

LANDSCAPE IS MY SIR:
PERFORMING A CONFLUENCE OF PERVERSITY, NATURE AND KITSCH

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A thesis/project submitted
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

ART

Department of Art
University of Lethbridge
LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA, CANADA

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Date of Defence: May 27th, 2019

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For “Megan,” who is becoming.

Abstract

This body of work and research aims to construct a cosmology of desire and perversity, which functions to unsettle existing narratives of power and landscape. A composite immersive experience built of performances, installations, videos and weavings, the work performs a collision of rural, colonial and queer imaginaries. Through this coupling of imaginaries, I unpack ideas of land and gender, western expansion and the imaging of colonially occupied territory. The work creates new visual languages with which to better comprehend cultural hybridity and the queering and unsettling of rural cultural paradigms. Using built and found sites, the work introduces a performance persona, Chico California, a homosexual leatherman seeking to engage in erotic relationships with space, site and inanimate objects. Chico California, a mysterious semi-feral misanthrope, makes his provocative, problematic and un-procreative advances on Nature and Landscape discoverable, presenting the onlooker with opportunities to encounter him in his habits of desire.

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks to the Siksika, Piikani, Stoney Nakoda, Tsuut'ina and Kainai First Nations on whose traditional territory I have had the great privilege to be a guest and student. Thank you to Jackson 2Bears, who has given generously of his time and energy to teach me how to survive and thrive as an artist, scholar and interloper in academia, to Annie Martin for enduring me asking her “But how is the weaving connected?” over and over until I finally figured it out – maybe? – and to Kim Mair for letting me walk around her Post-modernism classroom in handcuffs during a lecture on Foucault. Thank you to Adrian Stimson for supporting my work – what an honor! Thanks to Jarrett, Niall, Brent and Mary Anne for all their generous help in the shop, with particular gratitude to Mary Anne who has taught me everything I know about making textiles. Sorry, I must lump the rest of you together for the sake of space and time: thank you to the entire Art Department for welcoming me in! And to the fine members of other departments: New Media, Women & Gender Studies, Library Info and History. Thanks to my cohort, JP, Tyler, Other Tyler, Michelle, Nicole and Tara for listening to my gay drama for hours. Thanks to Asa for deep lessons in desire, distance and ephemerality. Thanks to the local Grindr community – you know who you are. Megan, thank you for really getting this work, and for being furious when Chico California tried to be accessible. Thank you to this land and all its collective entities for “letting” me make *so* many assumptions about non-human subjectivities. Thank you to my mother, Norma Alicia, for her great love, and to my Abuelita for the same, to my father simply for that, and to my sisters, who are there. And finally, thank you to Luke, who is my everything, without whom I am nothing.

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After all, love, too, is a place.
– Cecilia Martinez-Gil

1. Introduction

As I write the first draft of this paper, Chico, California, the place not the persona, stands in the shadow of an immense wildfire. The fire has been burning for three days, roaring through mountain communities, engulfing the entire town of Paradise, charging down the valley to the prairie Chico occupies. As a child, when we weren't living in Mexico we were living in this forest, a specific area named Concow after the Konkow Maidu whose traditional territory it is.

The Camp Fire started only 12.5 km as the crow flies from the site of my childhood home, the only place that ever felt like home to me until quite recently. And while I've had broken ties to that place for most of my adult life, my spouse and partner of eight years, Luke, is not wrong when they say to me, "That land was your third parent." It was. The long hours I spent playing alone in the woods were rich with a constant influx of tacit and sensory information, knowledge I'd store in my cells that has shaped how I relate to all spaces, objects, materials and creatures. Most importantly, that land was not only a parent but my first lover, and in my horny pre-pubescence I would become aroused stroking the smooth burnt red bark of a particular madrone before humping a knot in its forward leaning trunk. To understand Chico California it is important to understand that I grew up immersed in a feral, private theater of my own desire whose major players were myself and that 17 acres of wooded land, and no one else.

This body of work unfolds on Treaty 7 territory, traditional territory of the Blackfoot Confederacy, the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations, the Tsuut'ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda. Some Blackfoot names for this area which I've heard include (though surely aren't limited to) Aksiiksahko (Steep Banks), Asinaawaiitomottsawa (Where We Slaughtered the Crees) and Sikoohkotok (Black Rocks). This territory attracted me because it felt at once uncannily familiar and profoundly different from other places I have lived in. The prairies and river valleys are not entirely unlike those found in the foothills around Chico, California. Older urban spaces in Southern Alberta share that 'western flavor' with rural Northern Californian towns: it is unclear what is historical remnant and what is a simulacral¹ or themed effort to reaffirm a constructed identity of being part of The West. Lethbridge is at the center of many tensions and during my first two semesters I became very interested in the many power dynamics at work: the tension between industry and people, between Indigenous, settler and newcomer communities, between the working and academic classes. I spent a good deal of my first year engaging with these questions: Why am I here? What am I doing here? What do you do if you don't belong in a place or *to* a place?

My cultural and racial background is that of a Mestizx² Mexican who's family has had a power-complicated diasporic relationship to place, territory and land for many generations. And while my parents worked very hard to belong to Aztlan, a "homeland" comprised of the political gesture of cultural reclamation of lands sold to the US by

¹ I am here referencing Jean Baudrillard's idea of simulacra, the processes by which a simulation becomes more real than the actual thing, the glorified myth of the Wild West overwriting the historical realities of these towns. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1981.

² *Mestizx* being the gender neutral contemporary iteration of *mestizo*.

Mexico³ (a political gesture that I have contention with as it elides the complexities of Indigenous/Spanish relations prior to the Mexican Cession,) I personally find it far more interesting to *unbelong*. In a time when “Mexicans” are being declared to belong and not belong in any number of places, it is difficult to *want* to belong anywhere.

My question of belonging extends to gender as well. As a transman who spent the first 25 years of his life living as a girl then a woman – albeit a very masculine one – I have “belonged” to a complexity of genders. The process of becoming that transness engenders is a complex negotiation of rejection, re-fabrication and dealignment of/with notions of masculinity and femininity. This is generally understood as the process of ‘becoming trans.’ But far less discussed is how being trans is also a renegotiation with physical space, both due to physical changes a body undergoes during transition *and* social changes that occur when the trans body and self is newly perceived. Belonging must be reassessed by the trans self on a geographic level, a process informed by not only philosophical consideration but also geo-political ones.⁴ This trans perspective, though not as heavily discussed in this paper, is very relevant to the larger work, and we may read into it complex notions of not only belonging but also of becoming.

Release *belonging* from its charge of possessiveness and you are left with *longing* – ~~belonging~~ – a notion that compels me as an artist and errant, un-homed Mestizx. This ~~belonging~~ is the locus of my work, an art production research method rooted firmly in a context of desiring and wanting. I didn’t come to this approach immediately. Upon starting my MFA work I spent a semester or two floundering around with materials and

³ *Aztlan* was a conceptual territory based on various pieces of Chicano literature, such as Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands*, which formulated during the Chicano revolution of the 1980s, and while use of this concept is still widely in practice, it has begun to be questioned by contemporary Chicanx scholars. Anzaldua, *Borderlands*, 1987.

⁴ Aizura, *Mobile Subjects*, 2018.

sites, productively making an idiot of myself (which is not to say I don't still regularly and necessarily make an idiot of myself). I wanted to pay particular attention to how landscape is metabolized and my own assumptions and affective habits of regarding the area's land, sites and spaces: *the hills are so beautiful, I just want to dance in them, they look so soft, the ice is so alien to me and so blue, I want to put it my studio*. After some overly precious engagements, I tried interrupting these clichés of land/person interaction through a series of video collages which applied humorous and aesthetically crass conventions of YouTube based glitch art to footage I'd gathered in the field. This proved fruitful as the introduction of crassness allowed for the introduction of the visceral, bodily and unromantic into the work, which would set the groundwork for engaging with notions of the animal and of perversity. This manifested as material and movement driven investigations of sites: eating dirt, smashing ice on my head, stacking, skipping and looking at rocks. These studio investigations (which frequently occurred outside of the studio, obviously) shifted into what would become Chico California's persona once I began introducing the image of the leather daddy. This introduction of leather daddy iconography came from an intuitive impulse, a very personal desire to bring together the underworld of fantasy and outdoors, the exterior coexisting with the interior.

Getting to know this area has required a particular attention to people, interactions, politics, histories and objects that goes beyond attending talks, reading signage, hearing out conflicting discourses and visiting museums and historic sites. In this paper I will go into my use of thrift stores as historical, material and relational

archives in which I have spent a huge amount of hours, listening, touching, absorbing and reading. But how to “connect” to a place beyond its people and the histories?

Generally, I haven’t used the language of *mapping* in this work. The act of mapping territory presents a problematic and complex relationship to land where illumination of the unknown – and I use the word “illumination” purposefully to point to a particular notion of empirically driven “enlightenment” – fixes land in a power relationship with the mapper where land is an exotic body being assessed for commodification and homogenous access. But just because I am not using that language does not mean there is not the possibility of some unconscious colonial impulse⁵ in me, even while my work very purposefully is engaging with a performance of eroticized power struggles between person and land. So how does one *un-map* a territory? How can one orient oneself in an unfamiliar space without generating loaded texts or dangerous documents that machine land into Cartesian definitions?

Artists engage with place in so many different ways, through activism, community engagement, or by replicating its semblances in photographs, prints, etc. But I have not felt particularly drawn to these ways of engaging with this place, and the lack of feeling drawn-to led to the sense of loneliness and frustration that prompted the initial video performance pieces that would grow into *Landscape is My Sir*. It could be said that in a fit of desperation I may have decided that the most interesting and authentic way for me to make a personal connection to this unfamiliar territory was to openly acknowledge my own bodily attraction to this place and engage it sexually. My choice to engage with that sense of arousal and desire that drives the impulse to go outside, to move through

⁵ This impulse to map is in itself important and compelling to examine and consider alongside the impulse to dress in a leather uniform, or the impulse to tie someone up, or the impulse to take a perfect photograph of a landscape to hold in our photo roll.

what we identify as a “nature”-y space, to take pictures of vistas, is a choice to acknowledge the seed of want that leads to many troubling relationships to nature and landscape.

To decide to have sex with a place may seem unseemly and disrespectful, a colonial act of conquering. In many ways it is. For while there is real love in Chico California’s efforts to pleasure the land, sex rarely escapes implications of power. In this project I wish to engage openly with sexualized gestures of power, with the colonial impulse to conquer land through a particular kind of use and knowing. Chico California *deliberately gives a corporeal body to the horror fantasy of the colonizer*. He embodies the settler who manhandles the land for his own purposes. And in this way, I as the artist, must also acknowledge, examine and interrogate, and, at times, deliberately amplify and make visible, my own role as user of land, as one who embodies the colonial impulse, the conqueror’s compulsion.

Additionally, the act of sexing land brings us back to processes of queering: in the world of gay relationships to get to know someone by having sex with them is quite normal. Queer identities develop through highly relational systems of interaction, mirroring and mimicry, where one often learns to understand their own body through understanding the body of their sexual partners and vice versa. Furthermore, to return to the inherent transness of this work, we might again consider that aforementioned necessary reorientation of the body to space that must occur as part of *becoming*. We might specify that reorientation as being a necessarily sexualized one. We might call this a process of *becoming*, a further queering of Deleuze & Guattari’s ideas of becoming

animal and intense.⁶ It's important to understand the triple entendre of *becoming* as it is at once a transformational process, a locational process and a dirty joke. One *becomes*, one *cums* and one *comes to* a place, a person, a change, and here all three of these phenomena mingle together as part of a single multiplicitous experience. This is *becoming*.⁷

⁶ Deleuze & Guattari discuss sex, animalness and fetishism as creating liminal spaces where the intent is not to precisely become a particular existing entity but rather becoming something else altogether. Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987.

⁷ "How *becoming*!"

2. Methodologies & Materials

2.1 All My Relations: Strategies in Critical Auto-Biography

As suggested in the introduction, this support paper draws the bulk of its research from self-originated investigations. This process of self-examination is important to my own art research as it allows for an ethical and far more interesting making vulnerable of self in relationship to the work and context for the work. It is only through an honest – one hopes – self-representation that complex considerations of power and agency to arise. This strategy follows in various traditions of arts research and alternatives to institutional conventions of scholarship. Knowledge production strategies used by feminist artists, artist of color and queer artists have in various, intersecting ways drawn from auto-biography and auto-ethnography.

Landscape is My Sir represents a body of work which is highly relational: it is an investigation of what happens when human-generated choreographies of relating, sexual and otherwise, are applied to the non-human. This is a fundamentally queer undertaking, and requires, in developing an appropriate methodology, a close consideration of homosexual and homosocial intimacies, which may then be perverted by being applied to non-human entities such as “a landscape” or “a place.” In the process of this course of study I have found myself paying an unusual amount of attention to my personal relationships with people in my life, family, friends, colleagues, my spouse, my lovers, finding there to be a remarkable feedback loop between my art practice and my personal life. The idea that *the personal is political* has roots in second wave feminist art practice, and it is my intent to queer and indigenize this notion for the purposes of creating a relational methodology with which to contextualize my research. Relationship to land is

also personal and highly political, and to understand the interconnected webs of relating that occur between space, place and the individual humans in my life is to catch a glimpse of a comprehensive methodology that could help me understand . . . well, just about anything.

Scholar of Indigenous philosophy and science Dr. Leroy Little Bear discusses the notion of *all my relations*, a phrase I recognize from my own life as something said during ceremonies and sweat lodges I attended as a kid after songs are sung, after words have been said, offerings given or when the lodge door has been opened after a sweat. Little Bear states that invoking *all my relations* is an acknowledgment of relational ties between all beings extending well beyond human relations to other entities.⁸ This was a new conceptualization of *all my relations* for me, as I thought it was specifically a reference to human ancestors. To use *all my relations* as Little Bear uses it not only releases the concept from being strictly in reference to humans but also releases it from temporal fixity. A non-anthropocentric a-temporal pointing to relation allows it to exist in the past, present and future, and allows for important reworkings of post-colonial relationships to the non-human.

I am excited to encounter this different understanding of *all my relations* as it allows me to connect something from my own tenuous and problematic connection to Indigeneity to my current work. But I still find it difficult to full integrate the idea. Having gone through various cycles of learning, rejection and re-embracing in my various identities, as mentioned in the introduction, I am finally, *finally* coming to accept

⁸ I attended a lecture where Dr. Little Bear discussed “jagged world views colliding” and notions of *all my relations*, the web of relationships that connect all entities or what he calls “relational networks.” He argued against the idea of inanimate objects, and pushed for understanding location-based philosophies, and the absurdity of using perspectives that have not been specifically created for a location to understand that location. Little Bear, 2019.

that my best bet is to simply become comfortable being uncomfortable with the never-ending process of self-locating. I cannot deny that I carry in me an old, deep anger and sense of rejection and invisibility from the time I was a young person attending Chicano cultural events and pan-Indigenous gatherings where heteronormative and gender-normative language and gendered segregations were a constant, painful reminder that my sexuality and gender expression were not congruent with the ideal of “tradition” and “the old ways” that the spiritual and community leaders were encouraging us to reclaim.

Homophobia within Indigenous communities remains frighteningly palpable, the reasons for this being complex and heavily wrapped up in histories of colonialism, religion and institutional power. From the missions of Mexico, Latin American and the American Southwest to the residential school systems that presided over the United States and Canada, the removal of children from their homes to forcibly participate in Christian indoctrination created a foundation for generations of homophobic, heteronormative and patriarchal beliefs and values in Indigenous communities throughout the continent. Not only were there overt religion-based teachings that labeled Two-Spirit and other Aboriginal sexualities, identities and ways of being as morally offensive punishable acts, but the very tool of exerting power over the Indigenous body often appeared – and continues to appear, for example, in the case of missing and murdered Indigenous women – as acts of sexualized violence, aggression and domination. And while hard-fought effort has gone into reclaiming Aboriginal spiritual practices, philosophical systems of knowledge, ethics and values that shaped Indigenous life before contact, it has been a slower process to understand how to decolonize sexuality and gender precisely because of its intimate, personal nature.

Queer and *queerness* harbours its own power-related complexities, and I have gone through similar processes of criticism and rejection with queerness as a political identity, a system of thought and a social world. *Queer* as a notion and field of study is ballasted by institutional structures whose originating voices were and continue to be primarily non-Indigenous and mostly white, and can be in its own way a homogenizing colonial force. Finding myself at the edges of Indigenous philosophical discourse after five or so years of being away from it – I had a slight return during my undergraduate studies within a politically updated Chicana context that lasted only a few years before I became frustrated with it as well – I am tasked once again with the question of the queering of post-colonial understandings of Indigeneity: how can *all my relations* be queered? In the following section I will discuss how I have used these ideas of relating and relations through my own gay, trans experience.

2.2 Tacit Learning & Cruising

Scholars of material thinking and new materialisms Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt have collaborated on multiple texts dedicated to finding language for what artists identify as research. In *Practice as Research: Context, Method, Knowledge*, Barrett and Bolt emphasize the importance of what they call in their respective essays *tacit learning*, a process of research which requires the engagement of the body, the senses and repeated material investigations. According to these methodologies, the artist's data is that which is learned by exposing the artist's senses repeatedly to the same material, site, choreography and so forth. But given the expansive nature of *Landscape is My Sir*, the consideration of materials is a complex one. This body of work is comprised of multiple

mediums and materials: installation, performance, video, textile. Found objects, made objects, altered objects.

About a year into my research, I decided that while Chico California might not like to engage sexually with people, I did, and that I should – and longed to – immerse myself in Lethbridge’s local hook-up app culture as part of what I understood from Bolt, Barrett and other artists redefining the gathering of data. Grindr operates in interesting geographical ways. Distance indicators display alongside users’ identifying information – which is often minimal. These indicators have a peculiar effect of mapping or territorializing the space between users. The space is not highly defined: the distance indicator only says how *far* the other user is, not precisely where they are or in which direction. (One could walk around while looking at their app and watch the indicator increase or decrease to get a sense of the general direction the user is located in. I confess to have done this; I am a pervert after all.)

What Grindr’s distance indicator is mapping is a territory of desire between desirers, between *b*elongers, between *b*ecomers. To open Grindr in a new location is to open the door to a library of desire catalogued specifically to a particular place, and requires the user to self-locate in a new context. This process of sexualized self-location is key to investigating notions of *b*elonging for it is the process by which want pins itself on a map, asks to be found and offers directions to its desirous body. It is quite a different thing to engage in flirtatious chat with a user located only 100 meters away than, say, a user located 14 kilometers away. For in that distance, however short or long it might be, there lies a country of fantasy, an ephemeral territory. Projection of want becomes an echolocation attempting to close the distance with inarticulate “hey”s and insufficient

“how’s your night going”s. As users come close and part ways, intimacy requires and accrues elasticity: one may continue chatting with a user who is located thousands of kilometers away but the urgency of it has been transformed.⁹

A curious phenomenon that seems relevant to note here, having compared user profile pictures in several distinct geographic regions, is the remarkable amount of Grindr users who utilize images of landscapes and nature as their profile pictures in Southern Alberta. Rarely a stock image, many of these photos are simply the view of the prairies out a car or truck window, perhaps a way to flag or indicate the user’s transience across space if say the user is a trucker or commutes between cities. Other pictures imply recreation or a desire for recreation in the outdoors. Perhaps it is an invitation to share an homosocial, homoerotic outdoor experience? Perhaps this is an attempt to locate oneself as a self on a social platform where anonymous or “discreet” users abound?

Most important to the work is the use of the word *looking* on Grindr. In my experience a single message that says “looking” flags or signals a desire to meet up immediately with little to no conversation ahead of the encounter. Chico California is looking and the audience is also looking. When we go for a hike we are looking, when we go to the thrift store we are looking. The ocularcentricism of this is not lost on me, and is in conversation with the idea of landscape as being a framed thing, a thing to be looked at, and not necessarily touched or smelled or tasted. But one can assume that the result of looking is finding, which is the moment of encounter where Mr. California and his audience come together.

⁹Not to say the urgency is *less*, the flavour simply changes; the distance indicator is always there at the top of the chat box reminding the users of the distance between them.

When traveling to larger cities I have used Grindr as a kind of tool for hunting: I have wandered from neighborhood to neighborhood refreshing the user list to find online users close by. I don't actually know if I am alone in this practice. It is a kind of flaneurship which requires the luxury – and feral transience – to wander through an urban space like a coyote or a deer looking for an easy snack. There is something highly locational about this practice for me, being someone who still feels himself to be adapting to urban cultures of homosexuality after having been raised in backwoods areas and small towns.

But setting my own predator-like habits of desire aside, it's probably a mistake to call the use of hook up apps *cruising*, as cruising is really something that happens in a public sphere, where as Grindr hook ups often – though not always – occur in private spaces.¹⁰ This is important to the work if only to note that there is an unfulfilled desire to engage with cruising as something that happens in a public and often un surveilled or “nature-y” liminal space (a park, a rest stop, a row of bushes). As a girl and young woman I was often told to avoid these spaces, and now, as a gay transman, I am reengaging these spaces as sites of desire and looking. I believe this affects my process of peopling these liminal, nature-y spaces with a performance persona like Chico California. For key to the success of Chico California as a performance persona is a dual out-of-place-ness. Yes, he is out of place in the way a person who is cruising is “out of place”: he loiters, he follows tentatively, he watches. He at once wishes to be found and also to remain unseen. Questions attach to him as they do to the cruiser: what is this guy doing?

¹⁰ There is an interesting side note here about who can “host” and who “can't host” on Grindr. It is my sense that being able to host grants you a kind of territorial power. Certainly it indicates socio-economic and relational factors, but there is a harder to articulate way in which the sexual encounter is coloured by who's space it is taking place in. Is Chico California incapable of hosting given that he is essentially always in his lover's spaces?

Why is he here? Why is he alone? But unlike someone who is cruising, Chico California, when dressed in full leather, is quite easily seen and quite easily identified as a pervert. In a sense this is a total misunderstanding of cruising, and what I might identify as a very trans misunderstanding of the artlessness and remove cruising suggests as a cismale-centric phenomenon and fantasy.¹¹

In this way Chico California exacerbates the potential for public lewdness, that is, for sex to be *pronounced* as lewd by virtue of being accidentally encountered and witnessed by *a human who deems it lewd*. Chico California re-releases indecency into the wild: he invites getting caught having sex in nature *with* nature without making it especially easy. Many a tran fantasizes about getting caught being trans. And so Chico California wants to be caught sexing nature. For to be caught sexing nature is to allow for the complication of all of our allegedly plutonic relationships to nature. It is to point the allegedly plutonic relationship between a jogger and a park trail, and reveal it for the erotic encounter that it is.

Despite their cultural and practical distinctions, Grindr and cruising are important as methodologies for understanding the relationship between body, sex and place in that they both represent conduits for promiscuity, for slutiness. In the following section we shall see other ways of thinking about being a slutty scholar have served me as a broad methodological approach.

¹¹ To those for whom it might not be obvious, there is an inherent difficulty for the trans person who cruises: what if you are cruised as a cisgender person and then you are discovered to be trans? Will your lover be angry? Or disappointed? How to flag who you are in such a non-verbal context?

2.3 Thrifting

Having discussed *cruising* we can apply these ideas to an understanding of *browsing* in the context of shopping at a thrift store. This larger project of getting to know a place has had a center in Lethbridge's thrift stores. Thrift stores, like public parks and natural areas, are a kind of liminal space which, though not public is attended to by lookers, a collection of people who, for various socio-economic or cultural reasons, find themselves shopping there. Thrift stores are ephemeral archives whose contents shift and renew as time passes. This renders them very accurate archives, where one can expect to find repositories of rejected and outmoded knowledge and materials. Passed fashions, outdated print and media, obsolete technologies fall in and out of circulation in these commercial centers. Clothing with the logos of closed local businesses. Discarded textbooks that refer uncritically to *savages* and *great pioneers*. Maps with the USSR. These items defy accuracy and serve as evidence of wrongness.

Consumption of objects is often framed within consumerist practices, often a negative thing. But I am interested in queering or, better still, perverting this idea of consumption with the idea of *browsing*. This consumption is sensual, an eating that is slow, methodical and relished, rather than a transaction of property or a shallow desire to own or possess.

Thrift stores differ from most archives in that they are completely unprecious (although I have been in many a store that was decidedly precious about pricing used items). The items in the thrift store archive have not undergone any rigorous efforts at preservation. The curatorial eye that has assembled and displayed these objects is not that of a trained historian or museum specialist. Thrift store staffs are often made up of

retirees, church volunteers and/or employees who might not be able to acquire employment elsewhere. Indeed the main criteria these employees use to decide if a donated item should go on the rack or go in the garbage is if it is at all possible for this item to be used again. This is after all likely the last stop for the item. (Unless the store has a bulk warehouse where items are sold by the pound or is in the practice of palleting clothing to be sold to exporters who then sell them in third world countries.) Thrift stores, then, are not especially archive-y archives: they are created through a process of rejection, items in a liminal state between being desired and being disposed of. Much like Grindr, thrift stores are archives of promise and disappointment: one arrives full of hope, attempts to procure, to connect, and is sometimes rewarded and sometimes let down.

In my method of cruising the thrift store for materials I am sifting through the archive of human desire. Here I am considering Foucault's historical *a priori* and archive.¹² But rather than using these notions to consider the discursive nature of language I am applying Foucault's idea to the discursive nature of objects and their attending potential for sensual interaction. For the thrift store serves as both an archive of physical items and an archive of cultural and political moments. In *Bad Little Books* I use texts that have been discarded (I hope) because of their politically dated content. These books contain virulently racist depictions of Indigenous people, and glorify Western expansion to a remarkable degree. (This is not to say that racism and glorification of the settler no longer exist, it's just to say that it has been codified in some new ways – though

¹² In order to get to the point where found objects become art works through a series of performative gestures that turn them from, say, being wall decorations found at a thrift store to being sexualized objects offered a selfhood, there needs to be subversion of multiple definitions that govern the original purpose and categorization of those objects. To borrow from Foucault's notion of the *a priori* of history, all the compiled histories of meaning can follow each piece of art work. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1995.

we still see plenty of the old.) But discourse also appears in the thrift store in the form of passed fashion trends, t-shirt slogans, exhausted as-seen-on-tv products and many other ways.

Thrift stores contain the detritus of yard sales, deaths in the family, Marie Kondo-inspired spring cleanings, divorces, frantic cross-country moves, children growing up and moving away. As such, they are centers of relationally charged affect. To browse a thrift store is to perversely look, touch and smell into the domesticity of others. I often marvel at the perversity of my wearing the last shirt a man bought before he died or the earrings a mother gave her daughter which the daughter did not like. It is the specific histories of these items that imbue the inanimate objects I encounter in thrift stores with personality. It is what animates their inanimateness.

In order to make this happen a certain amount of frivolity is necessary in the browsing. In my method of cruising thrift stores I may not always go with the intent of buying something. I might go simply with the intent to look, to browse, to enjoy possibility. This feedbacks to the earlier discussion of Grindr where opening the app certainly does not always result in an IRL (real life, face to face) sexual encounter. But it affords other kinds of gratification related to the enjoyment of potentiality and flirtation, as would, say, finding a pair of jeans at the thrift store that would be perfect were they one size larger. Sometimes this (lack of) gratification is very frustrating and even loneliness inducing. It shouldn't be overlooked that if Chico California is performing for us the act of looking he is also performing for us the failure to find.¹³

2.4 Interdisciplinarity, Rhizomes, Hybridity & Mestizaje

¹³ Contemporary trans essayist Andrea Long Chu writes beautifully about disappointment.

A core part of my practice as a scholar and artist is my comfort moving between mediums and disciplines. Thoughts connect from one to the next easily for me – perhaps too easily sometimes – creating rhizomic webs of meaning and understanding that span perceived chasms between ideas. My educational and professional backgrounds reflect my interest in interdisciplinarity and I have shaped my career in humanities with the intent to allow myself the flexibility to be unfixed in any particular field. My own hybrid cultural background is mirrored in this: I was raised moving between a multiplicity of cultures, languages, countries and classes. Trying to hold these cultural perspectives simultaneously or switch rapidly between them has given me the ability to grasp, integrate or just listen to unfamiliar concepts and find connections between them. It has also made me feel a little crazy – perhaps more than a little at times – as a person trying to account for his mixed *mestizx* lineage that is made up of both the colonizer and the colonized, whose body is quite literally the result of that encounter.

What I'm trying to do here is to, first, emphasize the importance of rhizomic and interdisciplinary thinking and research as it pertains to this work, and then connect it to these notions of hybridity and *mestizaje*. To work between disciplines and mediums is to make murky the distinctions between them. To engage with an identity – the *mestizx* identity – is to reckon with a complicated racial existence. Power is particularly complex here as the *mestizx* body carries *both* the privilege of being *white-ish* without being immune to the forces of racism should, depending on the individual's ability to pass in either direction, the Indigenous-ness of the individual be targeted.

All of this is deeply complex and troubling, and I intend to make it – along with close examination of my own implications in the power nexus of *mestizaje* and *mestizx*

identity – one of the main subjects of my doctoral work next year. But I wanted to touch on it for the purposes of this work in order to set the stage for Chico California, who, in his racial and cultural ambiguity, draws a particular kind of concern. Does Chico need and have permission to have these interactions with this land? From whom? Is he just the amorphous dream of absurdly gendered territories? Of a post-colonial West where irreversible intermixing has happened? He is not a native of this land. He does not belong. Does he belong anywhere? Or is he just a permanent citizen of the in-between space? Between thoughts, between disciplines, between races, between species.

2.5 Affect & Art Production

I should make a point of underscoring early in this paper that affect – feelings, as it were – are a core part of my art production and methodological process, and one I frequently take for granted when discussing this process in an academic context. This not because I don't value emotions and feeling in my work – quite the contrary! Until quite recently I had assumed all art came from some process of emotionally driven discovery, but having been exposed to artists at the crossroads of art, research and academia, I've learned that many artists begin their work from aesthetic, intellectual and political impulses. Can they even be considered “impulses”? I don't know.

A work frequently begins with an emotional impulse of desire, a fixation, a perking of the ears that takes me suddenly. This very visceral impulse then leads to research, tacit or intellectual. I would hesitate to think of this process linearly for there is an amount of reiteration, repetition and total failure necessary to my process or working. I rather think of my process as a constellation of experience, a process of connecting

specific experiences with pencil lines to illustrate a sensical whole. Indeed, the emotional impulse that originated the concept for the performance, installation or textile isn't the only point of affect that forms this constellation. It isn't enough for me to understand, conceptualize and materialize the work. I have to feel it too.

Two thirds or so into the process of generating, practicing and refining performances I realized that it was essential for me to not only pursue but to achieve a state of sexual arousal as part of the "choreography." This is not to say that I am always turned on when I perform Chico California, but to acknowledge and emphasize the importance of this kind of bodily and affective engagement with movement and action has been very important to identifying the it-ness of a work.

Consideration of the word *impulse* opens the door to considering intensity as it relates to my methodology, and relates back to the relational and personal drive behind the presentation of this work as well as the work itself. This support paper is passionate, impulsive and obsessive, as Chico California is all these things. He is after all a product of me and I, by the end of this MFA journey, will effectively be a product of him. And for this reason it is important that this paper openly discuss various emotional stages of the work as they form part of the aforementioned constellation of experience.

3. Frameworks

3.1 Definitions

Some definitions are necessary for the purposes of this paper. First, landscape, site, space and place are related but distinct terms. Place designates a specific location in geography, contextualized by particular histories, cultures, representation and identities. Space is raw material, can be filled with bodies or not, can be of any size, area and orientation. Geographer and artist, W. J. T. Mitchell, who also undertakes the work of defining place from space, says “space has connotations of abstraction and geometry, while place resonates with particularity and qualitative density.”¹⁴ But Mitchell’s sterile definitions fail to address how space and place are mapped distinctly via the body’s subjective interactions with the two. When this mapping is happening on a very intuitive and cognitive level that is an interaction happening with space, hence the seeming overuse of the term spatialization. In a sense when something is being spatialized it is simply being turned over and over in space – as one might turn an object over and over in a video game – as the spatializer attempts to understand how the concept or thing fills space.

Place does not operate like this because it is fixed in geography, and while important arguments can be made to how place exists in time and temporality it is still beholden to its own locality. Place serves as an alternative to landscape, which, as will be discussed in this paper, is a term whose discourse is bound up in histories of colonial imaging, and implies the existence of a frame that demarcates an artificially decided whole. Cultural geographer David Crouch offers a definition of landscape, saying that “the ‘stuff’ that is often substituted for what is meant by landscape tends to be more in

¹⁴ Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 2002.

terms of countryside, but it can also include broadly the assemblage of landforms, concrete shapes, fields, gutters, designed spaces, and serendipitous collections of things. Implicitly included are our own bodies that are now enlivened into the ‘landscape’” [Pg. 6 Crouch 2010.] The inclusion of the self is a refreshing definition of landscape as it implicates the recipient of the landscape, the one who has, in a sense, placed a frame around the place.

Site is the easiest of this definition cluster, a term much used in art discourse that designates the space that an installation or performance inhabits when that space is not the “neutral” space of a gallery or a theater. It designates a specific place in which the artist has taken an interest, and often there is a performative or conversational relationship between site and artist, as one is activated by the other through interaction.

While *site*, *space* and *place* are terms that are all used particularly in this work, I want to give special attention to the terms *Nature* and *Landscape*, which I am capitalizing in some instances to signal a self-understanding of them as terms loaded with power complexities, expansionist histories and art-historic fetterings. “Landscape” and “Nature” are the words that appear in Chico California’s vernacular. It is Landscape that is Chico California’s Sir. The audiences are often addressed as “Nature Lovers” on Chico California’s Instagram account when he announces his upcoming appearances at the invented public venues where he performs his strip teases, gogo dancing, etc. The words “Nature” and “Landscape” have to be tossed around liberally as part of this work because it’s *our* vernacular for describing and *ascribing* place, space and site. A landscape is framed. It is *this* space or *this* view, cropped, isolated, segregated from its whole. When Chico California performs *to* Landscape he is performing to his own act of selection and

preference. He cruises, he browses, he elects a part of a greater body to seduce, to play with.

Similarly my insistence on using the word “Nature” is intended to point at our horrifying (and titillating) habit of generalizing, designating and (de)authenticating what is natural and what is not, what is part of this imagined empire that is Nature and who its impure interlopers are. *I fucking love Nature*, growls Chico California with the perverse self-assurance with which white cismale lovers have told me how much they loved having sex with transmen or men of color, this an abject experience I have found at once disgusting and deeply arousing.

3.2 Things, Power & Consent

I was returning from a filming session, still wearing my leather vest. It was a hot fall day and the grasshoppers had come out to fly around. Walking down the hill back toward the car park I realized that the creaking of my vest sounded nearly identical to the chirruping of the grasshoppers. Was I communicating with them? Certainly not. But a kind of accidental mirroring was occurring. I cannot presume to know if the grasshoppers recognized me at all beyond being a large, possibly dangerous object transiting through their space. But for me it was a sensory moment where my own leather garment served as a kind of prosthesis with which to contribute similarly to our shared space. It was a queer moment between three animals, a human, a cow and a grasshopper. Were we connecting? Did I have a “true connection” with Nature?

Throughout the process of creating this work I have been frequently scandalized and disturbed by my own insistence and gross agency in pursuing a knowledge of this

place, this site. My own urgency to know this place *now* (over a period of two years) is a shockingly fast pump n dump in geologic time. I have often felt like I'm *that* guy on the street following someone who has caught his interest saying things like *hey come on baby don't you want to talk to me? I just want to get to knowya.*

It would be wrong to assume of course that site and materials I've been working with do not possess their agency and power which could be or has been exerted over me. I, the artist, have been inconvenienced, injured, tortured and put in my place many times throughout this project, including a deeply humbling ice-caused ankle sprain last year which kept me out of the coulees, with limited mobility, for a while.

Chico California's assumptions of land and Nature's ability to be pleased addresses questions of sentience in the inanimate. How can I know if the trestle bridge let alone a *view* of the trestle bridge is aroused when it is being flogged? What does consent look like in an object or in anything that does not subscribe to human languages, gestures and affects? How would we ever know? Indeed even just asking that question is to assume a shared subjectivity with the object and with inanimate-ness. For this reason the work asks these questions without answering them. The work and, consequently, Chico California fails to ask for consent of the land, objects, organisms and materials with which he interacts.

Despite the title of the collective work naming Landscape as the Sir or dominant partner in the relationship, Chico California identifies himself through the course of various works as being a *switch* or, perhaps, as *versatile*, comfortable assuming both dominant and submissive relational positions, both receiver and giver, Top and bottom. This might come as a surprise – indeed it often surprises me just how much Chico

California's gruff, seemingly impenetrable hyper-masculinity wants to be penetrated – but it really is key that the image of Chico California's hyper-masculinity exist in order to be subverted. Chico does to and is done to by landscape. He performs dominance in many performances, but also performs acts of service or servicing, bondage and surrender, and allows his own body to be affected by the site. Often, in performance, this submission is more difficult to perceive than his acts of dominance. This is interesting to think about. Why is it easier to read an act of dominance from a human onto a place than the other way around? Isn't the cold dry wind constantly sucking our skin of its moisture? What isn't kinky about the prickly burr stubbornly embedded in our sock?

But Chico is not only interested in the switch-ness of performing both Dom and sub. For while individual acts or performances might clearly designate clearly defined power roles, *Landscape is My Sir* as a collective body of work aims to paint a more complex picture of how power shifts and moves between entities from moment to moment. This discussion of power, agency and consent unfolds during a particularly charged political moment where power roles are not at all clearly defined. Global warming represents an extended wrestling of powers between humans and environment, and we find ourselves in messy cycles of submitting too and attempting desperately to dominate a force which we have knowingly and unknowingly been feeding for centuries. Indigenous Knowledge has functioned since time immemorial as a pluralistic framework with which to negotiate these complexities, and in this work I hope to draw on notions of unmapping and embodied scholarship from this field to better articulate such nuances.

Newly emerged fascist movements and ideologies have gathered strength and become visible on the global stage, with opposing poles aligning themselves with hard

definitions between the other and the known, the correct and the punishable. And while one is inclined to read these oppositions as clearly defined power roles, it's important to remember that they are actually a dynamic unfolding of power relations, shifting from moment to moment, hinging entirely on whose hand has fallen on whose throat.

It is within these frameworks and understandings of power that Chico California comes into contact with the part of Treaty 7 territory called Lethbridge after a British lawyer who never even set foot in the region.¹⁵ This place has been home, body, battleground, refuge and resource to Indigenous, settler and newcomer communities, has been an industrial center for buffalo, whiskey, mining, oil and agricultural industries, whose various marks it bears.

3.3 Imaginaries

As a newcomer in Alberta it has been interesting to understand its industrial histories as actors in aesthetic and cultural mythologies. Cattle culture seems to be an important part of the imaginary of Alberta as an industrial center, and I have heard it referred to as the Texas of Canada. A Grindr friend who works in agriculture has explained to me that wheat, potatoes and oil are the province's main industries, which leaves me curious about the role of cattle as part of Alberta's identity.

Because of this history it makes sense for the cowboy and the leatherman to intersect in the fabrication of Chico California's world. Chico engages with cowboy hats and harnesses made of repurposed cowboy leather belts, just as he engages with camouflage and black leather fetish gear. They are not only signifiers of particular cultures, they are known bedfellows of masculine performance.

¹⁵ Let us make a mental bookmark here to consider this colonial history in relationship to notions of distance.

The sourcing of leather and creation of leather objects for this project is important. Of Chico's leather pieces only the Muir caps have been bought new, this out of a lack of appropriate skills and materials to make them. All other leather materials have been bought used, are altered versions of leather garments or have been made from leather objects completely repurposed and/or refitted. The refitting of used pieces too small or large for me is in itself an interesting performative task. In making, say, a men's size medium smaller so that it may fit me I am confronted with the ways in which my body is not-male, and in repurposing women's leather garments I am reminded of how my body was once female.

Masculinity must be defined here as a locus of this work. For while I certainly hope to challenge the gendering of Nature, whose frequent feminized characterization has deep roots in colonial imaging of conquerable land,¹⁶ it is simply far more interesting to me to recast sexual encounters as happening between masculinized partners out of a desire to homoerotically cast it as being a gender similar to my own. This of course is politically incorrect, a lack of correctness I feel is important to this work. Chico California is not at all meeting Nature where it's at. He is meeting nature where *he* is at. Chico California is a masculine figure (perhaps obscenely and detrimentally so) and being also a homosexual he engenders that homosexuality onto Landscape which is why Landscape must for the purposes of this work be a Sir. This is intentional on my part as the artist. This work is not a utopic project to de-gender Nature and relieve it of our human projections onto it. I wish to intentionally err in the use of gender, to, in the

¹⁶ Stuart Hall frames this notion nicely, setting a foundation for the notion of colonial imaginaries. Hall mentions the role that sexualized fantasy played in the artistic and discursive renderings of the process of conquering land. Hall, *The West and The Rest*, 2001.

obvious failing to supplant my own human subjectivity, re-perform acts of projection onto Nature in such a way that feels both wonderful and wrong.

To best understand how masculinity, Nature and Chico California's leather daddy image come together it's worth saying a few things about the history and use of leather fetish wear, and how it has contributed to what I understand, from my absorption of contemporary queer and gay cultures, to be an imaging of what it means to be queer, kinky and dressed in leather. While Robert Mapplethorpe has had a significant role in imaging this cultural iconography, I am focusing on Tom of Finland's iconography since it is his drawings that have most permeated contemporary gay/queer culture, and can be seen frequently as tattoos, on shirts and club posters.

Finland's men's bodies are not realistic bodies. Their hyper-muscular proportions are fantastic and their similarity to each other renders them clones. This is a fairly straightforward challenge of this imaginary, but the one that interests me more is the way the materials depicted in the drawings interact with the bodies they clothe. In Finland's imaginary denim stretches across genitalia and leather binds to muscle, defining it. But leather and denim would not start having these physical capacities until more recently when denim would be mixed with elastics and pleather would have the lightness to make the silhouette of a penis clearly visible through a leather pant leg. It is this defiance of physics that makes Tom of Finland's cosmology of objects such an important imaginary. It is this challenge of physics that interests Chico California.

The leatherman imaginary has seen revival in both the gay and queer worlds, where both cisgender and transgender men, myself included, have taken a new interest in leather accouterment and their attending gay masculine historical imaginary. I would say

in my case I have been interested in this imaginary since I was 19 and entering the world of BDSM for the first time. But in what site does this imagined world exist? Is it at the Folsom Street fair? At the various Eagle Leather Bars located in bigger cities? The leather daddy is a creature of the urban, and more importantly of the interior space. The leather bars I've been to are small and contained unlike larger, airier dance clubs. They engender a sense of social and sexual closeness, a necessitation to rub up against others. So Chico California's use of leather outdoors is rather daring in that it strips away urban and social contexts that usually contain the wearing of such fetish gear. Whoever encounters Chico walking around outdoors, specifically in Nature-y environments, is confronted with the question, *why is this guy walking around the nature reserve in leather fetish gear?*

It should not be overlooked that, while somewhat lost under the more immediately legible history of gay masculinity, that the classic leatherman costume or regalia is an adaptation of the uniforms of Nazi officers which have been blended aesthetically and culturally with motorcycle police uniforms. Via his drawings, Tom of Finland brings the already simmering homoerotic desire for and between agents of white male power and authority to the surface. The desire between and amongst these agents was already there, though unspoken: such extreme exaltations of white male power only allow for white males to love each other, as, all else, even white women, cannot be held as truly respectable or beautiful by their own ideologies of supremacy. But Tom of Finland has spoken it, and through a gradual process of dissidentification that spanned from the early 1950's through the late 1980's, the image of the leather daddy has slowly been deconstructed by millions of queer encounters, used to explore through

transgressive fantasy the power dichotomies between Alphas and betas, Nazis and non-Aryans, agents of the state and the ununiformed.

The work of Chico California aims to be part of the invisible constellation of invisibleized desire that exists in the collective subconscious of conflicting ideologies. Somewhere in rural Oregon a young white nationalist is jerking off to a picture of a Mexican transman assfucking a cisgendered man and somewhere in East Oakland a Mexican transman is jerking off to a white guy laying on a confederate flag. And somewhere on some patch of unfrequented Crown land in southern Alberta, a man in leather pants is stripping off his leather jacket for the enjoyment of a hill.

Rural and Wild West imaginaries function in similar ways as the leatherman imaginary, being all phenomena of image/myth construction, which is why this body of work has chosen to parallel these visual languages. The West has been an epicenter of place-based image/myth making since the first colonial painters and photographers – George Catlin, Edward Curtis, Albert Bierstadt – reinforced paths of expansion in various phases.¹⁷ Each of these sent back missives to the “civilized” world serving to create mental images of what this place looked like, essentializing not only what “The West” was but also what the non-urban promised.

Cree and Irish painter Kent Monkman has staged similar paralleling of the history of The West’s imaging and very gay BDSM encounters through his paintings, performances and installations that feature his persona Miss Chief Eagle Testickle. His work asks similar questions to mine: what happens when the power struggles between Landscape and colony, native and settler collide and fuck? What would it look like if all

¹⁷ Jules D. Prown provides a through analysis of this notion. Prown, *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West*, 1992.

the underlying sexual tensions that accompany the desire to frame Nature were made visible? And who is enjoying it and how?

I will go into particulars of the rural imaginaries a little more in depth in the following section, but it's worth noting here that the rural imaginary is worth considering as the Wild West or Western imaginary's twin which is unfolding in real time. That is to say that while we look to notions of the past for the root of the West's image, a temporal root-searching, the root of the rural imaginary is a locational searching. We need to look no further than Cabela's, the outdoor goods retailer that is part store and part theme park of camouflage, to see an imaginary of the rural and wilderness in action. Cabela's fuels fantasies of interactions with rurality and wildness with its faux rock walls and elaborate taxidermy displays, but I often wonder how many fantasizers or imaginers actually enact these fantasies of the enjoyment and consumption of Nature. I certainly have not – at least not in the way these fantasies are usually imaged.

Important to this interrogation of human desire to consume Nature, and cast it as an actor in colonial fantasies of The West, is the way in which wildness and the animal are set as being the opposite of civilization or culturedness. I appreciate place theorist Edward S. Casey's critique of the notion that nature is antithetical to culture in his contribution to Steven Feld and Keith Basso's collection of essays *Senses of Place*. Casey's treatment of the idea of wildness is useful to considering Chico California as a kind of wild animal who is both an agent of and resistant to forces of both "culture" and "nature" particularly when performing within the context of Indigenous territories currently occupied by parks, cities and the Crown. Casey argues that to know a place with your body *is* culture. They are not antithetical at all, rather:

... the endemic status of culture – pervading bodies and places and bodies-in-places – is matched by the equally endemic insinuation of “wild Being” into the body/place matrix. Even the most culturally saturated place retains a factor of wildness, that is, of the radically amorphous and accounted for, something that is not so much immune to culture as alien to it in its very midst, disparate from it from within. We sense this wildness explicitly in moments of absurdity – and sheer “surdity,” sheer “thisness.” [Casey, 1996]

It is my wild hope that Chico California is both surd and a thisness that resists or at least confuses these imaginaries. Luke and I frequently talk about a particular anti-drug cartoon from 1990 called *Cartoon All-Stars to The Rescue* which combined various characters from 10 franchises including, to name a few, Winnie-the-Pooh, the Smurfs, the Muppet Babies and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles all in one 32 minute television special. We both recount the mind-blowing effect of permeated boundaries between worlds that this had on us,¹⁸ and it is this very effect of perforating the isolated and enduring force of these imaginaries that I hope this work will cause.

3.4 Kitsch

Naming the found objects in this work has been a challenge. They have all been sourced from thrift stores, and are mostly plaques from the 1960s – 1970s that display either drawings or photographs of nature scenes, animals, mountains, waterfalls and birds which one hunts. I have cringingly called these items *kitsch*. The designation of “kitsch” is fraught with complex and problematic notions that compartmentalize objects within particular ideas of class, culture, gender, region and the rural. Kitsch objects are frequently characterized as being artifacts of working class aesthetics and seen as a kind of low and antiquated pop art. The “antiquated” part is a discourse of time that fixes

¹⁸ I could not tell you if it had any deterrent effect on me in regards to drug use. I was so blown away by the coexistence of these disparate worlds that I don’t even remember the anti-drug narrative.

kitsch in a particular era. But it could be argued that this is a relative idea, and that perhaps some not far off day cat videos, inspirational memes and even our Instagram feeds will seem like equally antiquated, if digital, artifacts of a kitschy past.

The hipster adoption, revival and cultural elevation of kitsch certainly helped fix it as an aesthetic genre associated with a particular past. But Nature and Landscape continue to be imaged for popular consumption, both in handmade forms and in mass produced forms. The proliferation of the amateur plein air painting or waterfall plaques printed with inspirational quotes may have been replaced by the ubiquitous Instagram post of a visit to Banff National Park. But this ubiquitous-ness may be pointing to an impulse to interact with and respond to experiences of place and nature that most certainly goes beyond colonial narratives, and hints at a different kind of desire. While the visual language of Nature and Landscape themed kitsch may be connected to discourses of class, colony and gender, it is worthwhile to consider it as a form of access to that desire.¹⁹ Artist Scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick creates a kind of gay code with which to unpack the idea of kitsch, attacking the binary of kitsch/not kitsch with a queered notion of sentimentality. This derails the binary of being the one who names kitsch (which was not even kitsch until that person came and pronounced it to be so) or the one who uncritically consumes it, leaving kitsch “under the system of kitsch-attribution, a major scandal, one that can induce self-exemption or cynicism but nothing much more than that.”²⁰ This makes me want to examine myself as a pronouncer of kitsch, and also speaks to a discussion I’ve had with a colleague who has insisted that consumption of objects like the ones in my performance-installation is only either ironic

¹⁹ If a mountain is photographed thousands of times by thousands of tourists is it a slut?

²⁰ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of The Closet*, 1990.

or non-ironic. This idea of sentimentality gets at a love for objects and their discourse that might not require a pronouncement of kitsch at all, but rather their affectionate sexing.

And how does camouflage, hunting decoys, blinds and other tools of hunting play within this idea of kitsch? Camouflage, specifically hunting camouflage (as opposed to military camouflage which bears its own visual and institutional language), is already regularly taken out of its practical context, its intended purpose, and used as a cultural marker, a *flagging*, if we may apply this queer term to what is typically considered the heterosexual realm of recreational hunting. Its mythology is firmly rooted in narratives of rites of passage into adulthood in one of two genders, usually manhood.

Wood grain too can be characterized in this work as operating on a level of kitsch. Wood grain patterning is a curiously charged image. The house I grew up in – the same house undone by the Camp Fire – was a geodesic dome built in the 70's by the property's previous back-to-the-land hippie occupants. Full of implications of class, race and place, faux wood marks a historical moment in design that has crawled its way deep into us to form intense nostalgic affective associations. Hand painted by using a rubber graining tool and acrylic paint, faux wood grain appears in multiple places in *Landscape is My Sir*. Chico California's cabin is defined within the gallery space by large swatches of faux wood grain, rendered in un-wood-like colors. It is the idea, the fantasy, the imaginary of wood grain, of a cabin in which the viewer is immersed, not real wood, not a real cabin. In building the various works I often found myself painting over real wood with faux wood grain, a truly absurd action, a performance of inventing an imagined space.

3.5 Genital Imaginaries

And what *are*, incidentally, Chico California's genitals? I, the artist, being a transgender man find this to be a very necessary question which I don't at all know how to answer. The assumption of course given Chico California's performance of Man, masculinity and homoeroticism is that he has a cock and an asshole and that he, in his uniquely beautiful misunderstanding of Nature and land, wishes to engage with Nature's cock and Nature's asshole.

Transness is important here because being trans presents narratives of not only dysphoria – which here I must define as the condition of not aligning with the space one occupies – but also learned strategies and adaptations for dealing and thriving with and through dysphoria. Narratives of dysphoria dominate trans discourse often overshadowing the far more interesting affective, physical, cultural and erotic adaptations trans people create when a body part you don't want is there or when what you do want isn't. For the purposes of this work it is useful to think of this as a kind of unmapping. To competently manipulate oneself in space, one must unmap their own body, the parts that are there and the parts that are imagined - one's mental prosthetics. This process then must be extended relationally, and that (un)map grows to include one's lover(s), a gesture necessary for troubleshooting the often complicated task of fucking.

The heterosexual imaginary draws maps of genital possibility which are often limited to procreation-related apparatuses. The queer imaginary is reputed to not only see beyond this, but also finds itself performing kinky disidentifications with those genital maps.²¹ But Chico California, in his relations with Landscape and Nature, is mapping

²¹ A wealth of queer theorization exists on the notion of the prosthesis and the complex task of prosthetic imaginings but Jack Halberstam and Jose Esteban Muñoz are classic go-to's for these ideas.

genital territories that push the idea of the unmapped body even further. Nature has neither a cock nor an asshole or, it could be argued, Nature has *many* cocks and assholes and all the other collective sexualizable body parts that make its amorphous, borderless whole. Chico California, in his lewd acts, recognizes this by making space for the material elements of place to have other kinds of sexualized body parts. He exerts himself in figuring out how to pleasure these parts, performing both the narcissistic and often presumptuous desire to please and be pleaser, as well as the more typical notions of servicing, empathy and devotion that we associate with the offering and giving of sexual gratification.

3.6 Ok, But What *is* Chico California?

What a good question. Certainly Chico California is an alter ego, a desperate bridge between fantasy and reality. Perhaps he is a god or mythological figure. The idea of someone that a real person *could* be but never *would* be. Chico is a hyperreality, both mine and yours. He is the bodily manifestation of a political moment, a figure born in a time when men, white power and the fascist impulse have newly reasserted their global dominance, and all people are being pushed to align themselves with clearly defined ideologies.

Adrian Stimson's persona work as the fabulous Buffalo Boy was influential early on in the process of creating Chico California. Buffalo Boy performs intervention and reassertion of Indigeneity in space and land, using camp and drag aesthetics to insert a subversive gayness into the problematic mythology of the "Wild West." In *Buffalo Boy: Don't Look East*, Stimson's fringe-clad, sequined cowboy-hatted persona poses, strides

and sashays around Venice, Italy, merging faggy swish with gestures recognizable from the black and white Westerns being referenced. Buffalo Boy's interaction and intervention into space is similar to Chico's efforts at affecting a space by inhabiting it. Buffalo Boy engages with ritual in his performances more directly and embraces process of becoming as seen in his performances with the bison hide.

Chico California is far less comfortable with similar processes of becoming, or becoming, and much of his work intervening in space is about this struggle. Again it is useful to consider here Deleuze and Guattari's notions of becoming animal and becoming intense, which is, among many things, "affect in itself, the drive in a person."²² Chico California is perhaps, at best, a demi-god. Too animal and too *much* to properly be a person, but too profane, too mortal to be a god. It could be said that Chico is staging a kind of ritual, but I will refrain from saying it: Chico is too feral to commit to the consistency of action that would constitute something as sophisticated as ritual.

I have struggled to categorize on many levels Chico California, particularly the tone his performances are "supposed to" impart. Is he campy? Farcical? Corny? Or is he in the realm of the dead serious such as the seriousness I aesthetically attach to Marina Abramović and Chris Burden? As I have mentioned, Chico resists such categories – and perhaps more honestly on my part, *I* both resist and fear the limitations of such categories. That being said it has been very useful – by which I mean deeply relieving – to consider cultural theorist Sianne Ngai's aesthetic categories. She examines the notions of *cute*, *zany* and *interesting*, offering aesthetic categories that are refreshingly complex

²² It bears mentioning too that Deleuze and Guattari point out that "masochism" and "fetishism" are both sites of this becoming. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987.

and point at highly contemporary senses of what a thing *is* and *could be* that I feel hasn't quite been named. We might consider Chico California, his acts and habits as *zany*:

Zaniness is the only aesthetic category in our contemporary repertoire explicitly about this politically ambiguous intersection between cultural and occupational performance, acting and service, playing and laboring. Intensely affective and physical, it is an aesthetic of action in the presence of an audience that bridges popular and avant-garde practice across a wide range of media. [Ngai, 2015]

Political ambiguity. Service. Intensity. Labouriousness. All of these speak to the odd tasks that Chico California sets about with total physical devotion, sometimes with frenetic intent. His affect may often be quite somber, but I would argue that the nature of his tasks, of his peculiar and absurd lovemaking to the non-human is very *mad*.

Ngai goes on to talk about the social requirements of zanies, that they frequently require others to be zany for or even other zanies to be zany with. At first glance we might see this as a dissonance with Chico California: he flies solo. Or does he? Is he not meant to viewed even if from a distance? Is he perhaps not a zany who is meant to be caught in his zany acts?

3.7 Some Notes on Audience, Distance & Working Alone

The truth is Chico California cannot exist alone. He *must* be if not seen at least *known* about in order to exist. Most of Chico's performances which happen "for" a live audience happen at a distance, and this staging has felt especially effective. Exciting, too, have been times when I have been filming performance in a relatively inaccessible site and a hiker will settle and watch from the next hill over. This is something very specific to the landscape of this area, as the rolling of the coulees allows for hills to overlook each

other while having between them a gulf of space. Chico has often found himself at eye level with his audience but they are far away.

I should note that performance is a tricky animal when it comes to audience. In my practice I am usually very frustrated with audiences. Rather than content myself to be disappointed with my audience I have sought in this work to engage deliberately with my own desire to control, manipulate and obligate the audience, intentionally setting up what I hope are productively problematic power relations. But intentions aside, it has been a challenge to also recognize my own self-protective impulses to keep the audience at a distance. We need not go into my own intimacy issues. Suffice to say that I have them, and that it has been an interesting metaphor to examine distance, belonging and intimacy in the context of this performative, land-based work.

West Texas based essayist Ray Gonzales describes the experience of being drawn in by the Southwestern landscape across a distance:

Image. Distance. Color. Height. Deepness. They work together to get us there, and we know that landscape way over there will not be there when we get to it. It is gone, and the earth is in our face, surrounding us with a magnetism that drew us to it, but that is now transformed into a living, breathing environment that has taken us into itself. [Gonzalez, 2008]

There is both a heartbreak, impossibility and exaltation in this process of traversing distance, but at the point when the audience perceives Chico across the distance, the roles of the two parties are quite separate. The audience is still longing across the distance for the promise offered there. Whatever projection the audience may have toward Chico it is surely easier to maintain without the animal proximity and animal reality of Chico and without having yet been taken into the “living, breathing environment” that Chico is inhabiting. Meanwhile, Chico has already been drawn in. He is deep in the process of

reckoning with the collapse of distance, deep in the problem-solving process of how to relate to the place he perceived from afar, which is no longer his projection of place, of being, but is an in-the-flesh place, beautiful and uncomfortable, a full, ambivalent, complex whole.

Early into this project I decided I would limit myself to areas around Lethbridge. No site has been more than 5 kilometers from the University. Many locations are in fact within eyesight of the university, worth noting because that sightline, I feel, serves as a sort of umbilical cord between myself as an art student and the institution which in many ways is also my Sir.²³ This became complicated when one performance, to be detailed in a later section, drew the attention of three university security guards. I felt compelled to make performances even more inaccessible, yet still making the audience feel the distance between themselves and Chico as a palpable thing.

Let's consider this electric territory between Chico and his audience. This distance, an important and ephemeral site, allows for both performer and audience to consume each other visually and, if the wind is right, aurally, while still remaining within their own private theaters of desire and curiosity. These encounters across distance allow for audiences to have very animal reactions and questions even as they are perceiving and designating the creature they are gazing at as potentially an animal. *What is that on the next hill? What is happening? What am I looking at? Is it dangerous? What is he wearing? What is he doing? Can he see me seeing him?* This brings us back to notions of cruising where similar questions arise. *Is he gay? Is he watching me? Are we looking for the same thing?* The adrenal experience of seeing a wild animal at a near distance is not unlike the adrenal tingle when, on Grindr, a man's distance indicator shows him to be

²³ The University of Lethbridge is my Sir.

close. *Does he see me?* To be seen is to be located and to be located is to be at the precipice of an encounter.

Finally, a note on working alone. The majority of these works have been staged and documented by myself, on my own. This has been very difficult and exhausting, and in some cases impossible. But, for the sake of this project, I have decided to engage with that impossibility. The most notable instance of this impossibility has been in the task of tying myself up. This is remarkably hard and very absurd. After much practice I have figured out how to do it with a bit of work and preplanning. Many questions surround the practice of self-documenting. Why is Chico California filming himself – is he? It makes sense in stills: he is likely sending photos to Grindr users who's profile pics are Landscapes and Nature. But does he upload to Pornhub? Did he once have a Tumblr? Regardless, this process of working alone, while important to this project, is something I am examining as my own compulsion to do everything myself, and am curious to, in future work, begin experimenting with collaboration.

4. The Works

4.1 Performance

4.1.1 *Landscape is My Sir*

The first completed performance work using Chico California, this piece stages Chico as both a dominant and a submissive. In the first version of the performance, Chico served tumblers of whiskey to the assembled audience and some rocks, verbally shamed an amateur landscape painting, staged a strip dance routine, and ended this series of acts by hand cuffing his hands behind his back, dashing up a steep hill and rolling down it in nothing but a pair of black short-shorts.

This collection of acts set the stage for further performance work, but the aspect of the performance that seemed most important was the running and rolling down the hill, mostly, I think, because it staged Chico as submitting to the forces of gravity, sharp things and dirt, the nausea, bruises, scratches and filth that these leave on the body. While the other acts or choreographies from the first iteration fell away or developed into their own works, the rolling down the hill has stuck as its own performance.

I have experimented with this rolling in different seasons, in various states of dress and undress. At times I have become so nauseous from rolling down hills that for days after just *thinking* about rolling makes me sick to my stomach. I have found it necessary to refrain from eating before performing this to avoid throwing up, though it might be interesting to roll so much as to induce vomiting.²⁴

But there is more to this performance than the rolling, for to roll down the hill also requires a climb to its peak, something which I have often accomplished through a

²⁴ Even as I write this I feel a little ill.

mad dash, something I have had to deliberately train to be able to do. There is something in this choice to run from one point to the other that is important, a deliberate collapsing of the distance, a pursuit of the horizon. I think this relates back to the perverse desire to somehow be in the space one is gazing at, even while, as Ray Gonzalez pointed out, the place we gaze at from a distance is not at all the same place that is possible for us to arrive at. But Chico is attempting, through sheer force of will, strength and speed to prove this notion wrong. Does he succeed? I do not know. He is already tumbling down the hill.

4.1.2 *Landscape is My Boy*

I shared footage of the first iteration of this piece with a student in my cohort who promptly sent me a link to the work of artist Julius von Bismarck. A video depicts Bismarck in various Nature-y settings – in a forest clearing, at the foot of a glacier, at the edge of a lake, on a mountain peak – whipping various natural forms with a bullwhip. Bismarck’s work speaks of land and power in terms of castigation and taming. His office is not to pleasure land, it is to punish it. He seems sever, his stroke mechanical and unending. Though smart and humorous, Bismarck’s work is not a project of loving or love making.

How is Chico California’s gesture of flogging Nature different? Because the context is one of a BDSM scene wherein Chico California is performing leather daddy Dom to a site, other considerations are in place. First of all, the toy being used is a flogger, not a bullwhip, which to my knowledge, is mostly about the experience of sound, and is used on people only with a great deal of training. It was a conscious decision on my part to *not* make physical contact between the flogger and elements in the site.

Indeed, Chico is not really flogging any particular object in the site, he is flogging the *view*. We might think of flogging as a kind of looking, a looking not unrelated to notions of distance and the urgent desire to close or collapse it as discussed earlier. Chico California “warms up” the subject of his sadism with slow flogging that gradually ramps up to harder and faster blows. Then there is a cool down.

There is a kind of frustration to the lack of contact which again brings us back to the idea that this action of flogging is not unlike the frustration of looking across distance without ever being able to touch or *have*. When we take a picture of a vista, a view, is this a kind of sadistic stroke? Perhaps this could be seen as Bismarck has, as a kind of punishing of a landscape. But what if we eroticize this – to image land like this is of course deeply voyeuristic.

Frustration comes to mind too when considering that, without impact, the flogger, the leather, does not make the delicious smacking sound that really *makes* flogging and being flogged an enjoyable activity. In the video of this performance, the sound of flogging has been added in later, creating a sort of sound drag, a lip-sync of impact. The folio sound serves as a prosthesis after the fact.

To call the landscape “boy” in the title is to not only assign it a role as subordinate but also implies a necessity to care for it. A boy/Sir relationship implies – or explicitly denotes – a contract of care, responsibility and reciprocity. Any sado/masochistic relationship has the potential to be an actually abusive situation without a baseline sense of respect, spoken or unspoken. Chico is attempting this sort of relationship, this contract of care, with these views, though of course we return to the question of whether the view,

being not only “inanimate” but entirely an abstract, human generated entity, enjoys being Chico California’s boy.

4.1.3 *Soil*

This performance was first realized and documented in the coulees south of the Alexander Wilderness on a hot fall day. Initially I had planned to stage the taking of earth away from the site by digging it out and wrapping it in a square of black leather. But as I performed this I decided instead to spank the earth inside the leather, service the hole I had made, before putting the earth back. These decisions happened moment to moment and were, I feel, a good example of having a general choreography that I then allowed to adapt to the site as the performance unfolded.

My earlier discussion of genital imaginaries is relevant here. In the course of the performance a hole is made in the earth which Chico then attempts to fuck. In the original iteration of this choreography I first tried to fist the cavity, but my fist felt too small for the cavity I’d made. What was stimulating about that? Instead I tried fucking the hole with Chico’s denim covered knee, employing the queer inventiveness that goes hand in hand with the pliability of queer, particularly trans, genital imaginaries. This allowed Chico to become an appropriate lover for the site.

During a performance of this work at the university –made viewable to audience members through the providing of binoculars – three security guards arrived just as I was finishing, and without knowing I was being pursued, I managed to slip away and disappear into the building, leaving the three guards to poke around the site of the performance. Thankfully, this did not have any consequences for me, besides the

anxiety it produced – which admittedly has affected where and how I perform since – but it did serve as a reminder of the provocativeness of this work.

4.1.4 *Bad Little Books*

The books used in this performance were all sourced from Lethbridge thrift stores and yard sales. The notion of thrift store as archive is particularly important here: these books likely found their way to the thrift store by being considered (and certainly are) outdated and outmoded. A collection of travelogues, textbooks from the 70's and historical narrative, each book demonstrates some facet of racist representation of Indigenous life and history. Noble savages and bloodthirsty injuns abound in all the texts, vilified and exalted before being pronounced dead, vanished. These books have been rightfully condemned as wrong or simply unusable information, yet the objects persist – and so, as we know, do the ideas.

In *Bad Little Books* I have made a leather harness for the books to sit inside of. Chico California takes out the books one by one, reads from them, then verbally shames them for being “bad” and for thinking they “know everything” and wanting to be punished, before spanking them with a leather paddle. He reads from these racist texts and then beats the books they come from, verbalizing back to them, using perverse language to *put the book in its place*. He is at once giving voice to the texts, exposing them, giving them volume, and at the same time interrogating them as sources of truth, knowledge and information, as generators of persisting discourse.

This choice to interact with the books by not damaging them permanently invites an investigation, an opening up of the texts and objects without destroying their

memories. For while it is good to remove these texts from the circulation of what is true – the West as an untamed, unpeopled resource available to the grittiest for colonial exploit, and Indigenous people as either sages or murderers at various stages of disappearing – I think it’s important to remember and highlight these documents which spawned the discursive histories that continue to shape current perceptions of race and land.

Coast Salish and Okanagan painter Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun completed an important, necessary task by traveling to the UK and shooting the Indian Act as an assertion of Indigenous presence, power and resilience, not to mention the staging of a fierce and humorous comeback to colonial history. But Chico California’s position as a kind of politically ambiguous switch, as embodying a moment of colonial confusion, tasks himself with a gentle if firm revealing and engaging with these troubling texts. Rather than destroy them, he activates them through eroticized shaming and exposure.

4.1.5 *Birdhouse*

I had many moments of nearly abandoning this work, and it underwent various iterations. This work deviates sharply from other performances – with the exception of *Trophy Weaving*, which will be discussed later – in that the distance between Chico and other people is entirely collapsed. What’s more, the notion of human genitalia are involved. The work originated in a desire to engage with the idea of the *slurp ramp*, a structure that may or may not be found in cruising areas, usually made of scrap wood or a derelict building. It is essentially some sort of wall with holes in it intended to facilitate anonymous oral sex, generally between men.

This idea of anonymity or masking seemed relevant to the dilemma that Chico California found himself in: given his preference for non-human genitalia, how to covertly introduce humans into Chico's sexual experience, that is, how to disguise humans as Nature. I had several wooden plaques with resin coated images of animals and vistas that I wanted to do something with and it occurred to me to make the one which depicted pheasants flying into a glory hole. This act of perforation in a way opened a hole into nostalgia, and allowed for the sexualization of this kitsch aesthetic whose intent is to make the of wilderness a domestic object.

But it wasn't quite enough to simply display these objects without activation. I took to Grindr, changing my profile name to "BlowJobs4Art" and my profile picture to one of the plaques lying on the floor. The response was overwhelming and I was able to try out my idea with the plaques unattached to any structure. The experience was fun and informative – the holes were proclaimed to be too small – but it felt wildly out of the scope of Chico California's world to introduce actual people so intimately into it.

I attempted to merge the idea of the slurp ramp and a notion of interior and exterior dichotomies by mounting these plaques on faux wood which I then meant to show as a wall. The idea was that the act of looking through the holes might be the act of penetration, of seeing into or through fantasies of the rural and the wild. But this too did not quite do it.

In its final iteration, the glory holes once again invite human use. But this time Chico California has situated himself inside an enclosure, a hunting blind, a miniature cabin or perhaps a kind of strange bird house. People, predominantly cisgender men, are

invited to locate the camouflaged box in a secluded outdoor location, and penetrate the camouflage so that they may be serviced by the anonymous servicer inside.

I decided that it was important for Chico to, at least theoretically, engage in this way with men, considering their masculinities and engagement with space as a material, and, as mentioned in the methodology section, a *site specific material*, a part of knowing a place. I think often of Pasiphaë's wooden cow²⁵ – really, who doesn't? – as a wonderful metaphor for the felt impossibility of trans/cisgender sex. How to have a homoerotic encounter when your genitalia do not mirror each other?²⁶ Really, this question is the same as that posed when asking how Chico California can adapt himself to fuck Nature and Landscape. But here the questions shifts: how can Chico adapt himself to fuck humans, specifically men? In this way this contraption allows for Chico to have a prosthesis with which he can achieve intimacy with men.

And why “Birdhouse?” I'm so glad you asked. Bird houses are deeply gendered objects that have everything to do with desire, Nature and distance. The mythology of bird houses is that they are invitation for birds to nest within sight of humans. *Wouldn't it be nice if a bird had a little house, if a bird mirrored my own domesticity?* I say that bird houses are deeply gendered objects because, like bird feeders, I feel these objects are characterized as artifacts of a feminine desire to encourage Nature to come closer to the home, to be viewable from a kitchen window – this at least is our shared unspoken heteronormative narrative. But how often are bird houses *actually* used by birds? More often they are used by bats, black widows and squirrels. So in fact the bird house is a

²⁵ I'm referring to the wooden cow prosthesis that Daedalus built Pasiphaë to aid her coupling with the Cretan bull, which then led to the birth of the Minotaur in the ancient Greek/Minoan myth.

²⁶ This is of course a fallacy of thought as genitalia rarely *do* mirror each other, but the frustration of same-sex desires and fantasies that cannot surmount the limitations of the body remain.

hypergendered object used a site for fantasy, the fantasy of the domestic inviting in the wild, the fantasy of an indoors which can be populated by an agent of the outdoors.

In the process of preparing to activate the installation piece I was made aware of ethical concerns related to human research subjects. Would not the involvement of human subjects make necessary a transparent and rigorous investigation of the project's ethical considerations? This is a fascinating question, and one that, given the precarious nature of institutional politics exacerbated by the scrutiny garnered by all activities which count perversity among they're topics, prompted me to cancel any plans I might have had to activate *Birdhouse* through performance. This question is particularly interesting within the context of a larger discourse regarding the relationship between research, academia and art, and the complex but often necessary process of cultural assimilation that art practice traditions, particularly those of othered art, must undergo to be a part of academic discourse. But this is conversation for another time.

4.1.6 Lapdances for Landscapes

This performance is recognizable as that out of which *Bound* and *Sweat* developed, and arose out of a desire to offer Chico's body in some way to Landscape. Chico makes himself available to be an object to be viewed by enacting the role of a gogo dancer at a dance club, exposed, clothed in leather and other outfits. He plays a campy miner character in hard hat, with pick in hand, offering an eroticized male worker body to the on-looking Landscape marked by remnants of mining operations.

Staged at a remove from areas of foot traffic, yet very visible from a distance by anyone inside the university building, the human audience is invited to watch from afar,

from the cheap seats you might say. Watchable through binoculars as in *Soil*, the audience was put in the uncomfortable situation of being on the outside of the central experience of this “club,” as one might feel walking past the open door of a bar where it seems like people inside are having a good time but you cannot join them.

4.1.7 *Mr. California*

How to bring Chico California into a gallery space? The obvious option would be to not have Chico California as a living body appear in the gallery space at all. But I find this an alarming idea especially when its so important to me to hold the audience in thrall with the work. *But how will they be aroused? How can I ensure that the sex is not taken away from the work?* The fact of the body is immutable. That is the entire point of performance. But how can this fact of a body resist being de-sexed by the “neutral” space of the gallery? What is the necessary confrontation between the performing body and the (im)passive audience?

Félix Gonzalez-Torres’s *Untitled (Gogo-Dancing Platform)* elevates the gogo dance platform to an activated art object, and with it, the gogo dancer himself, inducing a body and bodily reckonings between onlooker and looked at. This is not the purpose of *Mr. California*. This piece comes out of one single necessity: to get the body of Chico California into the gallery. After much consideration and taking in many opinions as to whether Chico California could even *be* inside a gallery space, I decided it was essential for Chico California to be a moving, sexual, horny body in the gallery. Gonzalez-Torres’s gogo dancers are all professional male erotic dancers. I am not. At best, Chico California

is a dive bar gogo dancer. He is a feral erotic dancer that has somehow been enticed or coerced into this gallery space.

It is perhaps most necessary to put Chico California on display in the gallery because it allows for an important inversion: in Nature, Chico is obscenely out of place as a human clad in leather performing odd sexual acts. But in the gallery this orientation flips and Chico can be seen as the animal that he is, and one might, as with a zoo animal, feel the excitement of seeing him up close at the same time as feeling the dismay of seeing him captive and decontextualized.

The particular role of gogo dancing, lapdancing and strip teasing is still something not quite resolved in the work, although it has persisted in being in the work. Although in the messiness of figuring out Chico California's performances, I have blended the lines between these three forms of eroticized movement, they are each distinct forms whose aims seek to accomplish particular relationships between the human/object in movement and the passive audience.

This passivity of audience is deceptive. In lapdancing an audience member is instructed not to touch the dancer. In gogo dancing the audience is being encouraged to dance themselves. In a strip tease the audience is encouraged to tip the dancer, placing bills on the dancer's costume. The boundaries between dancer and watcher – for the audience must certainly always be watching – are clear. The role of the audience is to be aroused, which is really not at all a passive role. How does Chico California arouse audiences? To what end? Does he want to be tipped? If you touch him will you be ejected from the establishment? Who, really, is he taking his clothes off for, who is he body rolling for?

4.1.8 *Bound*

This work is intended as a sort of final, capstone performance which is then re-represented as an installation, a sort of museum replica of the performance. The performance arises out of an exhaustion of possibilities for Chico California, and a need to mark an ending for him, a surrender. I will go into this more in the conclusion, as it is very much a concluding performance. As mentioned earlier, throughout the performance generation process it was quite easy to make readable moments in which Chico played the role of Dom/Sir, and land and object were assigned the role of sub/boy. It proved much harder to show the reverse. The scenarios I imagined were often quite extreme and dangerous: staging the potential for falling through ice while bound to a chair, throwing myself off an actual cliff, suspending myself from the High Level Bridge . . . The list of terrible and probably lethal ideas goes on. What's more, these extreme ideas seemed somewhat misguided, and were perhaps based more in the desire for bodily destruction.

The notion of destruction stuck, however, and, following some shifts in my personal life, I began considering more deeply supplanting forms of physical submission to a more spiritual submission. In various myths across global cultures, a hero must leave behind the known form, surrendering to something beyond themselves. *Bound* is this investigation of the offering up of self in exchange for some unknown, pluralistic potential for being which the human form cannot access.

4.1.9. *Old Daddy River*

In this piece I filmed myself digging out a hole in the river bank just deep enough to bury myself in the grey clay while dressed in leather jacket and jeans. I then unearthed myself, returned the clay then walked into the river, then allowed myself to float away. The footage shown in the installation projection is coupled with an audio narration recorded also on the bank of the river. In the narration, Chico California flirts and begs the Old Man River to “take” him.

4.1.10 *Bound 2*

A second version of *Bound* was staged as part of the opening of the thesis show. Spanning two days, the performance began the day before the opening. I wove a 25 foot long textile over the course of 9 consecutive hours stopping only for water and washroom breaks in my studio on campus, dressed in Chico California costume. I then overnights in my studio, waking up at six the following to cut the weaving off the loom, and dragging it to the river valley. Here I selected three trees growing close together and created a rope platform between them about 12 feet in the air. I performed for another nine hours on this platform, binding and unbinding myself to the trees with the textile. In the afternoon I came down from the platform, filled a square of leather with soil from the below the site, then carried the soil and dragged the textile across the river valley, over the bridge, through downtown Lethbridge and into the gallery in time for the opening. Here I first put earth on the gallery floor and poured river water over it, then wrapped the textile around the soft sculpture “tree decoy” made out of camo ripstop, while dragging it through the mud below.

4.2 Installation

4.2.1 *Let's Get a Cabin and See What Happens*

The title of this work is a reference to the language of Craigslist personal ads, a service which was taken away only a few days before I finished the first iteration of the piece. This moment marked the first in a series of blows to online gay porn and hook-up culture caused by the passing of the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA). While touted as being efforts to prevent sex trafficking, these bills ended up targeting digital gathering places important to the LGBTQ+ and BDSM communities. Within a few months of the passing of these bills, Tumblr banned adult content, effectively destroying an archive of queer fantasy and desire.

The installation work I have created within the context of this MFA has been deeply influenced by dark rides, a form of amusement park ride whose design takes the rider through a series of connected rooms often dressed up according to particular themes, a haunted house, a mine train, a pirate voyage. This interest of mine links to the desire to control, restrict and guide the audience. Dark rides are immersive and this too is seen in the installations that are part of *My Sir*. Chico California's cabin does not exist. It is made up of fragments and suggestions. In my studio two walls are painted with hand designed faux wood patterning. Hanging on these suggestions of walls are decorative plates, plaques, antlers and a large landscape painting which have been marked by Chico California.

The work of immersion is necessary to this investigation of imaginaries. The work could certainly exist as only a set of outdoor, site-specific performances or also –

though to less effect – an immersive installation found inside a gallery space. But I’m not convinced that the work would be as effective if outdoor space was not in communication or in tension with interior space. There is a dissonance between site and non-site that relates back to impossible fantasies and simulacral erotics.

The walls of Chico’s cabin is – “decorated” is not quite the right word – *peopled* by kitsch objects which he has “dressed” in leather, rope and chains. Photos displayed/scattered in the cabin, flash-lit and reminiscent of polaroid photos,²⁷ evidence the sexual acts that Chico has been engaging these objects in. One is asked to imagine these moments of awkward frottage and strange projection, to be puzzled and disturbed by the improbable coupling between animal and thing. The objects are animated in the photographs but we see them inanimate, flaccid and still on the walls, yet still bearing Chico’s marks, the leather and rope which he has with loving attention bound them in.

This treatment of objects is reminiscent of Dayna Danger’s work with fetish masks, though the process is perhaps inversed: she is taking objects intended for BDSM application and embellishing them with beading as a mark of Indigenization. But the work functions in similar ways. Danger is asserting, creating a space for the cultural languages of beading and queer perversity to coexist, stimulating important conversation and imaging possibilities for post-colonial sexualities and embodiments.

I should note that there is a tonal difference between Danger’s work and that of Chico California. Danger’s work is far more uplifted and politically clear: in speaking of her work she underscores that the space she is creating is one for Indigenous women and femmes. It is an empowered space designated for a person who finds themselves in a very

²⁷ I feel the object-language of polaroid photos lends itself to amateur pornography before the advent of cell phone photography as one would not have taken one’s porno selfies to be developed at the drugstore.

particular political power dynamic. Chico's created space is far less politically defined. Immersed in Chico's cabin one feels both excited by and uncomfortable with the way he has collected, altered and displayed the objects. Yes, the viewer is charged with eroticizing Nature and Landscape through these objects. But the viewer may feel some sympathy for the objects themselves and wonder if this is a consensual project or if there mightn't be a bit more of the colonial impulse toward power over land and object in Chico's interior space than is politically acceptable, an ambiguity which is critical for unsettling the viewer.

4.2.2 *Mr. & Mr. November*

These two inflatable hunting decoys were purchased on clearance at Canadian Tire. The work is simple: the two inflatable deer, originally "does," have had sex changes. I have attached to them penises and anuses made of pink leather, and have assembled them to appear to be having anal intercourse. This is a very basic queering of objects intended for the perceived non-queer activity of recreational hunting,²⁸ but it is critical to understand the marketing context out of which these two objects have been appropriated. The original product name is *Tink's Miss November*, a stunningly unabashed correlation between calendar girls and the month in which deer are known to rut. The copy on the back of the box focuses on the decoy's ability to bring bucks close to the hunter and emphasizes the "realistic look and soft texture that feels real and is irresistible to those love sick bucks."²⁹

This language of realistic-ness and "feel" is reminiscent of marketing language

²⁸ Although one might ask what *really* happens in hunting blinds.

²⁹ This from Tink's ad copy on the side of the box, the author unknown.

used for dildos, fleshlights and other sex toys and genital prosthetics,³⁰ such as packers, made to mimic human body parts. Hunting decoys – usually deployed during breeding season – are often dabbed with animal pheromones to make them more attractive. One can easily say that these hunting decoys, then, serve as prosthesis for hunters to disguise the homoerotic gesture of attracting a buck within a heterosexual flagging. Miss November serves as a prosthesis for hunters – often male – to be calendar girls to the roving, rutting buck’s desire.

³⁰ Not to mention condoms.

4.3 Weaving

4.3.1 *Trophy Weaving*

In *Trophy Weaving*, Chico California dresses in full hunting camouflage, takes a small rigid heddle loom to a site off a coulee trail and begins weaving a textile, periodically integrating plants, stones and sticks gathered from around him into the weaving. He invites the audience to come close and be taught how to weave, encouraged to bring with them or collect on-site materials to add into the weaving. This teaching he performs in a loud, gruff voice, mansplaining the loom's operation. He stresses the importance of supporting the loom because of "kick back" and has set up plastic nets around him as "decoys" to "attract" the weaving to the loom. The juxtaposition of the loom and act of weaving with that of Chico's hunting gear and performed hypermasculinity creates a gendered dissonance, an interruption of the boundaries between interior and exterior, domestic and non-domestic, feminine and masculine labours and recreation.

The introduced materials are held in place by the tension of the warp and weft, secured by the firm stroke of the beater. This method of keeping materials in place can be thought of as bondage, the grasses, stones and found objects bound between the threads of the weaving. It sounds ironic but this act of binding is actually an act of animation, proof that the "inanimate" is in fact animate, and that it is our narrow human subjectivity that perceives it as inanimate.

In an analysis of textiles, material scholar Tanaka Yūko discusses how some cloth objects are imbued with power thorough their adjacency to nature, thereby giving them particular cultural and social value. Yūko gives the example of patterns based on systems

in nature and natural dyes used to make handmade textiles. Yūko also cites “ingenuity” as a form of likeness to nature:

What determined an object’s power, and thus its value? A valuable object was often handmade with a nuanced ingenuity very like that of nature. To put it another way, a human-made object that expressed human awe at nature’s power and mimicked that power as closely as possible took on magical qualities. [Yuko, 2013]

I do not believe I am at this point anywhere skilled enough to even begin to mimic nature’s ingenuity. My weavings are very flawed things, technically basic and aesthetically questionable. But I like to think that some adjacency to nature has been achieved through literally binding site-specific materials into the weaving, by matching colors, if not yet quite being in a place to make my own natural dyes.

The imbuing of power and value into the textiles exists here but it is a perverse imbue ment: the textiles, once finished, have been morbidly if grandly displayed as trophies. They are mounted on ornately beveled wood trophy mounts much like those we might see a fish or buck’s head displayed on. Small bronze plaques detail the date and site the weaving was “collected.” Like with trophy hunting the weavings themselves have not “won” anything. If anything they have lost their lives to the weaver, “harvested” as a quail is. Rather the “winning” belongs to the weaver, to Chico California who has, enacting the role of the trophy hunter, gone into the wilderness and wrested from it a prize weaving. He has imbued the textile with power simply by making it as a hilarious and troubling display of dominant masculinity.

4.3.2 *Blind*

I purchased a hunting blind on sale from Cabela's in Calgary with the hope of using it to invite audiences to observe Chico's performances in the field and, later, to set up a kind of immersive space from which viewers could watch video of performances in a gallery space. The blind's marketing copy promised easy set up and tidy transportation capabilities, but the blind was on sale for a reason: half an hour of sweaty wrestling with the collapsed blind – a spectacle I should have filmed for it was itself a performance – resulted in two broken attachments. I did eventually get it set up enough to function.

The hunting blind alone did not work as a merely found or appropriated object. It was too uninterrupted, too unmarked by Chico California. It needed to be queered, made asymmetrical, perforated. "Cut it up!" a colleague demanded. To address this issue I wove several weavings, using thrifted yarns and threads, choosing a combination of colors that matched the existing camouflage colors of the blind and pinks that contrasted without clashing. The textures I created in the weavings are intended to illicit the idea of the animal, the plant-like, the genital and the organic. The resulting weavings are peculiar – to me they feel quite familiar – in that they are at once feminine and masculine. The body-ness in them reminds me of my own body, the ways in which it is both a male body and a female body.

To then cut out parts of the blind and insert these port holes, these windows, these partings in the thick of the wood, makes a lot of sense. The blind is there to camouflage you on many levels. You can watch Chico California's perversity from the safety of this blind, this made body that stages a privacy for you to spend time with your own perversities.

Hunting blinds usually have straps on their exterior meant for the attachment of foliage, grasses and branches from surrounding vegetation, to help blend the blind's camouflage to the particular site in which it is erected. In *Blind* I have taken this into consideration, asking what might possibly aid in the blending of this camouflage in a gallery space.

4.3.3 *Bound*

Weaving entered this work midway through this thesis project, and it has been an ongoing challenge for me to quantify its conceptual importance. This has been good, I think, because weaving both as a notion and as a practice has been a space for the unknown and the subconscious to inhabit the larger body of work. The role of weaving resists definition here, and this resistance to definition has allowed for meditateness to occur not only outdoors while I wander around unmapping sites, but also in my indoor studio space. Indeed, it was only through weaving that I have been able to understand its importance. The process of weaving requires spending a lot of time engaged deeply with a material process of knotting disparate parts into a whole. It is interesting then that Chico California must perform the weaving of disparate parts into a whole as part of preparation to be himself destroyed, a process of necessary annihilation which will be detailed in the conclusion.

In *Bound* the fabric that binds Chico California to the tree has been hand woven on a table loom. The act and process of Chico California in a sense making the noose which he will hang from is important. It signals that this act is not an impulsive act or an accidental act. Rather it is a deliberate gesture which requires slow, meditative

preparation. He is preparing his mind for this act of surrender. I created a test fabric for this performance and during that process did a lot of thinking and feeling which I certainly could not have accomplished had I not been forced into a state of meditative attention. A remarkable amount of emotional problem solving can occur in this state of being present but disengaged from some rational process. My psychological experience of weaving is of being able to, overtime, slip between rational and irrational thought, conscious and unconscious problem solving.

In discussing time, fate and weaving, material scholar Tanaka Yūko references the paralleled stories of Homer's *Odyssey* and the Japanese epic *Yuriwaka daijin* wherein wives whose husbands are absent fill time with tasks such as weaving and copying texts. Yūko names the role of weaving time here in a way that is useful to the way in which Chico uses time. Yūko writes:

Time spent at the loom becomes a barrier, hiding the weaver in a realm beyond earthly time. To weave is to step outside earthly time and accomplish something beyond it. [Yūko, 2013]

The context for the weaving in this mythology is highly gendered: it is female labour. So what does that do for hypermasculine Chico California who's hypermasculinity pushes him well past gender conformity into a whole other gender plane?³¹ Weaving becomes site for Chico to be female, or perhaps more accurately, trans. Weaving serves as site for Chico's feminized labour of feeling, of affective problem solving, of vulnerability. Furthermore, as Yūko explains, weaving works as an evidencing of time and attention, of the *temporal dedications of care*. It is a byproduct of thought and feeling. This is hugely revelatory for me considering how very much time is

³¹ Scholar of performance Amelia Jones interestingly categorizes performances of the "(hyper)masculine" as being "against the grain" along with other categories of subalternity. Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, 1998.

spent on thinking about this work. And, given that thought is often more highly valued than feeling, the weavings as objects are critically important to uphold as material proof of the value and physical existence of affective experience as a concrete, immutable part of life, and of the artistic process.

5. Conclusion: On Surrender

Let's talk about destruction. *Bound* was conceived shortly after a separation from an important friend, lover and colleague whose input has influenced quite a lot of the later stages of this work. The relationship, a short but psychologically charged long distance affair with another transguy, made for a separation which has been strange and painful, one of those experiences that makes you deeply doubt your own perceptions of reality, truth and meaning. As mentioned earlier, *Bound* is a sort of staged self-offering, a final act of surrender. When one gives of themselves completely there is nothing left but the husk of a body, and it is this husk which Chico California offers up to matter, to the elements, to gravity, to perversity.

Early in the developmental stages of *Bound*, in the depths of a cold snap, I practiced tying myself to a tree on an island on the Old Man River. The wind was painfully, exhilaratingly cold, and made the trees creak in unison with the rope I was working with and the leather I was dressed in. I attempted tying myself and letting myself hang suspended from the rope. Although the rope was tied safely around my body and I was not so very far from the ground I still found it terrifying to let my weight rest on it. After hanging there for a few seconds – the rope was cutting into my torso – I pulled myself up onto a stump beside the main tree trunk I was tied to and, back turned to the camera, began to cry.

Performance art, for me, is often an experience of pain and ecstasy. It is easy enough for me to say this but much harder for me to show it, to make those feelings

accessible to an audience.³² This work has been one of deep loneliness, of exile. It is about the failure to connect and the inability to go home. This work is about the endless cycles of desire, rejection and love that are part of every post-colonial reality, every queer reality. Surviving doesn't always feel good. It often feels terrible.

To perform Chico California is to perform unfulfilled desire that is so strong I am often sure it will destroy me. This video of me crying while bound to a tree is a document of the process of me being destroyed. I have of course sought my own destruction, have willfully chased down my destroyer and offered myself up to be taken, bound, annihilated. It is a far more common desire than we acknowledge, to want desperately to be rendered to the individual particles that make us. We can think of this as a kind of original perversity, this desire to return those individuated particles to the great loop of matter. It is very likely that we must be destroyed in this way in order to truly unbelong. I should specify here that, for me, to offer up or surrender my body, my ego and humanness by binding myself to this tree, to this site, for the purposes of its "destruction" is very much an act of love. It is the desire to become a part of a place, to be quite literally bound to it. *Make me part of you, Mr. Landscape, Sir.*

And what happens in the wake of this deconstruction of self? What purpose does it serve? For indeed every sacrifice is an overture, is the creation of a void that can be then re-peopled, re-personed with something changed. I have found that Chico California is a very *used* piece of art. He himself becomes a site onto which the audience member, the looker, the desirer, can project their fantasies of power, masculinity and land. Everyone, it seems, has a leather fantasy, a hypermasculine fantasy, a power fantasy.

³² Here, again, it can be asked the deeper role that distance between performer and audience has played not for Chico California but for me as the artist.

They may want to *be* Chico California or want Chico himself, or perhaps they want to *do* what Chico California *does*. More often than not I think it is a complex mix of all these things that stirs in people the need to use Chico California.

This use by audience manifests as looking, fantasizing and feeling. Chico California serves as a site for affect. He elicits a confusing mix of want and fear, longing and revulsion. He provides a space where people might engage with their own perversions, sexual, colonial, institutional and territorial. As an artist, to elicit this kind of reaction in another is a beautiful accomplishment, for it means allowing others to feel what I feel in performance: an agonizing, luxurious moment of feeling seen, connected and fulfilled.

Chico California doesn't know if Nature and Landscape enjoys his attempts at sexing it, at making love to it. But he must try. It's his way of loving through his loneliness. Ultimately, I don't know if Chico California is even capable of finding his desired connection to Landscape and Nature. For me, as the artist, his contradictions are enough. It is enough for me that he is both a desire to connect and a desire to control, to surrender and to exert power, to leave marks and to be left marks upon, and to be, himself, a mark upon the land.

In a lecture delivered in 2004 at UC Berkely, Dr. Leroy Little Bear explains how land and place function within the Blackfoot paradigm:

For the Blackfoot the ensoulment of the land results in a web of relationships with the earth, animals, plants, inorganic matter, and the cosmos. The ensoulment is captured in the stories, songs, and ceremonies. In other words, the stories, songs, and ceremonies arise from both the land and the web of relationships with all creation. But there is another important aspect of Blackfoot/land relationship that one has to appreciate to fully understand why land is a very important source of identity. Events and experiences happen at certain places. [Little Bear, 2004]

This speaks to an underlying question I've had in this work which is, if I am not directly relying on a specific site for, say, food and heat, clothes and shelter, can I not have a connection to it? Is the connection I do have to it very limited? Certainly, I currently rely on the Old Man River for my water. But what about these events and experiences? I have lived here long enough to have spent many a morning or afternoon walking and running through the coulee and river valley trails, feeling and thinking, and spending time with people that matter to me whether over the phone or in person. I am reminded of the time I spent working as a goat rancher in Mexico. The rancher I did most of the goat herding with had specific sites where he would retell the same story every time we passed it. It was, I think, his own way of unmapping. I worked with him four months and by the end there were sites at which we shared stories together that belonged solely to that site. Perhaps then, while I might never belong to a place, there is the possibility for my own stories to be woven into a place, into this place.

Some time after the Camp Fire near Chico, California, I found some pictures online that showed what was left of my childhood home. In the photos you can see that the two story geodesic dome has been rendered to a pile of ash sprinkled over the concrete foundation. Somehow my father's chickens survived, and, blurry, they mill around the remaining trees, surrounded by scorched earth. Perhaps my biggest feeling in the aftermath of this return to matter – besides obvious despair for those affected and general bad feeling for the future of all fire-prone rural areas – is a feeling of profound awe. A feeling of having been reminded what my place is, physically and temporally. I could never presume to have the *right* to feelings about the changes a place undergoes. Not something so grand and incomprehensible. I am reminded that I am just a human to

that place, just one among a whole rhizomic ecosystem of exes and lovers, unions and break-ups. This feeling is at once painful and wonderful. Yes, the feeling tells me, Landscape *is* my Sir. And Daddy does what Daddy wants on Daddy's own furiously unfolding geologic time.

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Appendix A: List of Works in Show

Bad Little Books (video documentation of performance, installation)
Birdhouse (installation)
Blind (textile, installation)
Bound (first version, textile, video documentation of performance)
Bound 2 (second version, live performance in gallery, installation, textile)
Bound Redux (live performance in gallery)
Landscape is My Sir (video documentation of performance)
Landscape is My Boy (video documentation of performance)
Let's Get a Cabin and See What Happens (installation)
Mr. California (live performance in gallery, installation)
Mr. & Mr. November (installation)
Old Daddy River (video piece)
Soil (video documentation of performance)
Trophy Weaving (textile, installation)

Appendix B: Documentation of Show & Performances



Figure 1. *Bad Little Books* still from performance documentation video



Figure 2. books from *Bad Little Books* installation view



Figure 3. *Birdhouse* installation view



Figure 4. *Birdhouse* detail

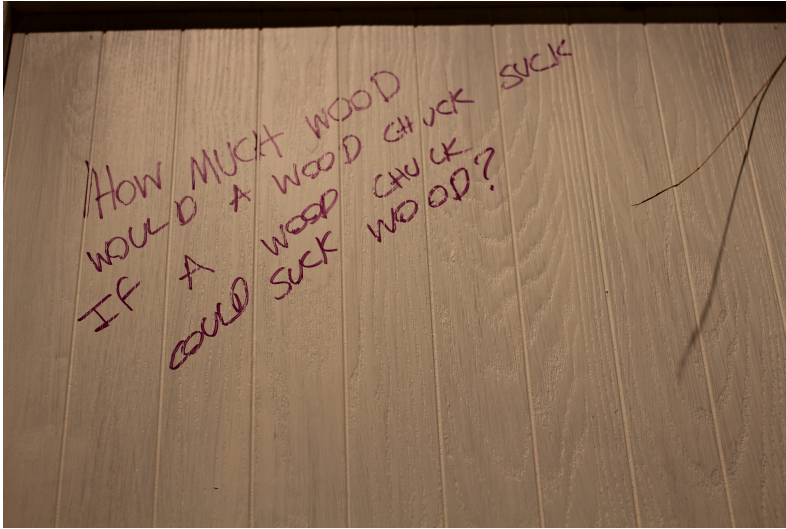


Figure 5. Birdhouse detail



Figure 6. Birdhouse detail



Figure 7. *Birdhouse detail*



Figure 8. *Blind and Bad Little Books installation view*



Figure 9. *Blind installation view*



Figure 10. *Blind detail*



Figure 11. *Blind* detail



Figure 12. *Bound* still from performance documentation video



Figure 13. *Blind and Bound 2* installation view



Figure 14. *Bound 2* detail



Figure 15. *Bound 2* detail



Figure 16. *Bound* performance documentation



Figure 17. *Landscape is My Sir* still from performance documentation video



Figure 18. *Landscape is My Boy* still from performance documentation video



Figure 19. *Let's Get a Cabin and See What Happens* installation view



Figure 20. *Let's Get a Cabin and See What Happens* installation view



Figure 21. *Let's Get a Cabin and See What Happens* installation view

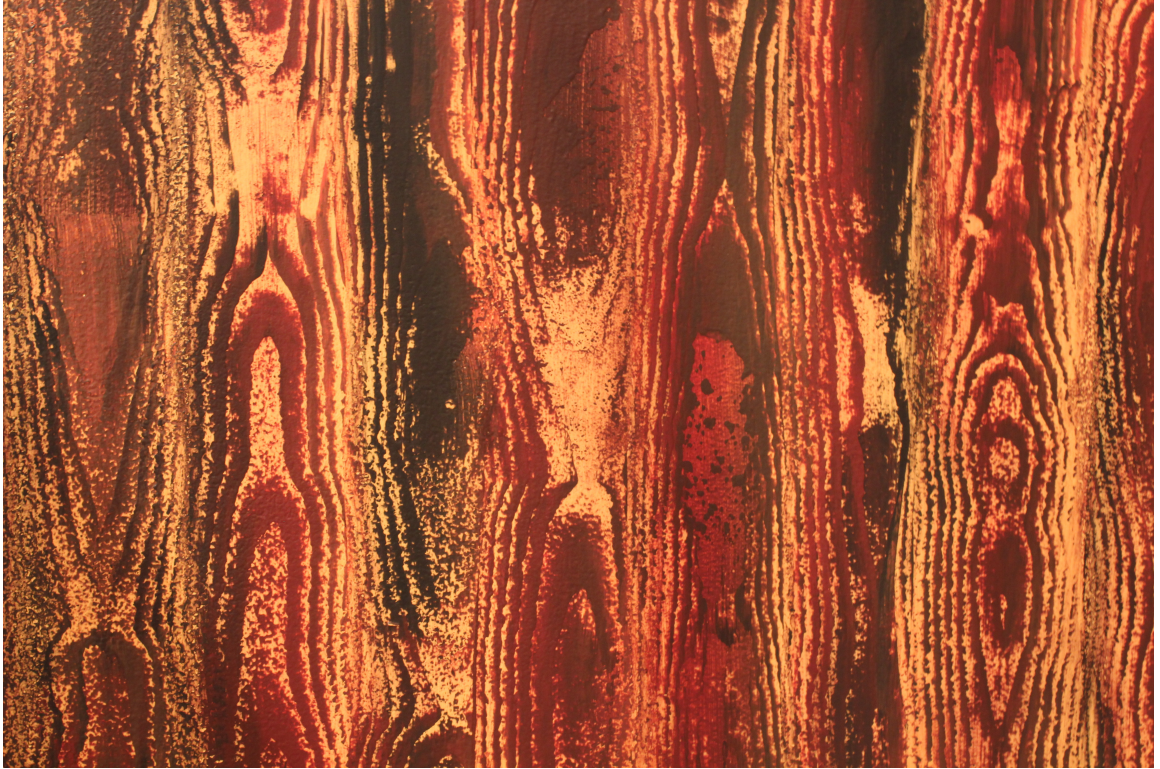


Figure 22. *Let's Get a Cabin and See What Happens* detail



Figure 23. *Let's Get a Cabin and See What Happens* detail



Figure 24. *Let's Get a Cabin and See What Happens* detail



Figure 25. *Let's Get a Cabin and See What Happens* detail



Figure 26. *Let's Get a Cabin and See What Happens* detail



Figure 27. viewing masks for *Mr. California*

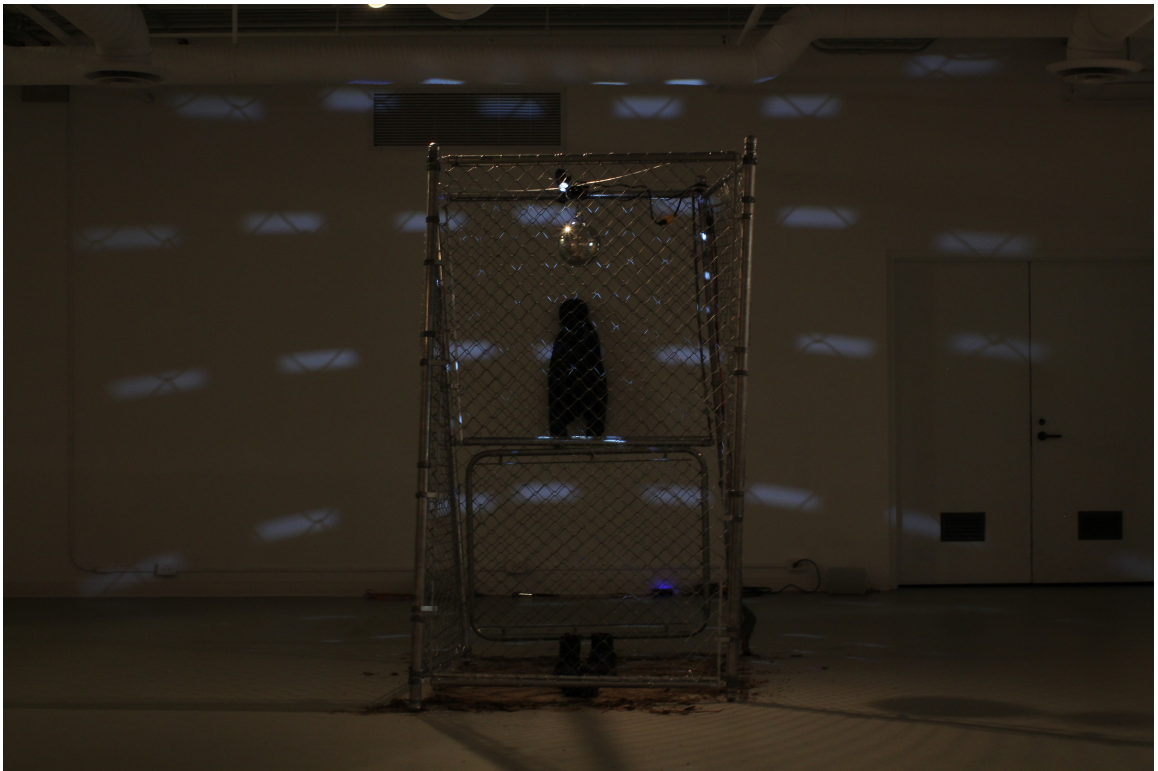


Figure 28. dancing cage for *Mr. California*



Figure 29. performance documentation of *Mr. California*



Figure 30. *Mr. & Mr. November* detail



Figure 31. *Old Daddy River* still from performance documentation video



Figure 32. *Old Daddy River* still from performance documentation video



Figure 33. clothing from *Old Daddy River* installation view



Figure 34. *Soil* still from performance documentation video



Figure 35. *Trophy Weaving* installation view



Figure 36. *Trophy Weaving* installation view



Figure 37. *Trophy Weaving* detail