underpinning the inquiry. Here I consider the artistic paradigm and the heuristic/reflective nature of the research. I also unpack the methods employed in the study.

The fifth chapter offers a critical commentary on the research project in relation to ideas that have shaped each image.

The exegesis' conclusion provides a summary of the research and a consideration of its contribution to knowledge. In this chapter I also discuss future directions that might be investigated following the completion of the thesis.

Positioning the Researcher

Chapter 2

Sometimes a normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life. Other times, the experience of a normative restriction becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has greater livability as its aim.

(Butler, 2004, p. 1)

An overview

Living as a non-binary person is a constant act of constructing liveability inside the liminal, where one exists in a space outside the acceptable bounds of gender. I juggle this feeling of otherness and exclusion from society with a sense of resignation that I will never truly be seen as my authentic self, often compromising my identity so that others can comprehend my existence.

I began my physical transition in June 2018. For the first 18 months of my transition, I struggled to be seen as a man because 'non-binary' was too difficult for others to understand. I was terrified that people would only see me as a woman; being seen as a man was 'close enough'. I am now fighting to establish myself as an openly non-binary person, not a man.

My gender identity falls outside the binary concepts of being a 'man' or 'woman'. While my gender expression is traditionally masculine, my gender identity is not close to being a man, nor does the composition of my body draw me close to feeling like a woman.

Determining where my gender sits in the spectrum of gender identities has been a tumultuous journey of self-reflection and discovery. It has taken me a long time to feel content and at peace with my gender identity as an individual disconnected from the gender binary. Until recently I have felt that I haven't been 'non-binary enough' and that I am not authentically representing my identity by presenting in a masculine manner. Only recently have I begun to accept that my identity and expression are enough, and that the way society thinks of gender shouldn't restrict me.

My upbringing

I was raised without the expectation that I should adhere to how society thinks my gender should appear. Freedom of expression was always encouraged; my mother has short hair and dislikes dressing femininely, my father has always had long hair, and my parents are heavily tattooed because they like the art form.

In primary and intermediate school, I remember living in a strange world where I felt like an outsider and did not belong with girls or boys because I couldn't make connections in the same ways that other children appeared to.

When I was 14, I cut my long hair short because I thought it would suit me (Figure 2.1). My thinking was that my mother had short hair and was a woman, so I must be the same. It never occurred to me that my preference for short hair might be because I wasn't a woman.

I recall when I was 15, I was mistaken for a boy by one of the security guards at a concert – she called me 'Sir' when she patted me down. I found it hilarious rather than offensive – it was dark, and I had short hair and a hoodie, so her assumption was understandable.

That same year I had a haircut at our local hairdresser, and the while the hairdresser was chatting with my mother, mentioned "your daughter and your son" (my sister and me). My mother and sister attempted to correct her, but once they saw me laughing they waved it off as a simple misunderstanding.

In retrospect, I understand these incidents as iterative insights into my transness.

Between 2014 and 2018, I attended an all-girls high school with my twin sister. I spent my high school years with strong, proud young women, surrounded by the warmth and love of sisterhood. I was the only student with short hair, the only openly transgender person, and one of half a dozen openly queer students at the school.

I missed out on learning how boys grow into men and all the social cues and etiquette that come with this. This made interacting in the world as a person who mostly passes[11] as a man challenging.

However, now I have stopped presenting as a woman I have also found that I miss that sense of sisterhood I had with other women.

I was only introduced to the queer community (outside of conversation and short encounters) in March 2017 at a PSSP [12] camp with other high school students from around Auckland. Here, I met and interacted with openly gender-diverse people for the first time and I felt far less like an outsider. Beyond this, the only place that I felt comfortable and accepted was at home, around my family.

On 24th September 2017, I finally had the words and experiences to name how I felt and I came out as gender diverse.

[11] Passing, when used by trans people, "can either mean that one is being read as the gender one identifies with or that one is being read as cisgender. For example, a trans man who people read as a man, most likely a cis man" (PennState Student Affairs, 2022, para. 55).

Passing is often a safety measure, mitigating the risk of being discriminated against or attacked for being visibly transgender. This said, the idea of 'passing' as cis can reinforce stereotypes that trans people must pass as cisgender to be taken seriously.

[12] Peer Sexuality Support Programme. This is an initiative run by Auckland Sexual Health services. It is a peer-led program "that focuses on youth health and support, not just gender and sexuality related topics." (However, these issues make up a large part of the teaching and support). (Auckland Sexual Health Services, 2022, para. 3)

Figure. 2.1 Rock the Park 2015

Note. The researcher at age 14 at 'Rock the Park' in Grey Lynn (February 2015). This was approximately two and a half years before I realised that I was gender diverse in September 2017.

Being visible

Although at secondary school I began to come 'out' about my gender non-binary nature[13], it was when I entered university that I began actioning my thinking through campaigns[14] related to education[15], institutional rethinkings, design, and community work[16].

Across 2021 and 2022, while studying, I was an executive board member of the university's Rainbow student club, Out@AUT. At this time, I also designed promotional material for events, including queer markets and pub quizzes.

In 2021, my final project for my undergraduate degree became the precursor to this research. During this period, I began to explore my non-binary experiences of dysphoria, gender, and euphoria through collage. (Figures 2.2 & 2.3).

Across 2022 and 2023, I became a part-time teaching assistant and concurrently involved myself in the university's Tertiary Education Union (TEU). As part of this, I attended the union's LGBTQ+ conference in Wellington (September 2022). In 2023 I volunteered as the Rainbow representative on the executive board of the TEU branch, so I could focus attention on enabling change for my LGBTQ+ colleagues.

Having now positioned myself in relation to the inquiry, it is useful to consider bodies of knowledge that contextualise the study.

[13] In 2018 I was a main cast member in a videoed production series. I performed a spoken word piece, starting by talking about a boy I loved and his struggles, later revealing that 'This boy is me'. That is how I came out as transgender. My old name, Ishtar, was used in these videos because I had not yet chosen 'Ezra' as a name.
(I no longer use my old name, so when referring to me - including in the past - please use 'Ezra' and they/them pronouns).

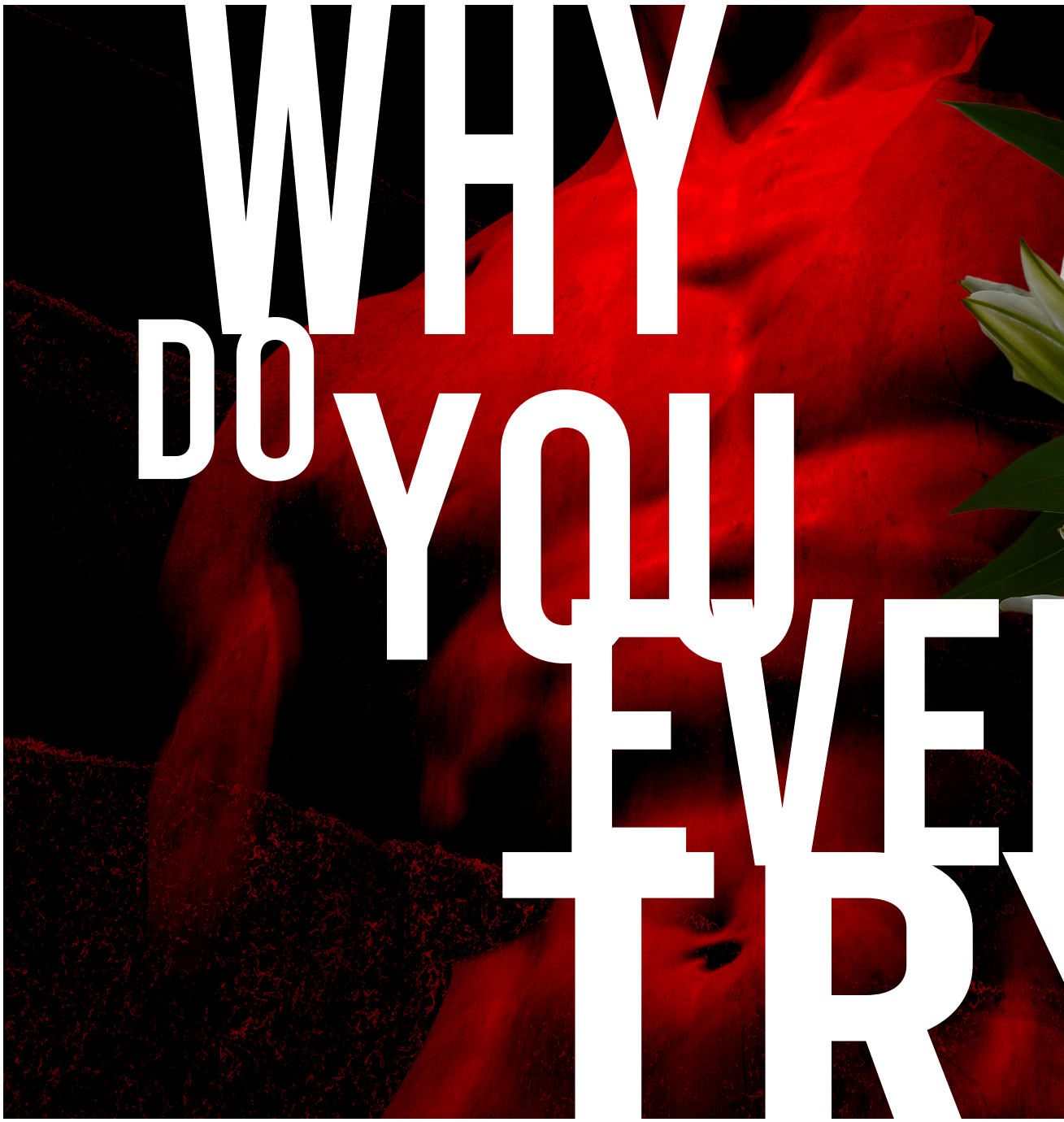
- The full episode can be accessed at:
https://www.tvnz.co.nz/shows/class-act/episodes/s1-e1
- A promotional clip can be accessed at:
https://www.facebook.com/TVOneNZ/videos/class-act/456423565018526/

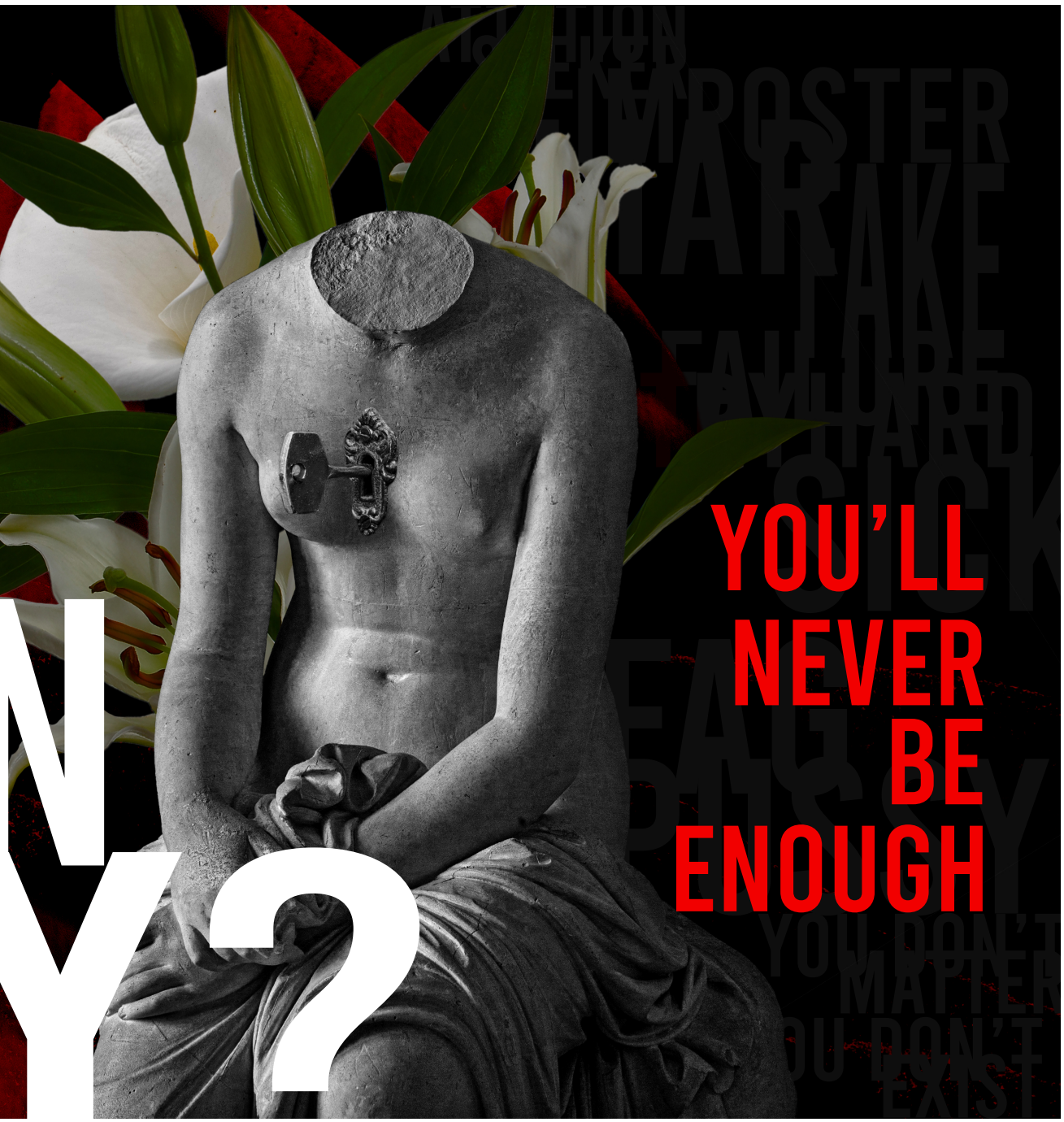
[14] In 2020, I was frustrated by the limited access to all-gender bathrooms on my campus. Alongside the Rainbow representative of the student association, I raised the issue with the university. After 18 months of negotiation (and five years after they were first installed), the new toilets were made accessible.

[15] In my second year at university I discussed the lack of gender diversity in a semiotics lecture with my tutor, because the assumed gender binary of the content made me uncomfortable. The tutor was eager to be more inclusive and the following lecture on gender and advertising was far more diverse.

[16] Before embarking on my degree (in the summer of 2018/19), I volunteered at RainbowYouth's Auckland drop-in centre, where I helped direct people to appropriate support services and assisted with administration work and the upkeep of facilities. RainbowYouth is a not-for-profit NGO that supports and advocates for LGBTQ+ people and their families in New Zealand.

Figure 2.2 Dysphoria and Self-doubt (October 2021).





Note. This collage explored the crippling self-doubt and grief that I experience, especially on days when I can't escape my gender dysphoria and all I see in the mirror is a girl masquerading as a boy, where nothing I do to change it is ever enough.

Figure 2.3 The Expansiveness of Gender (October 2021).

Note. This collage explored the expansiveness, freedom and mysticism I experienced once I began to relinquish gender binaries and explore the expansive state of in-betweenness.

Review of Related Knowledge

Chapter 3

This study proposes that gender is unique to each individual and that contemporary society relies on a binary distinction to maintain its present values and power relations.

Reviewing three realms of knowledge is useful in contextualising the work produced in the inquiry because each has been formative in my thinking.

Discourses relating to non-binary gender identity

This study accepts that gender is a social construct and people use gender to provide themselves with a context and positioning within society (Lindsey, 2014)[17].

However, recent discourse suggests that society's idea of gender emanates from a questionable assumption that only two binary genders, male and female, correspond with one's assigned sex at birth. Vijlbrief et al. (2020), Savoia (2017), and Beemyn (2011) all argue that a person's sex at birth does not determine gender identity and that gender itself is not binary.[18]

Richards et al. (2016) note that gender non-binary people often do not conform to established gender roles and expectations because these roles do not reflect their gender identity[19]. Darwin (2017) suggests that non-binary people tend to forge unique and individual navigations of the world, "[s]ome wish to evade binary gender attribution […] others wish to "pass" as one gender on one day and another on the next […] and others do not feel a need to visually convey their non-binary gender at all" (2017, p. 326). Darwin also observes that the non-binary gender may be seen as a queer demand for an alternative innovation, proposing that a "non-binary gender evades definition by its very nature, which is why its potential to redo gender is so considerable" (2017, p. 331).

Vaid-Menon (2020, p. 5) argues that the existence of gender non-binary individuals challenges the foundations of control used by society. They suggest that this power, "exists to create conflict and division, not to celebrate creativity and diversity."

[17] Lindsey states,"Gender refers to those social, cultural, and psychological traits linked to males and females through particular social contexts. Sex makes us male or female; gender makes us masculine or feminine. Sex is an ascribed status because a person is born with it, but gender is an achieved status because it must be learned" (2014, p. 4).

[18] Vijlbrief et al. note that "gender is experienced as a spectrum covering a plurality of identity experiences" (2020, pp. 95 -96). Savoia proposes that the term 'non-binary' defines "genders which do not match the gender an individual is assigned at birth, and which do not align solely with a binary gender identity" (2017, p. 2). Beemyn describes such people as individuals "whose bodies, identities, and politics exist outside of gender binaries" (2011, para. 1).

[19] Richards et al. note that "while such genders have been extant historically and globally, they remain marginalized, and as such, while not being disorders or pathological in themselves, people with such genders remain at risk of victimization and of minority or marginalization stress as a result of discrimination" (2016, p. 95)

Queer collage

Although definitions of collage remain protean, as a media form the term can be traced through a range of reconceptualisations. Güliz (2022) notes that 'collage' (from the French word coller) means to stick or to glue. As a medium, it was explored by Cubist artists like George Braque (1882 – 1963) and Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973), before being developed across the 20th century in other art movements, including Dadaism, Constructivism, Futurism and Pop Art. Significantly, Davis (2008, p. 246) notes that the collage aesthetic became "a critical discourse defying the traditional master narratives of authority, mythic individualism, and essentialism in which literature and painting were heavily invested."

However, beyond its political potentials, Diggs et al. (2015) discuss collage as a medium and process that utilises free expression and play, bringing together "disparate visual elements" that can be used as a "non-intimidating introduction to the process of creative expression" (Diggs et al., 2015, para. 4). Ball (2021) suggests that this 'playfulness' enables collage to be used as an unfiltered expression of particular relevance for artists expressing queer and non-binary experience. Building on Halberstam's (2011) conceptualisation of trans bodies being made through a process of 'continuous building and unbuilding', Ball proposes collage and method for critically engaging "with the politics and aesthetics of mess and as a framework for exploring trans and queer photographic representation" (Ball, 2021, p. 6). Thus, Ball frames collage as a process that enables queer artists to "recognise the value and pleasure that comes from experiencing [their] gender as continually in process."

Halberstam (2011, p. 136) argues that collage is a useful method for queer expression because it "references the spaces in between and refuses to respect the boundaries that usually delineate self from other, art object from museum, and the copy from the original". Suhr and Willerslev (2013) suggest that collage references loss, erasure, clutter, repetition, and contradiction, which often are embodied experiences of queer artists' lives.

Ball also proposes that politically, collage "allows for non-hierarchical, non-linear modes of narrative development" (2021, p. 10). Building on Campbell and Farrier's (2015) proposition that queer bodies erode disciplinary boundaries and normative hierarchies of knowledge, Ball notes how cisnormative narratives "often strive to make 'sense' of trans bodies using easily digestible narratives of neat binary transitions, which spilt lives into 'before and after' and focus on arriving at a stable endpoint" (ibid. p. 11).

But trans and non-binary identities are not easily categorised. Crawford sees them "as a lived experiential archive, rather than a "body-as-home" (2010, p. 519), and Ball conceives such identities as "in process" or engaged in a form of "iterative and intimate self-making" (ibid. p. 12).

This unease of categorisation, rejection of tidy binary states, erosion of boundaries and emphasis on 'betweenness' and contradiction makes collage a relatable medium for many queer artists, and a useful realm of consideration within my own practice.

Given my perspective as a queer artist, I define collage as 'a process of continuous building and unbuilding where one draws content from existing ideas, mediums, or media, then combines, amalgamates, layers, subverts or otherwise transforms the content (along with its existing connotations and associations) into a new body of work'. My definition extends the idea of collage to embrace a process of conceptual deconstruction of order and a form that enables transformational digital reconstructions that may connote a rethinking of gender identities.

In developing this position, I concur with Small who observes that "Central to the queer practice of collage is the construction of new worlds and identities, the outward use of a violent action to protect a vulnerable inner life" (2016, para. 2).

Contextualising practitioners who engage with queer collage

Significant queer contemporary artists and designers who employ collage as a mode of artistic discourse include Hannah Höch (1889-1978), Deborah Kelly (1962 -), Suzanne Wright (1968 -), Zach Grear (1984 -) and Ruben Guadalupe Marquez (1990 -). Given their significance to my practice, each warrants discussion.

Figure 3.1. Ohne Titel, Hannah Höch (1930).

Although perhaps Höch can't be argued as contemporary, this early work is significant because it deals with Suhr and Willerslev's (2013) queer sense of loss, contradiction and self-conflict. The collage contains a reading of embodied divorce. The figure gazing at the statue appears thoughtful, reflecting feelings of disoriented melancholy, perhaps expressing Höch's internal dialogue and struggles as a queer woman in the 1930s.

Figure 3.2. Still from The Gods of Tiny Things, Deborah Kelly (2019).

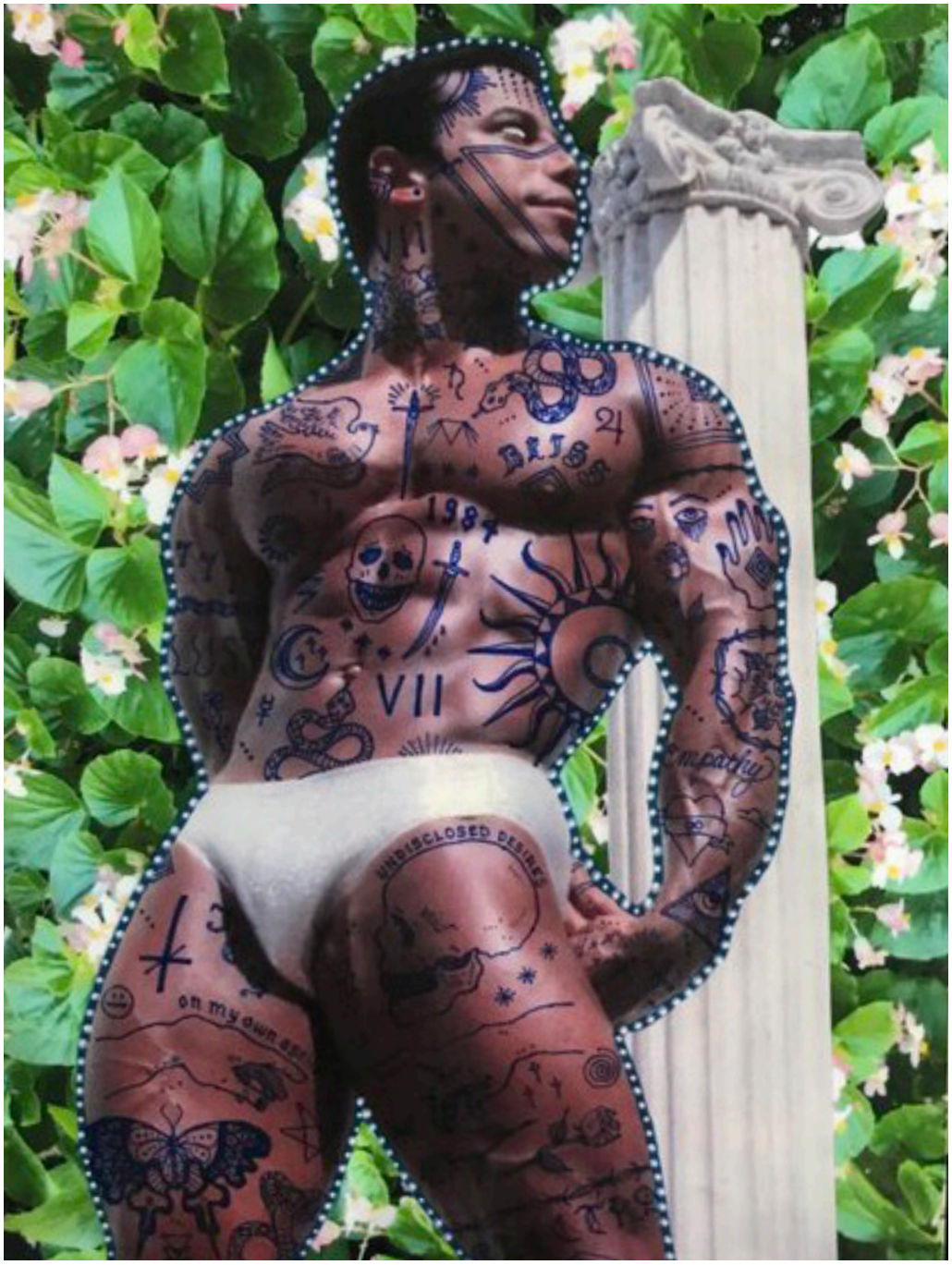
This is a still from a kaleidoscopic video that uses a dramatic collage of animated figures and landscapes from old magazines and encyclopaedias. Kelly's work explores topics like climate crisis, colonialism and the threat of extinction while concurrently considering ideas like gender expansiveness. Her work engages with Ball's (2021) queerly non-hierarchical modes of narrative development, producing consecutively constructed open readings.[20]

[20] An animated example of her work can be viewed at: https://www.acmi.net.au/whats-on/deborah-kelly-the-gods-of-tiny-things/

Figure 3.3. Mount Wilson Observatory, Suzanne Wright (2018).

This work aligns with Ball (2021) and Diggs et al.'s (2015) arguments that collage often operates as a queer playfulness and contradiction. Thus, in Wright's collages, we see nebulousness and grandeur brought together and disparate visual elements conjured through a sensual juxtaposition of intimacy and astronomical equipment. Like my work with human figures, Wright's collages are central to her compositions and intimacy is positioned inside environments of enigmatic meaning.

Figure 3.4. Pillar, Zach Grear (2021).



Grear's hand-drawn illustrations on photographs or male bodies may be seen as social commentaries. Combining queer erotica and tattoo iconography, he applies markers to found imagery from vintage gay porn magazines.
In his collages, original images become 'othered' versions of themselves. Grear's collages explore ideas of desire, sexuality and the 'ideal' male body that paradoxically draw inspiration from classical sculpture while simultaneously asserting the immediate sensuality of a living body.

Figure 3.5. Marsha P. Johnson, Ruben Guadalupe Marquez (AKA 'Broobs') (2018).

Marquez's collages employ botanical elements, photographs (often of queer icons) and intense colour palettes. Their work fuses elements of the past into a present moment. The collages reference the work of Latin artists such as Frida Kahlo. This collage pays tribute to the prominent LGBTQ+ activist Marsha P. Johnson in a style reminiscent of holy illumination in religious texts. Marquez's queering the idea of reverence and saintliness is a relatively familiar trope that occurs across the work of several queer artists, including Katy Miles-Wallace[21] , Pierre Commoy[22] and Gilles Blanchard, and Gabriel Garcia Roman [23].

[21] See https://qspirit.net/queer-saints-katy-miles-wallace/

[22] See https://www.plastikmagazine.com/interview/pierre-et-gilles

[23] See https://wepresent.wetransfer.com/artists/gabriel-garcia-roman

Gender diversity and queerness in classical mythology

This thesis study considered several classical gender non-binary deities including Hermaphrodite/ Hermaphroditus and Dionysus. As entities, these beings proposed something rich beyond a conventional gender binary order.

There is not an extensive body of literature specifically concerned with queerness in classical mythology. Early considerations may be evidenced in interpretations and accounts by the queer scholar Robert Graves, who wrote The Greek Myths (1955). This two-volume text offered a rich consideration of classical stories, accompanied by analyses supported by citations of classical sources. Graves' interpretation of these myths deviated from the largely patriarchal discourses of the time because he argued that the narratives emanated from a prehistoric matriarchal religion [24].

However, several classical scholars (Buxton & Buxton, 1994; Herbert, 1956; Kirk, 1973; Pharand, 2003) criticised his theories and etymologies for being too radical or insufficiently supported.

In terms of queer readings of classical mythology, Connor, Sparks and Sparks' (1997) Encyclopaedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit, provides the most extensive queer consideration of classical spiritual traditions, deities, gender fluidity and symbolism. This work was extended by Pequigney's (2002) Classical Mythology - GLBTQ Encyclopaedia, which examined a range of deities and relationships (although these entries generally failed to examine gender diversity in significant detail).

Exploring beyond classical mythologies, Brewer (1999) considered transvestism and gender in early colonial Philippine belief systems. Others such as Looper (2002) discussed third-gender deities in Classical Mayan religion, and Pattanaik (2002) examined gender fluidity in Hindu lore.

In 2017 Burton examined how classical mythology (along with Mesopotamian and Egyptian narratives) have been formative in reinforcing gender binaries in Western society.

[24] As discussed in his book *The White Goddess* (Graves, 1948).

However, he proposed that these myths may also be seen as a source of questioning the gender binary. While Burton's work provided an overview of gender fluidity in classical, Middle Eastern, Aztec and Hindu mythologies, his writing largely summarised earlier research.

More recently, Ehalt (2021) provided a detailed analysis of the Assinnu, the ancient Mesopotamian cult of Ištar[25] , referring to gender, sex, and sexuality as recorded in ancient texts and modern scholarship. Ehalt's work discussed the nature of Assinnu in relation to gender and sexuality, focusing primarily on issues including sex assignment at birth, castration, sexuality, and transvestism. The study was significant because it explored a new analysis of the Assinnu as performing a non-normative or non-binary gender.

Summary

In this chapter, I have considered knowledge that contextualises my practice. Beginning with an overview of discourses relating to non-binary gender identity, I discussed conventional definitions of collage before considering queer collage as a specific orientation, contextualising the review by discussing the work of five queer artists.

Given my work's iconography, the chapter concluded with a review of literature relating to gender diversity and queerness in classical and other mythologies. Having now provided a context for my study, it is useful to consider the research design underpinning the project.

[25] Which can also have the spelling 'Ishtar'.

Research Design

Chapter 4

In this chapter I discuss the study's paradigm, autoethnographic methodology and heuristic methods.

Paradigm

This thesis study emanates from an interpretivist paradigm. It may be described as an artistic inquiry that utilises a mode of sensory processing that reinforces art's role as a mode of cultural perception (Klein, 2010).

Methodology

Methodologically, the project can be framed as autoethnographic. Because the researcher identifies as non-binary, they view and interact with the world using a non-binary, queer lens.

An autoethnographic approach to a study enables the researcher to utilise subjective insights emanating from lived experience. These inquiries presume knowledge as personal (Duncan, 2004) and often include research "located in the realms of identity, ethnicity, sexuality or the ontology of the other" (Chang, 2008, p. 43). Chang also notes that autoethnographic research "transcends mere narration of the self because it engages in cultural analysis and interpretation" (ibid.).

Ellis & Bochner (2000) observe that autoethnographic inquiries generally employ "multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739), and Russell (1999) argues that through such approaches, "marginalised individuals who might traditionally have been the exotic subject of more conventional ethnographies are able to tell their own stories" (p. 3).

However, unlike much of the research discussed by these authors, this autoethnographic study is a practice-led, artistic inquiry. This means that the study uses artistic practice to discover and design knowledge into distinct, personally reflective artefacts (Candy & Edmonds, 2010; Mäkelä, 2007).

Heuristic methods

The methods employed in the project relate to iterative practice and reflection on that practice. Here, heuristic methods are employed to realise a process of "continuous building and unbuilding" (Halberstam, 2011) inside which collage becomes a process of artefact production and "iterative and intimate self-making" (Ball, 2021, p. 12).

Broadly, the study has employed three methods:

Reflective self-dialogue leading to spontaneous experimentation

Iterative collage as a process of building and unbuilding

External feedback.

Reflective self-dialogue and spontaneous experimentation

The reflective, intuitive, dialogic processes employed in the study may be broadly considered as heuristic. Heuristic inquiry has an established history of use in autographic artistic research (Faumuina, 2022; Ings, 2011, 2015; Najafi, 2023; Sinfield, 2020; Ventling, 2018).

As a deeply reflective approach, heuristic inquiry requires an "internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 9). It draws on intelligent questioning and 'sensing one's way forward' based on tacit knowing and explicit, accrued experience (Ventling, 2018). The flexibility and responsiveness of heuristic inquiry enables a researcher to evaluate and adjust the research process as required (Schön, 1992). That said, heuristic inquiry requires very high levels of self-reflection and self-dialogue to deepen questioning and heighten the quality of discovery (Kleining & Witt, 2000; Ventling, 2018).

When creating work, I become part of the inquiry (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985), guided by a form of internal self-dialogue that accompanies me as I explore and reflect on concepts and iterations of a collage. While this state has been discussed by a number of researchers (de Rooij, 2022; Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Hughes, 2009), Ventling suggests that in artistic inquiry, self-dialogue creates an "interiority of experience", which is significant because "our feeling responses to external circumstances contribute to the creation of meaning [and by extension] out of meaning, our personalities are constructed" (Ventling, 2018, p. 125).

While I work, reflective self-dialogue grows spontaneously into experimentation. In this process, my thinking and practice become dialogic. Thus, I speak with myself conceptually and through making. Because my collages are digital, I dwell in the potential of collage, moving things around, scaling and arranging in conversation with the work. There are no reflective journals or personal blogs; I speak and listen with fragments of imagery, seeking expression for a concept in a continuous state of transformation.

If an idea occurs, I transform it quickly into physical making, so its potential becomes concrete. This materiality becomes a form of embodied thinking where the self and the practice fuse and new thinking occurs (Crow, 2008; Marzotto, 2009).

[28] Here I was drawing on Brusati's discussion of the 17th century "hybrid genre of self-portraiture in the form of still-life easel paintings featuring one or more images of their makers" (1990, p. 168). Therefore, I was thinking about how a composition of material objects might freeze a moment of life experience (make it still), and thus create a portrait of the self.

Figure 4.1 Trans-Masculine Starter Kit, Ezra Baldwin (September 2022).

Note: Decontextualised, these everyday objects might be seen as mundane. However, through a queer lens, as a still-life composition, their meaning and significance allude to the beginning of my transition; the razor and brush from my first shave, the ace bandage from binding (flattening) my chest for the first time, and the vials from my testosterone (T) shots.

An example of this may be seen in a series of experiments where I considered collage a form of still life/self-portrait.[28]

In these early experiments I created collages that used photographs of objects that I associated with personal experiences of transition.

Initially I grouped and regrouped physical signifiers of masculinity and my sense of self. These objects included vials, medications, bandages, disposable razors and antique ephemera. (Figure 4.1). I then began experimenting with the idea of a 'stilled life' through collages (Figure 4.2) and studio shot compositions (Figure 4.3).[29]

[29] By 'stilled life' I was considering a frozen frame of experience in a life in transition.

Figure 4.2 Digital (Trans)Masculinity Still Life, Ezra Baldwin (September 2022).

Note: In this composition I 'collaged' elements found in traditional Dutch still life paintings, including citrus, fruit, and bread. These objects were sourced online and composed using digital lighting. These food objects were combined with books of Shakespeare's plays that had personal meaning for me because his work blurred gender boundaries. In the experiment, I was seeking to translate the scent of my favourite cologne *Guillaume* into visual form,[30] combining elements of tobacco, leather, citrus and musk to create a digital collage.

[30] From the Frangrifert Victorian Perfumery in Wellington, New Zealand. This cologne was the first scent I had experienced that felt gender-affirming.

Figure 4.3 Embodied Still Life of Masculine Objects, Ezra Baldwin (September 2022)

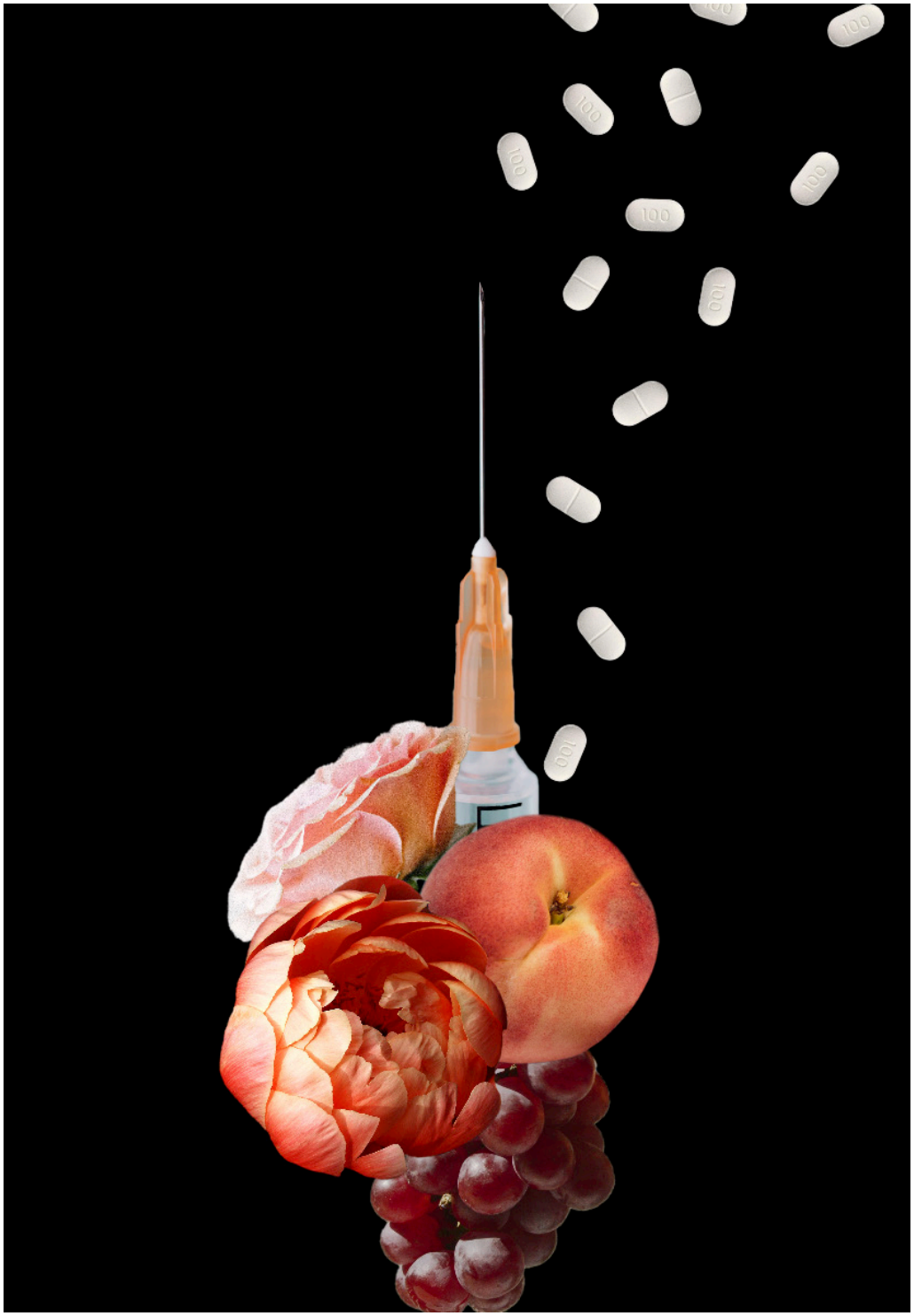
Note: In this still life, I assembled physical objects in a photographic, studio-lit photoshoot. The work featured an 1838 edition of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*,[31] a few of my late grandfather's jeweller's tools, and some of my testosterone vials. In this experiment, I explored masculine imagery, colours and lighting. Here, I worked my way through potentials, considering how signifiers of identity might be 'transgressed' as assembled objects as a still life.

While these experiments enabled me to progress my thinking through making, the concept of the 'still life' with its formal continuities became too constraining, making it difficult to explore non-hierarchical and non-linear modes of expression (Ball, 2021), that referenced Halberstam's (2011) spaces in between, where boundaries could be transgressed, and my non-binary identity considered as something associated with continuous building and unbuilding.

At this point, I reconsidered assembling fragments of personal experience explored in experiments like the digital collage (illustrated in Figure 4.2) and I began creating work where proportion and meaning were reordered. This resulted in a series of formal, graphic (almost poster-like) constructions (Figure 4.4).

[31] I have this book of Shakespeare's plays in my personal collection. The book references 2017 when I was at High School (before I came out). I played the character Iago from Othello, dressing and performing as a man. This was one of my biggest moments of gender euphoria before I recognised that I was transgender. This experience could be seen as almost a reversal of the typical gender-play in traditional Shakespearian plays, where characters of all genders were played by men or young boys.

Figure 4.4 Hormone Replacement Therapy, Ezra Baldwin (September 2022).



Note: In this digital collage, I reflected on my non-binary nature as bountiful and fleshed, while acknowledging the medicinal assistance that has allowed this nature to be realised. The injection signified my testosterone HRT (hormone replacement therapy), and the pills reference my antidepressants (SSRI; selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors). This combination of elements illustrates my realisation of 'wholeness' while contrasting it with nature and my medications – both essential to my journey.

Changing direction

Still life played into my desire to interweave hidden messages through compositions. However, after creating digital and physical still life images, even using queered subject matter, the designs did not connect to my non-binary experiences of identity (either visually or emotionally).

After some reflection, I concluded that this disconnect was due to lacking a 'human' element. The still-life compositions of objects and flowers were undoubtedly beautiful and ripe for extracting hidden messages, but they did not outwardly convey my embodied experience of queerness and non-binary experience. My experiences are human; my identity embraces love, compassion, anxiety, trust and tenderness.

Consequently, I decided to consider collage as a continuous 'building and unbuilding' that reached across time, back into childhood and adolescence, where I was captivated by the wonder of classical myth and legend. I initially understood these myths as binary-gendered and heteronormative. However, as I began to read more deeply and consider classical sculpture from a non-heteronormative position, I encountered examples of non-binary construction with very deep (and affirming) origins.

Therefore, I began experimenting with photographs of classical sculpture to explore the compassion and humanity of being bodied. Using digital collage, I sought to construct expressions of personal identity that challenged heteronormative readings.

Iterative, explorative collage as a process of building and unbuilding

As ideas began to form, I entered a critical phase of iterative experimentation. Using digital and analogue processes, I experimented by adding, subtracting, editing, and manipulating material as a form of thinking.

I constructed and challenged relationships, and evaluated what was emerging. Each iteration of a collage drew on my experiences, beliefs and identity, and reflections on the meaning I made of past experiences (Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5 Iterations of the collage Younger Self, Ezra Baldwin (November 2022).

Note: Above, left to right, are examples of iterative, explorative collage that reflect on Campbell and Farrier's (2015) proposition that our queer selves erode boundaries and normative hierarchies. Here, I was refining a consideration of how I nurtured my inner child (or younger self), and how themes of rebirth, love, empathy and transition might relate to this.

Feedback loops

The third method used in developing my work involved looping feedback into the research's iterative development. This involved surrounding the project with a small group of informed 'critical friends' who provided external review.

I was conscious that Sela-Smith, in her critique of Moustakas's method, had warned against importing external feedback into heuristic inquiries because it can lead to a "confusion of … different perspectives and different meanings, [that] can fully disorient the researcher doing self-inquiry" (2002, p. 71).

However, both Ings (2011) and Ventling (2018) have noted that if solicited feedback is drawn back into the self (as opposed to being applied uncritically to the emerging design), the work can be more effectively assessed against its purpose as a communicative artefact.

Accordingly, in constructing feedback loops, the principles of 'informed' and 'solicited' were important because I wanted to ensure that I maintained my integrity and focus. Therefore, it was not until I had an idea relatively well established (moving through advanced processes of iterative refinement), that I would show variations of ideas to family members, other gender non-binary mentors and a select group of queer designers. Their questions and reflections were taken away and drawn back into further refinements or revisitings of the collages, until I reached a resolution. Their feedback and commentary enabled me to ascertain if my collages could be understood or 'felt' on an emotional level by others. Their prompting also ensured that I was addressing the research question.

Having now discussed the research design underpinning the project, we can turn to a discussion of the exhibited outcomes.

Critical Commentary

Chapter 5

Introduction

This chapter offers a critical discussion of the five printed collages that appear in the exhibition that accompanies this exegesis.[32] These collages speak to my identity and feelings as a non-binary transgender person and provide an alternate queer lens for considering the complexity of my world.

The collages constitute digital 'remakings' that engage with a softening of classical masculinities, reorienting the masculine gaze, and the creation of harmonic compositions that elevate ideas like sensitivity, sensuality and affection.

[32] The exhibition was hung in the St Paul's Street Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand between 29th June and 1st of July 2023.

Classical mythology and the queer lens

In 2021, Ehalt noted,

> … while it is not exclusively the goal of queer archaeology to simply prove that queer people existed in the past, such evidence can empower modern people, a reminder that they are not alone in the world and indeed have connections to a very ancient history (p. 2).

At home, I grew up immersed in classical mythologies, surrounded by gods and heroes. My parents bought me books like Coats' Atticus the Storyteller's 100 Greek Myths (2003), which became my bedtime stories. These, along with other books on mythology, unconsciously reinforced binary ideals about what constituted gender.[33] However, as my reading became more sophisticated, I began encountering connections between my queerness and knowledge that lay beyond the surface of what was written.

The collages submitted with this exegesis drew on that resonance and recontextualising to talk about my queer, non-binary self.

In these works, I employ queer collage that engages Ball's (2021) non-hierarchical, non-linear modes and Campbell and Farrier's (2015) reordering of normative knowledge hierarchies. Here, classical depictions of gender are decontextualised and elements are 'remade' through a process of building and unbuilding (Halberstam, 2011).

[33] While I accept Rubarth's assertion that classical masculinity was not "fixed, uniform, monolithic or homogenous [and] manliness was a fluid concept, full of tensions and inconsistencies" (2014, p. 21), I am also conscious of the fact that I have inherited subsequent cultural readings of classical sculpture that have aligned these works with the Victorian ideals of masculine "strength, virility and stoicism" (Jobbins, 2017). These revisionist readings of classical gender have been integral to conceptions of gender that I grew up with.

Eros and Ludus - from fraternal solidarity to queer affection

Eros and Ludus combines a detail of Aimé-Jules Dalou's La Fraternité des Peuples with a corporeal landscape and flesh-coloured petals. The sculpture fragment is sampled from a plaster haut-relief that was carved for the city hall of the Xth Arrondissement in Paris in 1833.

The collage depicts a 'fraternal kiss on the mouth', which in the 1830s was a form of greeting between socialist leaders who considered themselves ideologically intimate (Belton & Citron, 2016). However, through a queer lens, I combine elements to suggest a greater level of sensual intimacy.

The title Eros and Ludus, draws on Lee's (1973) psychological taxonomy of the primary types of love (Eros, Ludus and Storge).

I have combined Eros (romantic, passionate love that pursues physical ideals) and Ludus (love that is uncommitted and game-playing) in a collage that connects the romantic and the bodily. Here, masculinity is subverted and softened, transferred from a socialist expression of fraternal solidarity to an expression of affection, tissue and muscle. Through a queer lens, we encounter a heightening of emotion and affection; encased in the transitioning colours of dawn and dusk.

This collage expresses how I want to be loved, how I want to love another person - combining Eros' romantic passion and Ludus' playfulness. Such love combines delicacy, beauty and a fusion of classical strength with intimate possibility.

Figure 5.1. Eros and Ludus, Ezra Baldwin (November 2022).

Reclining Colossus - the internal gaze

Reclining Colossus draws its figurative iconography from two sculptures; the Sleeping Satyr (sculptor unknown, c. 220 BC) and the Dying Gladiator (Pierre Julien, 1799). These works were combined in the collage because their languid expressions and reclined positions could create a composite cohesion that suggested lovers, their gazes being serene rather than stoic.

This work deliberately steers away from the hyper-sexualisation that often occurs when depicting queer and transgender identities. While celebrating the sexuality and erotic nature of queer and trans bodies is valid (when addressed respectfully), it is often used to minimise and fetishise the community. In contrast, this work connects desire to love, affection and interiority. It proposes a rich intensity of emotion that extends beyond romantic cliché because the collage is concurrently "unsettled", "forging unique navigations", and by its nature, "evading fixed definitions" and order (Darwin, 2017).

A notable feature in Reclining Colossus (and most of my collages) is a distinctive, internalised gaze. Schroeder (1998, p. 208) proposes that "to gaze implies more than to look at; it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze." Mulvey (1989) describes the gaze in gendered terms, proposing that the 'male gaze' objectifies women as stereotypes for heterosexual male viewers.

Conversely, the 'female gaze', she suggests, subverts the object and positions women as viewers. Both forms of gaze stem from social power buried within the act of looking. However, Moss (2019, para. 3) suggests that a 'queer gaze' differs because it:

> … deconstructs gender-based power dynamics, changing not only the object but also the intent of the male and female gaze. Ideally, a queer gaze [creates] space for plural identities and possibilities.

In my work, there is no direct address to the viewer. If a communicative gaze is evident, it is internal and intimate, connecting to another individual within the frame (Eros and Ludus; Reclining Colossus; The Younger Self) or to something that attracts from beyond the frame (Haircut). Because the figures in my work do not entertain the assumption of a viewer, they unsettle conventional gendered power relations through the intensity of their internal focus.

Reclining Colossus communicates my hope for the future. Much like Eros and Ludus, the collage expresses my wish to share love with another in a way that is both vulnerable and tender. Here, love transcends constructed affection, rejecting outside expectations and obligations. Intimacy and care occur behind closed doors, away from the politicising and judging public eye.

Figure 5.2 Reclining Colossus, Ezra Baldwin (January 2023).

The Younger Self - compassionate care

The Younger Self combines a nebulous environment with part of the statue Silenus bearing the child Dionysus, created by Praxiteles (c. 400 BC).

The myth of Dionysus's birth, death and resurrection is complex, and Mark (2022) observes that the myth has diverse accounts. However, they all share a consistent feature; that either Dionysus or his pregnant mother was killed before he regenerated or completed gestating inside the body of a second parent. Accordingly, as a deity, Dionysus is often associated with survival and rebirth.

In this collage, an affectionate relationship between a child and an adult is positioned inside an ethereal environment to suggest a moment of meditation, reflection and insight.[34] Here, I look back at my younger self with the nurturing kindness of a parent embracing their inner child.

The collage reflects the story of my name, 'Ezra' (that replaces my old name, Ishtar). 'Ezra' comes from the Hebrew word 'azar', meaning 'help', 'aid' or 'protect'. If we understand these two phases of the self (the child as Ishtar and the adult as Ezra), we encounter a compassionate bridge of support and understanding within the gaze.

In mythology, both Ishtar and Dionysus are transitional beings. Burton (2017) notes that Ishtar epitomised gender fluidity, queerness and binary disruption. He also records that this goddess of fertility, love, war and sex, "was sometimes represented with a beard to emphasise her more bellicose side. She could change a man into a woman, and the assinnu, kurgarru, and kuku'u who performed her cult had both male and female features" (Burton, 2017, para. 8).

[34] In this work the heavens open to an emerging day, a newness that is both earth and sky, not bound by binary divisions.

Figure 5.3 The Younger Self, Ezra Baldwin (January 2023)

Trans Body - reimagining Hermaphrodite/Hermaphroditus

The collage Trans Body is both a self-portrait and a reimagining of classical representations of Hermaphrodite/ Hermaphroditus. In this work I have used a section of an anonymous Roman sculpture of an imperial family member (c. 27BC – 68CE).

Instead of feminine breasts and masculine genitalia, the central figure has a masculine chest with top-surgery scars adorned with orchids and feminine hips with a sense of what might be covered feminine genitalia. Positioned in front of a seascape that is itself transitioning through light and form, the collage is not cisgender or aspiring to appear in a cisnormative construction. It is a body in fusion that does not hide the battle scars of its transformation. The fusion of genders is not a new idea; there are references to such individuals in classical mythology. Indicative of this is the deity Hermaphrodite/Hermaphroditus who Seymour (2011) notes was the son of Hermes and Aphrodite. The transformation of this individual occurred when Salmacis, a water-nymph, observed him bathing in a pool and fell in love with him. She prayed that they might never be separated. Seymour states, "The gods interpreted her request literally and joined the pair into one body. In both his name and his being, therefore, Hermaphroditus combines male and female"(2011, para. 1).

Although Graves describes Hermaphroditus as "a double sexed being" (1955, p. 68), the earliest recording of the deity's nature is attributed to the Greek Historian Siculus who described Hermaphroditus as a being who:

> … appears at certain times among men, and that he is born with a physical body which is a combination of that of a man and that of a woman, in that he has a body which is beautiful and delicate like that of a woman, but has the masculine quality and vigour of a man. (Siculus, n.d., 4.6.5)

In my collages Trans Body and Reclining Colossus, I integrate swathes of contemporary fabric. This feature disrupts the proposition that these collages are concerned with classical illustration. Although the cloth in Reclining Colossus alludes to the soft security of contemporary bedding, the fabric in Trans Body is overlaid with an image of a contemporary building. I did this to create the appearance of a patterned textile. The draped fabric is employed to 'feminise' the lower portion of the sculpture by softening the stone texture of the body and creating the illusion of wider, more traditionally feminine hips.

Such fabric in my work is often oxymoronic, and it reinforces a paradox of time. Chitons (tunics) and himation (cloaks) in ancient Greek sculpture were employed to emphasise "the dialectical relationship between clothing, the human body and posture" (Chen & Cao, 2021, p. 29). My works preserve this function but also force us to confront the contemporary nature of what we encounter, underscoring the fact that what we experience in these collages is a transformational reconstruction that combines, amalgamates and subverts. Here, Halberstam's (2011) queered collage "refuses to respect the boundaries that delineate […] the copy from the original" (p. 136), and the impossible becomes a new possibility.

Figure 5.4 Trans Body, Ezra Baldwin (March 2023)

Haircut – revealing beauty and inner truth

The collage Haircut explores the transformative qualities of a trans person's first gender-affirming haircut. The shroud of long hair hanging from the shoulder represents the literal and emotional weight being lifted as the beauty and inner truth of the person is revealed. Combined with the overlay of flowers on the skin and the halo of the planet Venus behind the head, the collage speaks to physical transformation and the emergence of joy.

My first haircut was a profound and deliberate assertation of my identity, reshaping the self by 'cutting away' the constraint of gender compliance. Captivated, I watched as, physically, a closer presence of my identity was revealed as my hair fell to the floor.

The ambiguous presence of the planet Venus as a halo refers to the classical goddesses of beauty (this includes Ishtar in Mesopotamian mythology and Aphrodite in Greek mythology). This planet alludes to the transformation from my old name Ishtar into my new name Ezra, and the association of Venus with the revelation of beauty that emerged from that transformation.
Although Venus is associated with revelations of beauty, the placement of the halo alludes to the halo and its connotations of holiness. Here, the halo highlights the sanctity and beauty of transgender and non-binary people.

Halos have been used by other queer artists, including Gabriel García Román in his series Queer Icons (2011). In the article Why this artist is putting religious halos around his queer subjects (Rivas, 2015, para. 3), Román states:
My images are visually giving power to a group of people that are generally disempowered. I want young people to see these images and see them as an example of someone powerful and noble that they can become.

Much of my collage work is illuminated with holy light (not in a religious sense, as I am not religious). Instead, luminosity is ethereal; a form of spiritual enlightenment where holiness refers to reverence, love and respect for a person who pursues inner truth.

This pursuit of my true self, I see as non-linear and evolutionary. My understanding of 'transgender' is a journey between genders that does not follow a directional route. I understand identity as fluid, and destinations can fluctuate. My gender as a non-binary transgender person is an identity outside of being a man or a woman, and the intimacy and aspirations of this journey of building and unbuilding is ever-evolving.

Figure 5.5 Haircut, Ezra Baldwin (February 2023)

Summary and Conclusion

Chapter 6

Introduction

On 22nd of March 2023, the TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) influencer Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull, also known as Posie Parker, planned to speak at Albert Park for three hours about "the dangers she says women face from trans people" (Chapman, 2023, para. 3). After only 24 minutes she was forced to leave the park by pro-trans protesters.

On that day, I was too afraid to attend the protest. The threat of violence from Parker's supporters made me afraid for my safety. I knew that there would be anti-trans and right-wing supporters there, and that tensions would likely escalate. For the week leading up to the rally, and a few days after, my anxiety levels accelerated. I was afraid because I know that in public, I am both visibly queer and non-binary. Watching the debates and commentary on television exacerbated my fear. Instead, safe inside the protection of my family, I followed the protest through the social media of friends who were attending in person.

As footage of the rally emerged, news of Parker's negative reception and eventual decision to terminate her address began to give me hope. Thousands of people; trans, non-binary, queer and allies, showed Parker and her followers that her harmful rhetoric and media manipulation was unwelcome.

Despite most media accounts, the event in Albert Park was a largely peaceful and affirming rally of trans and non-binary New Zealanders. Although some reporting depicted the crowd as 'riotous', 'ugly', 'chaotic', and 'overreactive', the rally I witnessed through my friends' postings was large, loud, and energetic. People expressed joy, love, and support. After Parker left, the rally continued as music played and community members made speeches at the band rotunda she had occupied.

Despite the negative reporting, this was a space where my identity and existence were affirmed. While the event was unsafe for me and hundreds of people like me to venture into, what occurred gave me hope. It reminded me of the purpose behind my art, the importance of speaking in public forums, either in a park or a gallery.

We speak because our silence enables others to speak against us.

Figure 6.1 Scenes from the anti-trans activist counter-protest at Albert Park, Auckland
(March 2023)

Photograph ©. Troy Rawhiti-Connel (2023).

A. Rawhiti-Connell reported the event in the Spinoff (26th Mar, 2023). https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/26-03-2023/an-alternative-view-of-the-angry-protest-crowd

Contributions to the field

As a practice-led, artistic inquiry, my work has considered how a person navigating a world of gender conformity might use collage to express a lived experience of non-binary identity. Approached as a self-study, the thesis makes a personalised contribution to emerging discourses related to contemporary non-binary gender identity and expression.
Unlike the Posey Parker protest, this study employs a vulnerable, deeply personal voice that elevates autobiographical experience. Therefore, the project does not reduce trans and non-binary identity to an 'issue', but instead contextualises an intimate expression of how it feels to love and seek love, to navigate betweenness, and to journey with identity through states of transition.

The project offers three contributions. First, it positions a quiet, reflective expression, offering an embodied, qualitative contribution to what are currently largely quantitative or media-filtered understandings of trans/non-binary identity. By representing my non-binary experiences, I have sought to humanise non-binary people and our lives in a manner that might create space for empathy and connection.

Second, the thesis contributes artworks to an emerging body of queer collage that is being used internationally as a vehicle for gender expression. The artworks in the thesis approach collage as 'a whole that is in harmony with itself'. In so doing, the study proposes a new definition of collage that preserves the concept of a new assembled whole, while introducing the possibility of creating an outcome that is harmonious rather than discordant, with fewer explicit seams evident between elements.

Finally, the study considers and activates the concept of 'queerying' (Wolfgang & Rhoades, 2017) how we might understand classical elements when they become part of Halberstam's (2011) conceptualisation of trans-identity (as something created through a process of 'continuous building and unbuilding'). Here, what are conventionally seen as binary-gendered bodies are decontextualised and rebuilt as expressions of intimate queer experience and aspiration.

Further research

A study like this is not undertaken solely for marking and gaining a qualification. It is a commitment to an extended form of agency that uses the culture of an academic environment to enhance its focus and test its thinking. As such, the thesis is a step into other journeys that move forward into new possibilities.

Exhibitions

I plan to organise solo and group exhibitions that promote LGBTQ+ artistic research. In my current position as a postgraduate student, I am proposing a curated exhibition of queer, postgraduate artistic practice projects at the university. I am also planning to exhibit my work at Studio One Toi Tu in Ponsonby, Upstairs Art Gallery at Lopdell House, Titirangi, and spaces in Wellington, including Thistle Hall Community Centre and [Suite] Gallery in Te Aro.

Publication

An article on my research (Baldwin, 2023) has been accepted for publication in July in the peer-reviewed, academic journal Rangahau Aranga. It will form part of a themed, illustrated issue showcasing queer postgraduate research. Rangahau Aranga is an open-access journal with a dedicated DOI, that will also provide links to my thesis post-examination, once it is published in the Tuwhera repository.

Further study

I am also considering advancing the thesis' concerns into doctoral study. A four-year autoethnographic inquiry would provide greater scope for examining and critically contextualising experiences and identity as they evolve over the greater period. A practice-led doctoral study would also provide an opportunity to advance my redefinition of queer collage beyond the two-dimensional.

Selling artwork

I am also creating limited runs of art prints of my collages for exhibition and sale online.[35] These prints would range in scale from A3 to A1 and be printed on archive stock.

[35] Queer art is sold on sites like Etsy https://www.etsy.com/nz/market/queer_art, Society6 https://society6.com/prints/queer, rtsper https://www.artsper.com/us/contemporary-artworks/pride and Ko-fi https://ko-fi.com/explore (keyword 'queer').

In closing

My journey through this thesis has been a transition of the self. I have grown my practice as an artist and designer and continued to evolve and explore dimensions of my identity and purpose. I have learnt how to weave pain, joy, hope, aspiration and love into a tangible, visible form. The project has not been an exercise in self-indulgence. I have sought to give voice to vulnerability and intimacy without resorting to confrontation or dramatisation.

I am reminded that autoethnographic inquiries such as this study presuppose knowledge as personal (Webb & O'Brien, 2008) and they can display "multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739).

However, perhaps they do something more than this … perhaps in blending the personal, the scholarly and the political, they help to shape unique artistic voices that can renegotiate the aggression of confrontation and elevate intimate, authentic identity - expressions of the humane.

In this regard I am reminded of Alok Vaid-Menon, who in an episode of the Man Enough podcast (2021, 29:12) said:

… There is nothing more powerful than stepping into your truth.

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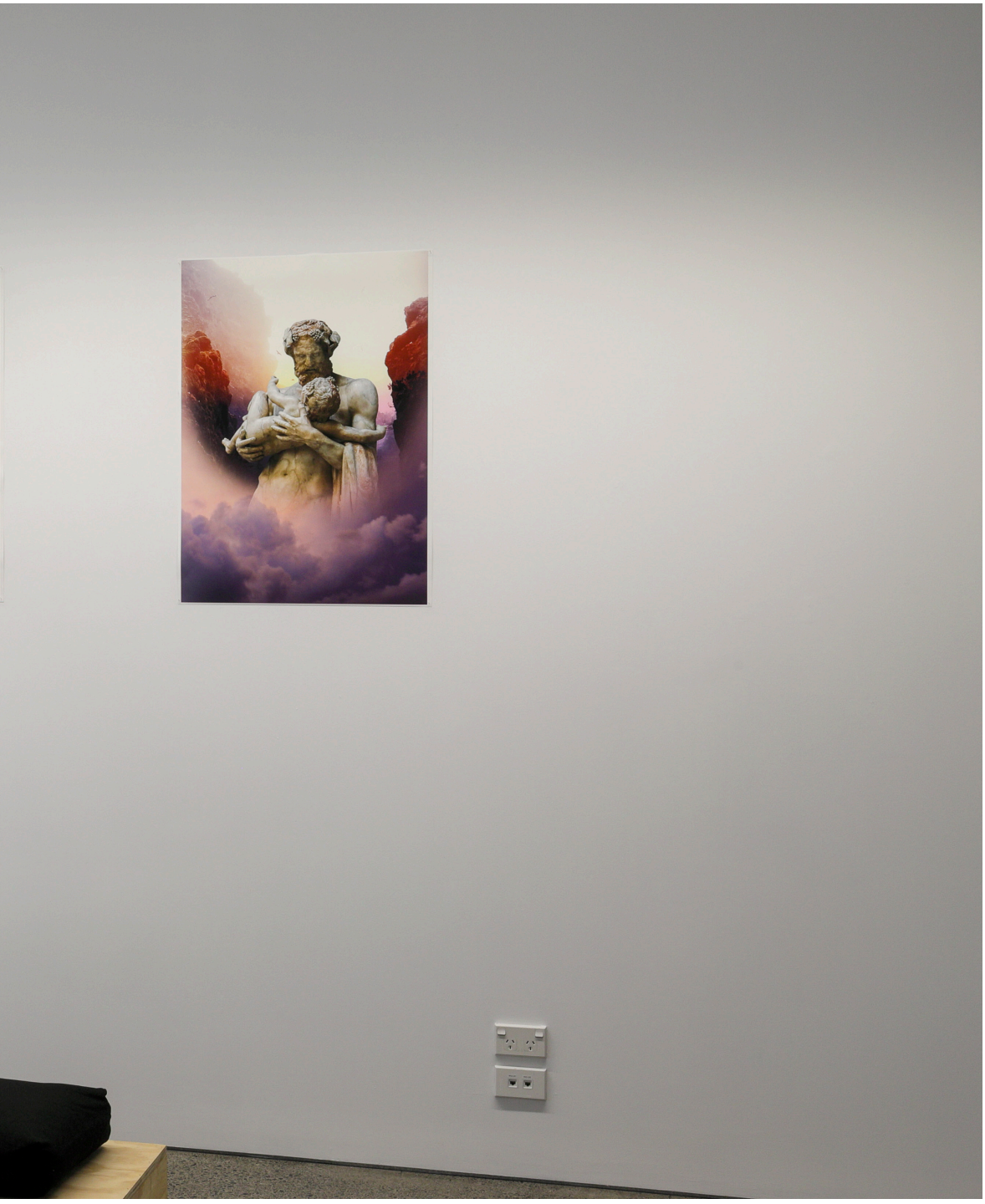
Appendix

Master of Design Graduating Exhibition 2 2023

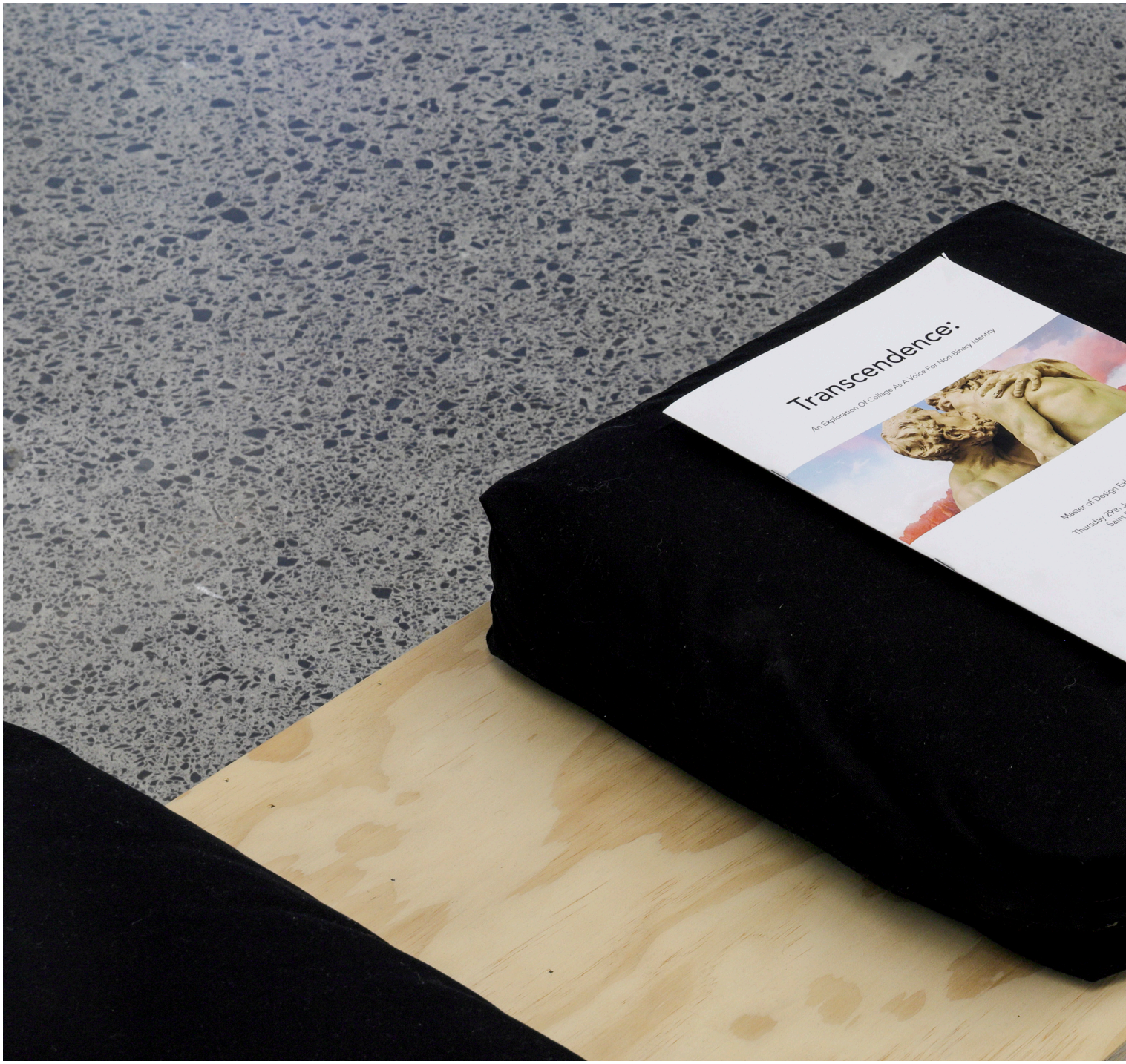
Figure Appendix 1: Exhibition of Transcendence in Master of Design Graduating Exhibition 2, 2023.
Three 594 × 841mm digital collages printed on matte-finish inkjet stock.

Photograph © Paul Chapman (2023) - used with permission.
The exhibition was held from Thursday, 29th of June 2023, until Saturday, 1st of July 2023, across Saint Paul Galleries 1, 2, and 3 on A



UT City Campus, Auckland Central, New Zealand.

Figure Appendix 2: Exhibition Catalogue Accompaning the Transcendence Exhibition, 2023.
One 210 x 297mm 16 page booklet printed on matte-finish inkjet stock.



Photograph © Paul Chapman (2023) - used with permission.
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UT City Campus, Auckland Central, New Zealand.