

Tracing the Absurd: Queer Bodies of a Painted Allegory

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Abstract

This practice-led research employs representational painting to narrate a series of paradoxical allegories that reflect my lived queer experiences through an Asian body. I am interested in the philosophical notion of Absurdism—a condition that possesses qualities of being exiled from a sense of rationality. Struggling with the Westernised concept of *coming-out-of-the-closet*, my project positions my queerness as something that is inherently permeated by absurd qualities. Through this conceptual framing, I aim to construct a queer Absurdist language, via representational painting, that imagines narratives which juxtapose humour with discomfort, beauty with grotesqueness, and lyricism with insanity; these narratives are situated within a spectrum. I question how absurdity informs a deconstructive methodology against the binary ways of thinking that fundamentally reject queerness. Centring self-referential naked male bodies who take on different characters via my painted narratives, I explore ways to reclaim an underrepresented subjectivity of queer bodies that has been historically ostracised by a Western heteronormative masculine gaze. As my project progresses, the affective physicality of oil paint is felt in my experience of the world. Through expanded painting methods, I examine how the emotional gesture of painted marks and distorted forms on the canvas's textural surface may accommodate a queer methodology.

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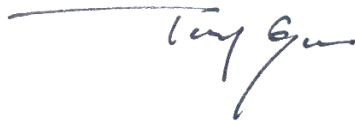
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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tony Guo', with a horizontal line extending to the left.

Tony Guo
23rd May 2022

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还在梦着秋天翠竹南里的银杏树
我被一片一片的落叶埋下

Introduction

Whether it is impermissible to love someone or to be rendered powerless in public for that very reason, I have come to realise that my experiences may never evade the tragic nature attached to my identity as an Asian gay man. There are no words to verbalise my rage; therefore, I resort to painting.

This practice-led research employs representational painting to narrate a series of paradoxical allegories that reflect my lived queer experiences. My research is structured via three critical areas of interest—the absurd, the body and painting. These interests form the central question of my research: how do absurd narratives in representational painting both project a queer allegory and deconstruct binary thinking? Embedded in this question is an inquiry into how the defaced self-referential naked body informs a satirical, self-deprecating methodology to rebel against the violence of homophobia. This self-deprecating methodology is in essence, a coping mechanism that takes my body as the centre of absurdity.

The first chapter—*Curtain Up*—discusses the philosophical notion of Absurdism, which French philosopher Albert Camus defines as the collision of the human condition and an utter indifference of the world.¹ Reframing Absurdism through a queer lens, I argue that the absurd displays an irrational and irresolvable situation, and that this is similar to the nature of the “closet.” Whether I am in or out of it, my sexuality is inescapable from the violence and presence of homophobia.

My project also connects with American queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s discussion of non-dualistic thinking.² With reference to Sedgwick, I argue that Absurdism reaches beyond the confines of binary thinking, as queerness is fundamentally an outlier of a conventional heteronormative man-woman binary. In this regard,

¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Great Ideas. (London: Penguin, 2005), 28.

² Eve K. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 01.

the first chapter explores how the absurd as a conceptual method informs a deconstructive methodology to confront the violent externalisation of binarism that pervades my queerness. For my research, a deconstructive methodology is understood as a fluid spectrum that is not fixed to the “either/or,” twofold approach to seeing the world. By deconstructing how queer identity has been predominantly structured via binary modes of thinking, my project considers an inclusive middle-space of otherness that is more attuned to the arbitrary nature of human experience.

My methods of constructing painted narratives draw influence from the Theatre of the Absurd, and from French and Belgian painters Balthasar Klossowski de Rola (known as Balthus) and Michaël Borremans. It is with reference to these practices that I explore ways to formulate a queer, Absurdist language in representational painting, which I consider functions as a kind of painted stage. On this stage, I construct narratives that juxtapose humour with discomfort, beauty with grotesqueness, and lyricism with insanity. Part of this painted stage involves the theatricality of the represented body, which is accentuated by how each character is absorbed in activities that make up their own narrative-world.

The second aspect of my research involves a political framing of my central subject matter, namely the self-referential, naked male body. British writer Sally O'Reilly suggests that “the body is where identity resides and where it is projected, rehearsed and asserted.”³ My project aims to reclaim the autonomy of an underrepresented queer Asian identity by questioning conventional ideas of “nude” versus “naked” and subjecthood versus objecthood in Western painting history. Rebelling against a privileged Western, heterosexual male gaze, I employ self-portraiture, using my naked body as a reference point, to challenge the kind of gaze which historically has ostracised and dehumanised queer bodies.⁴ Chapter two—*The Shape of a Scar*

³ Sally O'Reilly, *The Body in Contemporary Art*. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 109

⁴ My specific painting methods draw influence from various Western historical painting tropes, which in my project function to de-homogenise the elitism of these tropes.

—discusses how the painted representation of an effeminate, naked male body, through a first-person gaze, can be emblematic of a shifting power dynamic to confront toxic aspects of masculinity. I explore this concern through a conceptual framing of the idea of the anxious anus⁵ that is present in homophobic sentiment.

Throughout the development of this research, my emphasis in painting has shifted from an imitation of a subject's naturalistic form to an emotional reaction to how I experience the world. This shift has resulted in the introduction of abstracted qualities to my painting. Chapter Three—*Glimmer*—focuses on how the physicality of paint itself, explored through methods such as layering, mark-making, tracing and erasing, can deliver a visual narrative. For example, by focusing on the treatment of skin textures, I test how the material—the physicality of paint—can transcend representation and become an emotional gesture that accommodates a queer, Absurdist methodology. These methods move beyond the relationship that the pictorial arrangement of subject matter has in relation to the construction of narrative. My focus concerns how my painting process becomes attuned to how I experience the world. In other words, I am interested in treating the painting as a composite of bodily translated marks that hold a vast variety of affects. Furthermore, drawing influence from British painter Francis Bacon, I explore how abstracted qualities of painting coupled with deforming subject matters are, when situated within representational figurative painting, akin to the nonbinary spectrum that is queerness, that is opacity.

⁵ Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998): 275.

Curtain Up

Absurdism is a philosophical concept that emerged in response to the devastation and destruction of World War Two, where an unprecedented sense of disorientation had displaced the search for a meaningful life. I am interested in Absurdism and its interconnected history with representational painting, one of the primary methods of my research. This chapter establishes relationships between Absurdism and representational painting and discusses how they underpin the methodological framing of my project as related to queerness. As a queer person of colour, my methodology is indivisible from my everyday, lived experiences. These experiences, in turn, inform my project's reframing of what is predominantly a Eurocentric, male discussion of Absurdism. My research aims to formulate how absurdity has been inherent to queerness, because queer lives are imbued with disorientation, paradox, and non-normativity, despite neoliberal strategies of inclusiveness. For example, French philosopher Michel Foucault critiques the delusive nature of power as it shifts via the act of *coming-out*.⁶ This shift further underscores the experience of queerness in a heteronormative world as essentially absurd. The deconstruction of the closet does not necessarily ease the difficulties of a queer experience.

A queer position, as defined by an embodied sexuality within a heteronormative society, is riddled with frailty and dilemma, as queer bodies are outcasts of the heteronormative man/woman binary of Western society. In short, there is no space for queerness and queer bodies within Western binary thinking. Adopting Sedgwick's positioning of non-dualistic thinking,⁷ this chapter argues that an Absurdist framework can become a deconstructive methodology in the face of the oppressive binary forms of thinking that fundamentally reject queerness. This chapter also connects my painting methods—which utilise representation to construct situational narratives—with Absurdism. These narratives recall theatrical traditions adopted by playwrights from the Theatre of the Absurd. In addition, I analyse specific methods used by painters Balthus and Michaël Borremans, who approach painted narratives with theatrical means, such as placing recognisable casts of characters in specific settings.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 60.

⁷ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 1.

1.1 / In, Out

Sisyphus was condemned to perpetually perform the futile action of rolling a rock up to the peak of a mountain, only to have it fall back down. This mythological fable was used as an analogy by French philosopher Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* to reflect the incongruous state of the human condition. Camus suggests that this condition is permeated by Absurdism, which is born out of the confrontation between human desire and an utter indifference to the world.⁸ This notion denies human efforts to give coherent meaning to one's relationship with the world, whereby any search for meaning is as futile as Sisyphus' punishment. I contend that *The Myth of Sisyphus* is an allegory that conveys a general statement about the psychological and socio-political anxieties that haunt humanity through an inescapable cycle of dissonant cause-and-effect. I am interested in how this diminishing cause-and-effect is a pervasive aspect of queerness.

Although I align with Camus' discussion of Absurdism as a generalised human condition, my research expands on his ideas by considering Absurdism from my contemporary, queer perspective. My project's methodological framing is, in part, informed by my lived, queer experience, which encompasses an unparalleled condition of disorientation, paradoxes and absurdity. I argue that these qualities are associated with being involuntarily closeted—a space where one must keep one's sexuality a secret to stay safe. I am interested in exploring how the absurd nature of my closet-imbued queer experience holds an intrinsic presence within my identity.⁹ That said, neoliberal agendas see political discourse shifting slowly in favour of queer people in resistance to the traumatic aspects of the closet. Although queer visibility and acceptance are becoming more ubiquitous, American author

⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 28.

⁹ The queer visibility of Western history has generally benefited a white, queer experience, whereas my experiences are confined by a Confucius, collectivist patriarchy that is still pervasive in contemporary China.

Nicholas de Villiers argues that the “neoliberal era [has] new strategies wherein queer people are controlled less by homophobic exclusion than by a politics of inclusion and legalization.”¹⁰ I connect with Foucault’s hesitation about a confessional freedom derived from the act of coming-out. As discussed in *History of Sexuality*, “truth does not belong to the order of power.”¹¹ To emerge from inside the closet to a state of liberty does not necessarily follow a positive trajectory. Instead, it is an act of exposure to wider danger, which as a course diminishes the effect of the closet. My project aims to contribute insight into how queer bodies navigate absurdity, danger, paradoxes, marginalisation and irregularity under heteronormative ideals, despite being in or out of the closet.

Queer and People of Colour queer bodies orient to different shapes and spaces that deviate from conventional Western patriarchal notions of love, sex and belonging. British-Australian queer theorist Sara Ahmed analyses the term *sexual orientation* in her book *Queer Phenomenology*. She explores the word *orient* within colonial framing and connects it to ideas concerning sexual orientation. The Orient denotes the East through a Western gaze, away from the centric West. To sexually orientate is to move away from the centre, namely, heterosexuality.¹² According to Ahmed, the term sexual orientation marginalises that which is non-heterosexual and, by proxy, non-white.

Living in a Eurocentric, masculinist, heteronormative system that fundamentally marginalises queer identity, I argue that queer people adopt paradoxical ways of feeling and thinking as we explore our presence in heteronormative spaces, prompting us to conform or resist. Either way, we are outcasts, and to many, we are absurd. In

¹⁰ Nicholas de Villiers, “Afterthoughts on Queer Opacity,” *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, (2015), <https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/afterthoughts-on-queer-opacity/>.

¹¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 60.

¹² Dai Kojima, “A Review of Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*,” *Phenomenology & Practice* 2, no. 1 (2008): 90, doi:10.29173/pandpr19816.

poet Gregory Woods' discussion of the paradox of male-homosexuality, he argues that a heterosexual man's masculinity remains valid

since a man is the penis'd creature whose
defining organ becomes erect when he sees a
person without such an organ—woman. Gay
men, on the other hand, confuse the issue. Our
desire responds to the wrong object and,
notoriously, we turn ourselves into women by
allowing ourselves to be penetrated by other
men.¹³

Wood's example demonstrates how a gay man's sexuality is perceived as pathological within the heteronormative dichotomisation of biological sex.

A reoccurring positioning within my research—imbued by my queer experiences—is the accentuation of the absurd. The absurd sentiments within my paintings are informed by my representation of mismatching placements of normative contexts; for example, masked figures crying rivers into an inflatable pool or riding a carousel horse in a dark cave (see Figures 1 and 2). These mismatched placements establish a fairy-tale whimsicality woven together with an excruciating sense of loneliness, fugitiveness, and incongruity. By carefully rendering the details of my subject matter, these narratives are treated as a paradoxical love language for people like me. Through the life-like, exaggerated details I paint, my aim is to affirm a painted world where my lived experiences are free to embrace my "absurdity" or "perversion." By extension, I offer this world to other queer bodies.

¹³ Woods, *A History of Gay Literature*, 379-380.



Figure 1. Tony Guo, *Rain*, 2021, oil on canvas, 900x1400mm.



Figure 2. Tony Guo, *Carousel*, 2021, oil on canvas, 550x650mm.

1.2 / Neither nor

The Myth of Sisyphus offers a counter-strategy that functions to revolt against the absurd.¹⁴ I propose that this revolt operates as a kind of queer methodology; it is the absurd itself. I am interested in how the absurd can be conveyed or function in service of a queer emotional landscape. This interest connects to Sedgwick's thinking as outlined in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. She argues that "non-dualistic thought and pedagogy"¹⁵ is inherently a queer methodology as queerness is not confined by the sexual or reproductive duality between men and women. I contend that an Absurdist way of thinking parallels Sedgwick's non-dualism, as the absurd is also not a "for-or-against" situation. The absurd privileges malleable and non-definitive interpretations, which are situated across a spectrum. More specifically, my research argues that the absurd encompasses the juxtaposing positions of this spectrum and includes everything in between, from humour to discomfort; beauty to grotesqueness; natural to artificial; calmness to insanity. All these positions are mismatched onto the canvas, presented at once.

I am interested in the fluid nature of the affect derived from the absurd, where the sense of cause-and-effect does not abide by how the real world is conventionally conveyed. Expanding on Camus' framing of the absurd as a generalised meaningless state of the world, I position the absurd in my project as a living embodiment of queerness and a lens to see a world beyond binaries. Drawing on Sedgwick and through a non-dualistic positioning of the absurd, my project frames the absurd as a deconstructive and reparative methodology for marginalised queer communities. The absurd functions as an unfamiliar language that reflects a conflicted identity outside of binarised systems and evokes empathy for those who live within those system's accusation.

¹⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 53

¹⁵ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 1.

1.3 / Cacophony

My methods for constructing a painting composition are influenced by a group of Western playwrights known as the Theatre of the Absurd. Embracing the absurdity of the human condition, as discussed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, these playwrights reject conventional forms of linear storytelling by integrating meaning into a situational narrative. In the *Theatre of the Absurd*, British dramatist Martin Esslin analyses plays by Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov and Eugene Ionesco.¹⁶ Esslin outlines that in Beckett's famous *Waiting for Godot*, the plot deals with a situation where essentially nothing happens. More specifically, the objectives of the characters are not met, nor are they intended to be met. They are often portrayed to be out-of-sync with any broader sense of narrative or situational context. The play functions as an allegory for an absurd human condition. In this sense, the play itself, as opposed to individual symbols, character traits and settings, holds the entire meaning. Esslin argues that:

Instead of a linear development, they present their author's intuition of the human condition by a method that is essentially polyphonic; they confront their audience with an organised structure of statements and images that interpenetrate each other and that must be apprehended in their totality, rather like the different themes in a symphony, which gain meaning by their simultaneous interaction.¹⁷

The Absurdist playwrights that I am interested in present microcosms of the human condition that align with Camus' discussion of the absurd. Absurdist plays present situations that are exiled from rationality and project internal anguish, fears,

¹⁶ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1966).

¹⁷ Ibid, 45.

anxieties, struggles, and dilemmas linked to the tension of the author's interaction with the world. My project examines methods that employ Absurdist theatrical means to project a queer emotional landscape.

My research is equally influenced by Absurdist cinema. For example, Chilean film director Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Holy Mountain* (see Figure 3) is particularly relevant to my project's methods of formulating absurd narratives via representational painting. This film uses a distinctly scattered, non-linear timeline within a psychedelic atmosphere. The director uses playful replacements for uncomfortable subjects—such as sausages for intestines, and vibrant paint or juice for blood. These scenes are whimsical and thereby stimulate a paradoxical experience.



Figure 3. Alejandro Jodorowsky, *The Holy Mountain*, 1973. ABKCO films

Chinese filmmaker Yang Fudong's *The Seven Intellectuals in the Bamboo Forest* is an example of specific storytelling strategies that can elicit contrasting emotions such as disjointedness and disorientation. These contrasts occur within unfathomable situations. For example, a scene where two characters stand stationary in a lake, watching an animal lantern burn to its skeleton establishes a kind of strange melancholy (see Figure 4). As the mysteries unravel on the screen, forms of opacity emerge that reject the penetrability of its own storytelling—there is no rational meaning behind the narratives. Instead, they are attuned to an emotional landscape, an allegory of a human condition. This opaque wall keeps viewers within the absurd and exiled from binary ways of understanding the world.



Figure 4. Yang Fudong, *Seven Intellectuals of a Bamboo Forest*, 2003-7.

Part of my project's exploration concerns how to translate theatrical languages into painting methods via the interchangeable aspects of these two mediums. I am interested in how pictorial representation in paintings can be utilised to establish Absurdist theatrical narratives. Surrealist painters, like Absurdist playwrights, focus on improvised compositions that respond to a desire for an unrestrained world where automatism of the mind dominates the medium. Ideas or compositions respond spontaneously to the arbitrary flow of thought. However, I distinguish my project from twentieth-century Surrealist tropes, which, at their core, deal with the liberation of the autonomous unconscious via the distortion of reality. Although I adopt certain Surrealist methods,¹⁸ the philosophical framework of my project is rooted in an existential insecurity, meaning a search for meaning through an embodied queer sexuality. Additionally, my construction of painted compositions has closer proximity to theatrical and cinematic traditions.

Painters such as Balthus and Michaël Borremans expand the limitations of painterly storytelling through their use of theatrical apparatuses. For example, Balthus employs recognisable characters in specified settings, engaging in performed scenarios. Subjects are depicted as naturalistically and as believably as possible. As a result, the realistic representation of a painted narrative becomes similar to how one experiences the real world. Although figurative, they are allegorical of a psychological tension on the brink of collapsing. For example, in *The Street* (see Figure 5), characters are performing a role attributed to them, discordantly put together into one scene. There is a distinct separation between this painted theatrical stage and the audience, who are reduced to a voyeuristic presence, silently observing timeless subjects within a painted theatre. This separation echoes the way cinematic narratives unfold where there is an inherent

¹⁸ These methods include painting recognisable objects in detail within mismatching contexts. For example, see Rene Magritte's painting *Time Transfixed*.

impenetrability of the storytelling—the characters in *The Street* must stay within the context of their world. American writer Alice Benston suggests the subjects in Balthus' paintings "are, like characters caught in their own drama, unaware of our existence."¹⁹ I am interested in how the separation between characters on the painted stage with the viewers outside the canvas can facilitate this sense of theatricality in painting.



Figure 5. Balthus, *The Street*, 1933, oil on canvas, 1950x2400mm.

¹⁹ Alice N. Benston, "Framing and Being Framed by Art: Theatricality and Voyeurism in Balthus," *Style*, vol. 22, No. 2, Visual Poetics (Summer 1988): 349.

Belgian artist Michaël Borremans's artworks explore theatricality via the interchangeable approaches of painting and filmmaking. His paintings create mysterious situations based on staged digital compositions, where there is a strong undertone of ominous unease. Characters carry out meaningless activities to create a sense of anarchy within the image.²⁰ In *Large Rocket* (see Figure 6), a figure in a cult-like costume stands in a manner that resembles a Renaissance portrait in warm, dim light. This painting triggers a paradoxical space that is both Absurdist and romantic.²¹ This space provides potentially contradictory visual information as viewers attempt to resolve the situation within the painting. If the painting invites me to know this person, why are they portrayed as unknowable?



Figure 6. Michaël Borremans, *Large Rocket*, 2019, oil on canvas, 3000x1900mm.

²⁰ David Coggins, "Michaël Borremans," *Art in America* (March 2009): 91.

²¹ *Ibid*, 92.

Characters and their specified settings are a continuing method in constructing painterly narratives. Within my research, I treat my subjects as “props” on a painted stage. While it may be possible to read these subjects as being a collection of symbols, this is not the primary motivation of my project. Instead, they collectively form a more extensive allegory. For example, in *The Curse* (see Figure 7), three farm animals lay around an out-of-context toilet with out-of-context balloons stuck down it. The landscape in this and all my works is bereft of specific geographical significance; instead, they are merely another stage-prop that imitates the idea of a theatrical backdrop to hold the scene and characters. I gather a collection of references to improvise these scenes. There is an overall calming atmosphere in *The Curse* conveyed through a warm, muted colour palette and the empty landscape. This atmosphere stands in contrast to a bizarre and ominous situation around the balloons in the toilet. Collectively their presence and focus establish a tension that transgresses a broad spectrum of contradictory binaries such as humour and discomfort, wildness and tameness, nature and artifice, violence and whimsicality.

I am interested in how this fluid middle space is free from the confinements of binary ways of thinking and, in turn, embraces conditions of absurdity. As a durationally static painting, this middle space presents the narrative immediately and visibly on the canvas’ surface, as opposed to Absurdist theatre or cinema’s linear timeline.

By positioning absurdity as the fluid space across spectrums between binaries, my project employs theatrical means to provide a stage for this space. The next chapter focuses on the how the characters on my painted stage embody a queer sexuality.



Figure 7. Tony Guo, *The Curse*, 2021, oil on canvas, 1050x1400mm.

The Shape of a Scar

- *Am I a livestock?*
- *I'm sorry?*
- *Like, did you grow me as food and that's why I have no memories?*
- *You think we grew a full human, gave you consciousness...*
- *I don't know.*
- *...did your nails and...*
- *I don't know. I don't know you.*
- *No, you're not livestock. Good Lord.*
- *Then what's my name?*²²

My body is the central, represented subject within my paintings. This representation occurs through the various characters that are situated on my painted stage. This chapter discusses and politicises how the effeminate naked male body can function as a rebellion against a violent historical dehumanising of queer bodies. Through the painted body's self-referentiality to its painter (in this case, *me*), I position this project as a form of self-portraiture that manifests an underrepresented Asian queer subjectivity. My project positions self-portraiture as an unending quest for a powerful, self-defined representation of a marginalised subjectivity. In elaborating on the imbalance of representation, I question how the history of Western portraiture painting has generally privileged a singular, white, heteronormative-patriarchal subjectivity. Shifting the gaze to the agency of a first-person queer and Asian perspective, I redeploy Western classical painting tropes²³ to reframe the objectified "nude" into the autonomous "naked." With this conceptual framing of the body, this chapter explores how painted bodies within my research establish a theatrical relationship with viewers via their absorbed nature and body gestures.

²² *Severance*, season 1, episode 1, "Good News about Hell," directed by Ben Stiller, aired on February 18, 2022, Red Hour Productions, Endeavor Content

²³ These tropes involve using naturalistic colour palette, composition, softly rendered forms, idealised figures, indirect painting method, glazing etc.

2.1 / Naked, Nude

A visually mimetic representation of a person or a body projects the painter's gaze onto who and what is being represented. I am interested in how this idea of the painter's gaze operates to inform relationships between object and subject, namely, my body that paints, and my painted body. In discussing French neoclassical painter Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Negresse* (1800), British theorist Cecile Bishop establishes how portraiture within Western art history often objectified the sitter: "many painters used black characters to highlight, through chromatic and symbolic contrast, the wealth, whiteness, and superiority of Europeans."²⁴ Unlike the objectification of black bodies, queerness was often shunned because of its homoerotic connotations and thus lacked notable presence to even be objectified. In the late twentieth century, within a Western art context, a more openly homoerotic framing of the male body becomes evident. For example, American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe takes photographs of naked male bodies. His photographs are a composite of sensibility and sensuality. At the core of Mapplethorpe's representation of the body is a deconstruction of how subjects fit into the gaze—the boundaries between masculinity and femininity are rendered less distinct and occupy a spectrum. His male subjects are devoid of conventional ideals attributed to male bodies; instead of appearing stoic and warrior-like, they are immersed in a soft veil, enacting feminine connotations, which are further enhanced through gestures such as cuddling (see Figure 8). As opposed to a masculinist portrayal of the male body, writer Kelly McDowell suggests "much of Mapplethorpe's work offers a commentary on the feminized position of the gay man."²⁵



Figure 8. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Embrace*, 1982, Gelatin silver print, 486x384 mm.

²⁴ Cécile Bishop, "Portraiture, Race, and Subjectivity: The Opacity of Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une Nègresse*," *Words & Image*, vol. 35, no. 1(2019): 1.

²⁵ Kelly McDowell. "Censorship and the Radicalization of the Body in the Photography of Mapplethorpe and Serrano." *Culture, Language and Representation*, 1 (2004): 12.

Pakistan-American artist Salman Toor paints agile figures and lush scenes to narrate the diaristic lives of queer brown men in America and Pakistan. The abundant use of green in his paintings captures a sense of interior nightlife in downtown gay bars. Although his recent artworks show characters absorbed in intimately private moments, he does not limit his subjects to only sexual encounters. Instead, men are represented as lonely, playful, desirous and melancholic. Viewers witness a rich array of human experiences and emotions that are ubiquitously human. Notably, Toor's reference to Western art history is a powerful gesture as he repositions the conventional white-male gaze, with its focus on the representation of female bodies, to that of queer bodies. For example, in *Sleeping Boy*, Toor creates a parallel to the composition of Diego Velasquez's *Rokeby Venus* (see Figures 9 and 10). Instead of facing away from viewers, the naked brown man is frontally depicted. He has a lethargic expression. Perhaps he has just finished masturbating, which confronts viewers with an inescapable non-binary queer desire,²⁶ which is reinforced by the fluidity of painterly marks. Through the sexual connotation of this confidently "naked" male character, Toor claims the autonomy of a queer representation.²⁷ Men have been historically glorified via notions of a warrior, toughness and physical strength. By contrast, this scene with a masturbating man denies conventional painted representations of masculinity where sexual connotations were prevalently embodied via the female "nude." I argue that being "naked" implies a first-person self-directing gaze over painted subjects, whereas the history of the painted "nude" confines the body to objecthood.

²⁶ Joseph Wolin, "Telling Details: The Painted Life of Salman Toor," *Border Crossings*, 109.

<https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/telling-details-the-painted-life-of-salman-toor>

²⁷ It is worth noting that I do not intend to sexualise queerness—I am interested in the intentional rebellion against a conventionally non-sexualisable identity. This rebellion is a core strategy of my practice and informs my project's queer methodological framing.

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Figure 9. Salman Toor, *Sleeping Boy*, 2019, oil on wood, 230x300mm.



Figure 10. Diego Velasquez, *The Rokeby Venus*, 1647, oil on canvas, 1220x1770mm.

Similarly, the representation of the naked body within my paintings is a constituency of my lived experience as defined by my non-normative, queer sexuality. Painting the queer body, which is ultimately my own body, through a first-person queer gaze reclaims the autonomous representation of an underprivileged subjectivity. The body becomes a site where my identity collides with the violence of patriarchal heteronormativity. Within this political framework, my methodology in representing the naked body is informed by how power shifts from the violence of toxic masculinity to the effeminate queer body that oscillates between the binary gender spectrums.

My body inhabits a world where heterosexuality gains its power by being perceived as the only natural and healthy expression of sexuality. In a heteronormative ideal, any deviation from heterosexuality is potentially threatening because it can be considered as pathological, thereby hindering the reproduction of the human species. More importantly, if a man wishes to be penetrated by another man, he becomes morally condemnable for such anomalous and obscene behaviour.²⁸ Woods defines sexual penetration as “a conclusive exertion of power, physical and mental; but it must also be symbolic of the fragility of masculinity; for every man has an anus. It is the seat of his manly anxieties.”²⁹ If a man’s anus gets penetrated, he is fated to corruption, and loses the power and pride attached to his fragile masculinity.³⁰ Accordingly, the existence of homosexual men functions to alert heterosexual men that their masculinity is also capable of this same kind of corruption. Such logic suggests that homophobia is essentially the fear of becoming homosexual. In order to remove that threat, gay men must stop committing homosexual behaviour. A naked male body alludes to the idea that the anus is easily accessible, which threatens a sense of heteronormative masculinity. Hence, the self-referential, naked male body in my paintings is emblematic of a shifting power dynamic from toxic masculinity to its victim—the queer body.

²⁸ Sarcasm.

²⁹ Woods, *A History of Gay Literature*, 275.

³⁰ Ibid.

The history of homosexuality and the representation of queer bodies are interspersed with censorship, misrepresentation and genocide: it is a history of dehumanisation. There are notable events—such as, among a myriad of others, gay Holocaust prisoners who wore the pink triangle—that epitomise the tragic nature of this history. The self-referential, effeminate, naked male bodies in my paintings are emblematic of this dehumanising history of queer bodies. The bodies I paint look coy, creaturely and passive, with anthropomorphising heads and whimsical penis-like elephants in their genital area. They are in an ambiguous, dichotomous state of masculine-feminine and human-subhuman, which reflects the rejected humanity of queer bodies. Bearing the weight of this history—which is still pervasive in queer lives today—my project adopts a self-deprecating satire methodology that aims to confront the violence of homophobia. I offer insight into a complex psychological phenomenon where a “victim” chooses to be their own executioner. I paint my defaced bodies engaging in absurd activities as an instrument to reflect a queer existentialist anxiety—am I human enough to fit in? Is it safe? Will I die if the world does not accept me?

In *The Shape of Our Scar* (see Figure 11), there are four green, anorexic bodies loosely rendered on a rock. Their chicken heads invite a whimsical reimagining of one of the first recorded derogatory terms against gay men in ancient China *Jijian* (鸡奸), meaning “chicken rape.”³¹ By painting my own body in accordance with this insulting phrase, I offer a complex juxtaposition between self-deprecation and rebellion. This juxtaposition parallels my queer experience. For example, I have learned to humourise the word “faggot” in a safe context with my other queer friends. Perhaps this kind of humour normalises a sense of ease around that word as opposed to letting it become a detrimental weapon against me. In addition to the chicken-faced bodies, the painting is saturated in a disturbingly absurd atmosphere. The central figure swings a basket of eggs with a crazed expression, while the surrounding figures hold a futilely small umbrella as if they are shielding themselves from the eggs. Black squares over the genitals, plus one humorously and randomly misplaced, further reinforce the history of queer censorship.

³¹ Ibid, 61

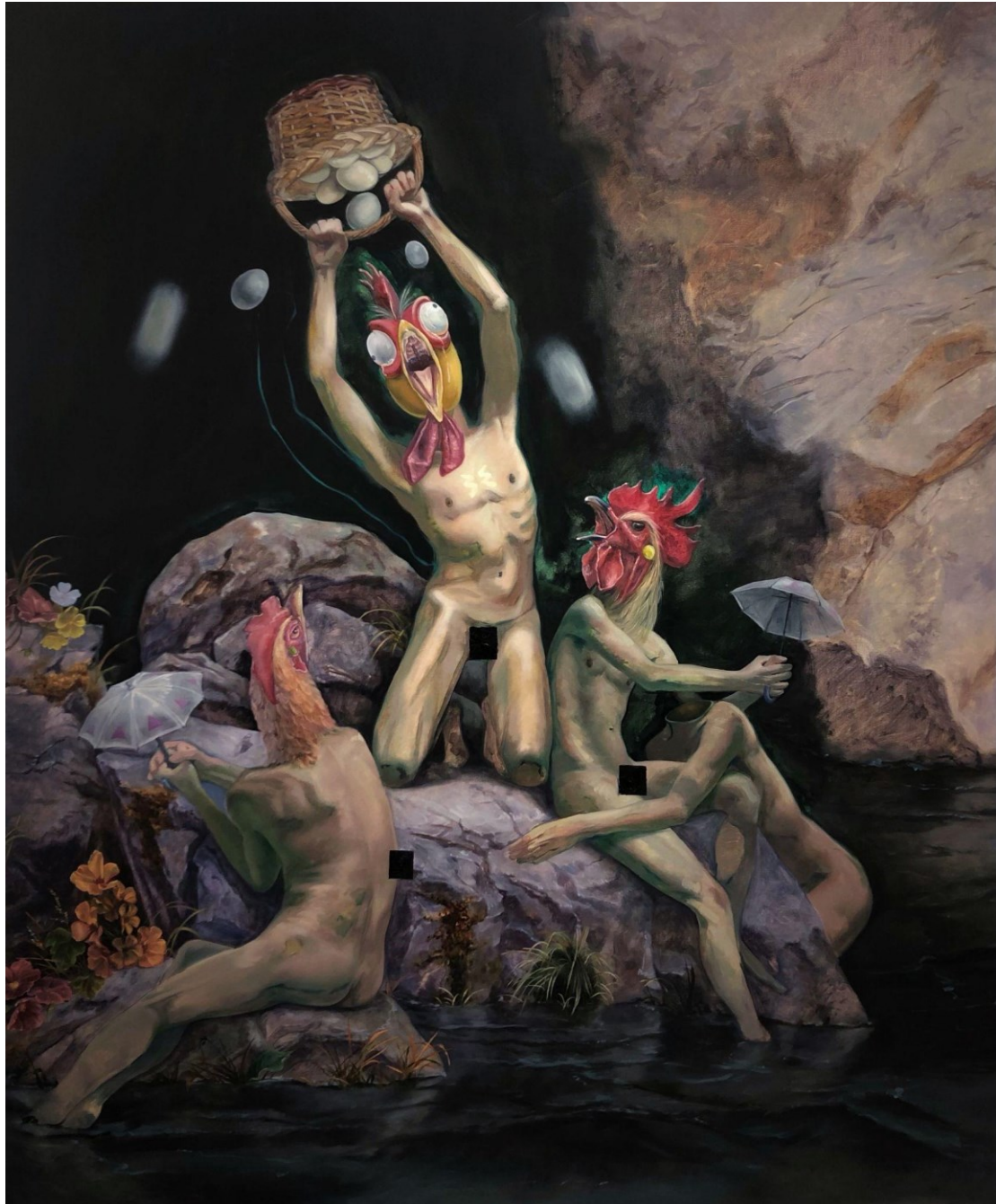


Figure 11. Tony Guo, *The Shape of Our Scar*, 2021, oil on canvas, 1200x1450mm.

2.2 / The Pantomime

American art historian Michael Fried's analysis of eighteenth-century French paintings in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* aligns with my methods that enable painted bodies to sustain a sense of theatricality.³² In discussing the relationship between a painting and its beholder, Fried provides resourceful evidence from painters such as Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin and Joseph-Marie Vien. Their painted subjects, notably the characters, are preoccupied, with an impenetrable absorption, in the activities they engage in. Their thoughts and feelings are endorsed by the painter's "persuasive representation of a particular state."³³ The viewers, too, are absorbed in the psychological and emotional state within the painting's narrative via the identifiable, humanistic narratives. For example, Fried discusses Chardin's depiction of playful amusements in *The Soap Bubble* and *The Game of Knucklebones* (see Figures 12 and 13), which show distinctly absorbed characters.³⁴ They exhibit explicit obliviousness to the viewers both in and outside of the painting. A state of concentration is integral to evoking the impenetrable absorption of the character and, by extension, instils a psychological sense of loneliness or rejection.

³² Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1980).

³³ *Ibid*, 10.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 46.



Figure 12. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Soap Bubble*, 1733, oil on canvas, 930x745mm.

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Figure 13. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Game of Knucklebones*, 1734, oil on canvas, 820x655mm.

These character's absorbed condition suggests a theatrical convention—the *fourth wall*.³⁵ Thinking of the narrative existing on a three-wall stage, this fourth wall establishes an inviolable separation between the performers on the stage and the viewers watching them. The characters on the stage must act as if the viewers are not there, as if they are unaware of anything outside of their absorbing situations.

Employing this theatrical convention, American painter Sasha Gordon paints multiple versions of herself in a neon-infused world, engaging in staged, leisurely activities. She reflects on her childhood memories growing up as a biracial Asian woman in Westchester County, New York.³⁶ Her figures are painted with a highly unnaturalistic colour palette. By painting the same bodies, Gordon's work makes me think about the multiplicity of a marginalised identity. As a queer person of colour, it is inevitable that different traits of self-presentation need to be performed to fit into different social contexts. Gordon, as the painter, divides herself into the painted bodies, which are imbued with the lived experiences of the different parts of herself that have performed in order to adapt to a heteronormalised society. In her painting *Campfire* (see Figure 14), the vibrant setting coexists with a psychological crisis conveyed through the corpse-like characters. They engage in outdoor activities with exaggerated expressions, conveying a sense of hysteria.

³⁵ Benston, "Framing and Being Framed by Art," 349.

³⁶ Harley Wong, "Sasha Gordon's Perturbing Paintings of Recreation," *Art in America* (June 2021). <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/sasha-gordon-perturbing-paintings-1234595010/>

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Figure 14. Sasha Gordon, *Campfire*, 2021, oil on canvas, 1600x2838mm.

In *The Puddle* (see Figure 15), I developed methods that utilise representational narrative to capture mythical content: nine figures, all possessing the same body but with sheep heads and elephant genitals, inhabit an empty landscape. Like Sisyphus, my characters are trapped in their situations, echoing a state of dilemma that is inseparable from my lived, queer experience.

The characters are absorbed in their own strange and playful missions around a purple puddle, under a simulated cloud and a cartoonish lightning bolt. There is a mismatching cause-and-effect: if the cloud is the cause, then these characters are acting out the effect, indulging in activities from the water puddle under the cloud, such as fishing or expelling water, which then, in turn, breeds the growth of grass and attracts preying birds.

Unlike Chardin's representation of realistic, human, trivial activities, my characters in *The Puddle* are immediately unrealistic. I question how the dissociative, absurd activities in which the characters are absorbed evokes empathy for a lived queer experience. Their absorption is veiled under an animalistic essence in the surrounding bodies. They hunch down and crawl in a manner as creaturely as their anthropomorphic animal—rather than human—heads. Activating the fourth wall, these characters are presented solely on the painted stage, unaware of anything outside of their absorbing activities. I emphasise this separation by creating a scale that encapsulates the scene, where central subjects are framed within the canvas. Additionally, the intentional placement of a front row of plants imitates the theatrical set-up of a stage—they are props of the scene, giving a stage to the characters.



Figure 15. Tony Guo, *The Puddle*, 2021-22, oil on canvas, 1800x2700mm.

This painting is intended as an allegory of the closet; the sheep-morphing characters signal the opaque wall of the closet that prevents queer bodies from human legitimacy. The veil, as portrayed via the animal heads, expresses a terror of a silenced condition while also alluding to the untameable nature of their identities. The preying birds in the background, their hunting instincts and their indifferent appearance, reveal a human struggle, which aligns with my closeted queer experience that is imbued with a perpetual passivity. In this position, I present the liberation of repressed desire via the primal nature of the animalistic essences of the painting. The blindfolded central characters are portrayed with human facial features, which signals a rebellion against that opaque wall but is yet to demystify what is ahead. The mirroring of my body projects a deeply personal consciousness—the fears, conflicts, vulnerability, disquiet and isolation attached to my queerness. With empathy, I offer this connection to other queer bodies.

Bodily expression and gesture are important devices in my project to initiate a queer, Absurdist, painterly language. I pay close attention to the subtleties of body movements when painting bodies, for example, clenching feet, tilting hips, straining hands and so on. These details reveal a psychological tension, a sense of fear, uncertainty or even hysteria that corresponds to the dismissive positioning of queer bodies. A key question of this research concerns ways to convey human emotions that are present in my queerness via the painted body. I draw influence from Western classical painters such as Nicolas Poussin. Referencing classical antiquity and biblical fables, Poussin creates large scale paintings that depict scenes occupied with a dynamic human presence. The tender, lyrical rendering of the body in *Bacchanalian Before a Statue of Pan* (see Figure 16) softens the voluptuous energy of the scene. The expressive gestures and holding hands are complicit in accentuating the vibrant festivity that these bodies are indulged in; the bodies within the composition suggest a sense of depth in space. This space connects the presented figures across the two-dimensional canvas

so that the group of bodies in the painting is treated as one figure tumbling across the scene. I am interested in Poussin's exaggerated, painted bodily gesture, which informs my project's exploration of developing the painted form of a feminised, queer, male body.

In reference to various Western classical painting tropes, my painting methods focus on representing the self-referential body—the central character of my painted stage. In the same way that this body is emblematic of a fluid spectrum between human-animal and masculine-feminine, the next chapter experiments with how the materiality of oil paint can also establish a fluid spectrum that transgresses the boundaries between representation and abstraction.



Figure 16. Nicholas Poussin, *Bacchanalian Before of Statue of Pan*, 1633, oil on canvas, 980x1428mm.



Figure 17 - 20. Details of *The Puddle*.



Figure 21. Tony Guo, *Leak*, 2021, oil on canvas, 550x950mm.

Glimmer

*Because the sunset, like survival, exists only on the verge of its own disappearing. To be gorgeous you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted.*³⁷

Due to the unforeseen disruptions of the Covid-19 lockdown in Tāmaki Makaurau in August 2021, I was unable to work on unfinished paintings. Like many, my daily life was filled with an unprecedented sense of loneliness, disjointedness and existential crisis. Painting helped me conquer these emotional difficulties. As I transitioned to working on smaller-sized canvases and therefore surfaces, I became more attentive to every brushstroke. During this process, I observed how the materiality of paint itself is a powerful medium that can evoke affects and sensations. The physical processes of layering opaque and transparent paint, smudging, erasing, tracing and glazing create narratives that bypass pictorial representation. Instead of painting the subject's form in a manner that mimics its naturalistic appearance, I allowed the paint to interact with the surface to suggest figuration amid abstract lines, shapes, colours and spaces. This chapter examines how my developing painting methods loosen pictorial representation to accommodate an Absurdist, queer, emotional landscape by responding to the lyricism of oil paint rather than portraying the subject's naturalistic form. British painter Francis Bacon's distorted bodies are explored in this chapter as a relevant motif of queer trauma. Immersed in a continual struggle between his homosexuality and the homophobic, devastating post-WWII social context of twentieth-century England, Bacon's paintings are infiltrated with a strong sense of existential threat. His idiosyncratic gestures and animated scenes are often metaphorical of a psychological anguish, but they also do the opposite by liberating that anguish.³⁸

³⁷ Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (New York: Random House, 2019), 238.

³⁸ Armin Zweite, Introduction to *Francis Bacon: The Violence of the Real*, ed. Armin Zweite (London: Thames Hudson, 2006), 22.



Figure 22. Tony Guo, *Stars*, 2021, oil on linen, 450x600mm.

3.1 / Skin, Surface, Opacity

Stars (see Figure 22) was painted in the first month of the 2021 lockdown. By showing a recognisably human face, I took a spontaneous step closer to the conventional notion of self-portraiture. The treatment of skin textures becomes reciprocal to the substrate that holds the paint. I explored how paint can transcend representation and become an emotional gesture that accommodates my project's queer, Absurdist methodology. While suggesting a figure, instead of depicting a rendered mimetic representation of the subject's naturalistic form, I am interested in treating the painting as a composite of mark-making, which holds a vast field of affects. Thus, any resulting narrative derives from the play of gesture, texture, colour, and shape, which have been constructed from a spontaneous impulse. The painted representation becomes less representational and makes visible a sensory phenomenon.

While putting down these painted marks, I questioned whether painting could become a cradling medium that holds together a fragment of my experience—immortalising impermanent moments of life translated via my painted gestures. In French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion's book *Crossing of the Visible*, he writes, "in truth, one is restricted to what one can see and where one can go. And this is certainly why philosophy cannot refrain from finding itself, when it comes to painting, permanently."³⁹ Each brushstroke responds to the impermanence of a specific moment, followed by the next arbitrary one. The painting becomes a medium that bridges and records these impermanent moments of life into a permanent presence on the canvas. For example, the colouring of the skin is attributed to abstract qualities as it undergoes continual, deliberate transformations in response to the malleable nature of emotions.

Responding to oil paint as an act of feeling, I ask myself a series of instinctive questions: does that sharp green line down the neck instil a sense of violence by its chromatic resemblance to a corpse? Does the flat

³⁹ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2004), 2.

red shape on the chest under the arm suggest the appearance of a piece of cooked bacon? Is it gruesome? Does the tender curvature of the torso convey a sense of comfort? Does the person want to engage with me, to exchange love and hope? These questions attribute an impermanent emotional phenomenality to the physicality of paint, where the painting generates affective narratives such as frailty and decay.

With this active engagement with the materiality of oil paint, I explore how the canvas texture can complement the aesthetic and philosophical qualities of the painted skin. In some areas, I leave the underpainting visible to reveal the raw state of the canvas texture. When painting the body, I am practically only depicting the skin on a two-dimensional surface to suggest the body's form and volume. By leaving the under layers of the painting visible, the painting is suggestive of the underlayer of the body—its flesh. There is a reciprocal gesture between the surface and the subject matter; the canvas seeks to imitate and capture the expressiveness of the skin. This gesture is achieved by utilising oil paint's varying levels of opacity. Connecting with Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant's call for a "right to opacity"⁴⁰ as a socio-political rebellion against colonial violence, I position the opaqueness and transparency of oil paint as a philosophical connotation to the unknowability and impenetrability of a marginalised queer identity. The opaque paint on the canvas serves as a metaphorical protective veil complicit in a de-hierarchised social discourse where otherness should not have to be resolved with violence.

I further explored these ideas in *The Nutcracker* (see Figure 23); I attributed a statuary texture to flesh and hair, alluding to a more pronounced sense of opacity via the painted stone. Reducing the tonality of colour, I experiment with how a warm, muted palette evokes a meditative emotional space. The body is entrapped, countered by a pulling-out action as an attempt to be set free. Positioned within a confining plant-pot, the painting presents the figure as a passively displayed object. Parts of shadow areas are rendered as a single block of flat shape, leaving underlayers partly visible.

⁴⁰ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189.



Figure 23. Tony Guo, *The Nutcracker*, 2021, oil on linen, 550x700mm.

French theorist Louis Marin writes, “to be at the same time present and absent is a good visual and conceptual definition of a transparent thing.”⁴¹ The textural quality of opaque and transparent layers concerns the notion of absence, which I argue is an inherent aspect of the absurd since the absurd is quite literally the absence of rational meaning. As a method, drawing is richly nuanced in its emotional expressiveness. I am interested in how the visual language of drawing as a mark-making process sustains a sense of absence. I utilise drawing as a preliminary process for larger oil paintings. I am particularly drawn to works by German printmaker Käthe Kollwitz, whose etchings engage with the emotions of the working class, affected by industrialisation, poverty, and WWI. Kollwitz charts unprecedented honesty and realism in her subject matter. For example, *Woman with Dead Child* (see Figure 24) depicts a mourning mother, modelled by Kollwitz herself. She appears almost animalistic, desperately grabbing onto her son, foreshadowing his tragic death at war. The mother’s ambiguous face reflects Kollwitz’s painful despair, unable to shelter her young one. Almost blended into the child’s shoulder through her powerful pictorial strategies, her body contorts uncomfortably to clutch the child as if she is calling him back to life.⁴² The scattered lines trace a lived tragic experience as they signal a desire to weave together that which is fated to fall apart.

⁴¹ Louis Marin, *Opacity and Transparence in Pictorial Representation*, 1991, 57.

http://www.louismarin.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/39/2019/05/Est_compressed.pdf

⁴² Jay A. Clark, “Käthe Kollwitz and the Face of Grief,” *Art in Print*, vol. 5, no. 5 (2016): 26.



Figure 24. Kathe Kollwitz, *Woman with Dead Child*, 1903, etching, drypoint, sandpaper and soft-ground on paper, 403x470mm.



Figure 25. Tony Guo, *Portrait Study*, 2022,
graphite on paper, 210x297mm.



Figure 26. Tony Guo, *The Pipe (Study)*, 2022,
graphite on paper, 150x180mm.

3.2 / Form, Transform, Deform

The fluidity of paint opens the potential to reinvent pictorial forms. Francis Bacon's oeuvre challenges pictorial representation by reinventing the human form. Bacon's paintings may be viewed as a psychological reaction to the trauma of war and his repressed homosexuality. Similar to Camus' Absurdism, Bacon's painted bodies express an existential insecurity, a nihilist psychic quality that denies any logical derivative of meaning, which holds relevance to my project's construction of a queer, Absurdist language.

Bacon's paintings contain depictions of twisted bodies combining human and animal features; the vibrant presence of paint imitating flesh; eroticism tinged with violence—I can almost hear the bodies in Bacon's paintings scream. They are horrifying yet enchanting and utterly irresistible. *Head I* and *Head II* (see Figures 27 and 28) depict a soft, emerging form that is suggestive of an animal-human hybrid. Disjunctive organs accentuate a sense of organic pathology; combined with a muted dark palette, these paintings scream terror. Bacon's loose brushwork further abstracts the facial form, merging its edges into the background. This leads me to think of the idea of rejected hierarchies, as the order of background and foreground are rendered chaotically. German art historian Armin Zweite writes that "the human being as a social creature, as a person, as an intellectual power and character is reduced in Bacon's oeuvre to vital forces and instincts, or to a fleshy substance that oscillates between form and formlessness."⁴³ The Baconian human body is often reduced to a deformed, creaturely existence through depictions of biomorphic figures, dissolving shapes and smudged paint. Bacon reassesses the conventions of realism outside of an accurate representation of the subject matter, and he concentrates on sensations through abstracted forms and the physicality of paint. The representational condition of the painted body does not get fulfilled in Bacon's paintings. In an interview, Bacon states, "you must distort to

⁴³ Zweite, Introduction to *Francis Bacon*, 18.

transform what is called appearance into image."⁴⁴ My project considers the distortion of form and space as a pertinent method to explore how the abstracted qualities of the representational body capture the transitory space that reflects my lived queer experience between a fragile existence and a violent projection of repressed desires.⁴⁵



Figure 27. Francis Bacon, *Head I*, 1948, oil on canvas, 1003x740mm.



Figure 28. Francis Bacon, *Head II*, 1949, oil on canvas, 850x650mm.

⁴⁴ Hugh M. Davies and Sally Yard, *Francis Bacon*, (New York: Abbeville, 1986), 41.

⁴⁵ For an in-depth discussion on the philosophical qualities of Bacon's oeuvre, see French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).

In *The Pipe* (see Figure 29), on top of a brief suggestion of an Absurdist narrative, I allow the act of the painting—the diagrammatic construction of marks, shapes, textures and colours—to deform the subject matter and create spontaneous narratives. Via these methods, I notice how the painting activates an evolving potential where surprising things happen beyond my intention. For example, the background is a collage of several shades of Cerulean blue, suggesting the impression of a sky. With improvisation, the result is led by a process of instinctive discovery of recognisable forms by an arbitrary impulse. This discovery is a response to the unknown. When vision is confronted with an unknowable stratum of information, the mind generates plausible associations to memories that could make sense of the mystery.⁴⁶ In this blue background, I can almost see a vague form of an elephant emerging on top of the central character's head. I am interested in how the arbitrary, free flow of imagined forms parallels a non-conforming status that is queerness, that is the middle space between binaries. As for the characters, the painting does not depict bodies but rather body-like organic forms. They merge into one another as much as blocks of colour merge into adjoined planes. In *The Pipe*, the fluidity of the painted forms and paint itself add a quality of movement, allowing the image to reside in an intermediate stage of a being. Having the objects collide out of the edge of the canvas, I can almost see a water pipe pumping through the canvas from left to right, where the painted forms allow the fluid material to flow and leak. Metaphorically, what is not queer about having a pipe pumping liquid through my body?

⁴⁶ Michael Greaves, "Praxis, Memory, Things and the Nearby: Painting Representation," *Scope: (Art & Design)*, 13, (2017): 12.



Figure 29. Tony Guo, *The Pipe*, 2022, oil on canvas, 1000x1200mm.

Conclusion

despite my desire to share how grateful I am to be in love with a man and equally, how ashamed I am to be in love with a man. This project has sought to convey this perpetual paradox that imbues my identity.

To live is a constant process of reimagining memories. At the core of my painting practice is a curiosity to transform these experiences in beautiful and interesting ways. This project has explored how to develop a queer, Absurdist painting language. Absurdism—with its rejection of binary ways of thinking—informs my research's deconstructive methodology, which challenges a twofold positioning of sexuality. Influenced by Absurdist cinema and theatre, I have utilised devices such as setting, characters and mismatching contexts to manifest an absurd atmosphere in representational painting. The painted characters—and by association my body—is emblematic of an underrepresented, Asian, queer subjectivity. When placed on a painted stage, these characters' absorbed qualities elicit a theatrical relationship with viewers.

Throughout this project, my methods have shifted significantly as I let myself be immersed in the play of paint, to feel each action, each mark, each strange little creation from my body to the canvas. Through these moments, I feel a sense of comfort in the sharp edges of reality.

Considering an exhibition layout, I prioritised three major works from this project—*The Puddle*, *Stars* and *The Pipe*. These works, when brought together, adhere to a visual spectrum from representational to abstract qualities of painting, which respond to a non-fixated, fluid space. This space, in painting, is presented by the queer, Absurdist painting language explored in my project. Thinking through a theatrical lens, I wish to convey an anthological flow in the selected body of work. Each painting, like an episode, depicts a self-contained narrative. These narratives are, in common, steeped in juxtapositions between a range of binaries, giving stage to a queer allegory.

Installation and Exhibition

St Paul Street Gallery Three, AUT
9 – 12 July 2022



Figure 30. Exhibition View, St Paul Street Gallery Three.



Figure 31. Exhibition View #2, St Paul Street Gallery Three.



Figure 32. Exhibition View of *The Puddle*, St Paul Street Gallery Three.



Figure 33. Exhibition View #3, St Paul Street Gallery Three.



Figure 34. Exhibition View #4, St Paul Street Gallery Three.



Figure 35. Tony Guo, *Pests*, 2022, oil on canvas, 850x850mm.

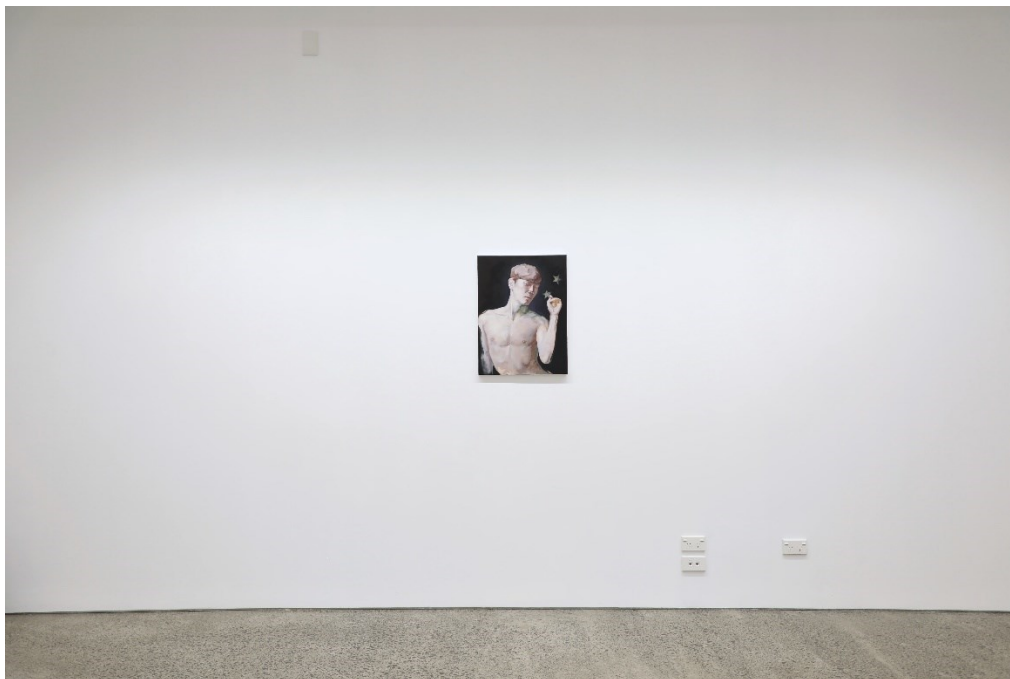


Figure 36. Exhibition View of *Stars*, St Paul Street Gallery Three.

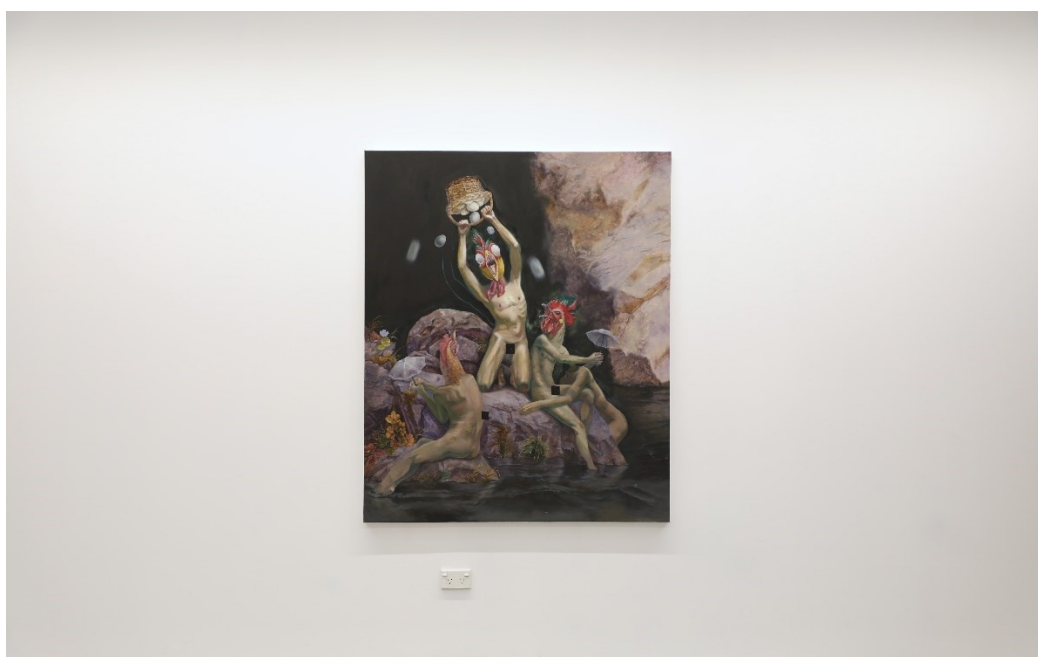


Figure 37. Exhibition View of *The Shape of Our Scar*.

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