

## **Clay and the figure: Gender liberation through figurative ceramic sculpture**

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### **Introduction**

The figure is one of the most recognizable and accessible points into visual language that has been produced infinitely across geography, culture, and time. The entire spectrum between abstraction and literality yields a similar result, humans look for themselves in art. The figure is a direct reflection of collective consciousness, and the viewer sees a light of humanity within the fixed eyes returning their gaze. One physically translates the gesticulation before them by knowing it within their own body. The sculpted figure is itself a visual tradition that bears cultural significance, narrative, and morality. Sculptures of the body are a spectacle, shouldering the conventions of our settings, the ideological priorities and standards of the contemporary.

The sculpted figure suffers the scrutiny of both the artist and viewers' gendered philosophy. When the artist makes deliberate choices on how to express gender and sexuality in a piece, they are effectively canonizing a particular ideology, whether through ratification or rejection. One sees idealized notions of gender, modesty, and intimacies mirrored back, monumentalized in its objectification. The public display and subsequent reception of certain works also immortalizes what society should deem as acceptable. For example, when recognizable depictions of queer people are heralded as profane and thus hidden from public view, it sends a message that queerness is to be concealed for its vulgarity. Sculpting a figure with queer tone inherently sustains a sociopolitical statement that queerness is worth the radical act of taking up physical space in public, to be spectated upon without shame or censorship. Creating an object of the body imbues philosophical and political understandings of how certain genders should move through the world, how they should interact with one another and be observed. Sculpting non-normative bodies is a means of dissolving hegemonic idealizations of gender and sexuality. Employing material and gender theory to figural

sculpture can be a liberatory vessel to shift and transform cultural perception of the body.

## **Clay in Physical Space**

The process of creating with clay has a particular ancestral symbolism that dates back from as far as humanity can remember, as well as portrayals of the figure. Clay represents a form of sacred creation, with theological reference in the genesis of man. It is ceramic work that stands the test of time - something natural which erodes, transforms, and evolves that becomes a relic of the archaic, pottery and sculpture lasting millennia under the layers of Earth. To create these works and fire them is manifesting something that exists in physical space, three-dimensionally to be observed in the round. It goes through countless transitions, changing its very molecular composition and taking a new surface and structure completely.

The manipulation of nature to create meaning is the basis of materiality in art. Aristotle describes the artistic process as that which is between form or idea and matter (Lehmann 2012). Clay is a particularly transitive material that shifts naturally, by exposure to water and air. But its transformation by human hand is remarkable, going from the earth to the kiln, wet to hard, porous to vitrified. Clay experiences ongoing transitions, working with nature and man, molded by its circumstances. Similarly, the very chemical compositions of clay and glaze are intensely particular. If even the slightest excess in moisture within the environment of the kiln is present in the clay body, the entire material is at risk of destruction. There is a delicate balance between water, clay, fire, and time that is harmoniously necessitated by the material in order to change form with most success. From earth to pedestal is an even longer journey, riddled with intention. In viewing the materiality of clay as animate and embodied, it severs the art historical assumption that the art object is a manipulation of inert matter, that the authorship of objects come solely from the hands of man. Removing material theory from art creates a hierarchy between man and material, and in this case, nature. It is rather a collaborative process. The context of material is always present in sculpture. Material holds history and evolution. The clay beneath our feet is both the same and different than that beneath the feet of our ancestors. It evolves on a greater scale, as the environment changes and chemical compounds shift, as well as an individual scale (certain clay bodies undergoing chemical changes and migrations). Clay is not stagnant, but exists in the context of present ecosystems that shift with erosion and displacement. From a gender studies perspective, the material nature of clay is inherently queer - fluctuating, transitioning, bending around boundaries.

The industry of clay manipulation has been historically gendered. Common pottery studios were predominantly female, and largely this has remained true. It is also the

reason why clay, alongside textiles and basketry, have been typically categorized as 'craft' as opposed to 'fine art.' The assertion of this hierarchy has always been rooted in the patriarchal assumption that women's work is less masterful and deserving of observation. Clay sculpture, however, has been notably male-dominated, particularly in the figural niche. What the clay figure in this context does is effectively define ideas of personhood. Thinking of this from a phenomenological perspective, it is as theorist Sarah Ahmed writes, these ideas held within figural objects "explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture, and their gestures (Ahmed 2006)." If male hands are defining identity, in using the figure as proclamation, the culture of identity is shaped by male principle. Art has been, and always will be, the zenith of sociocultural establishment. In this regard, how clay can be liberating from a gender theoretical perspective relates both to its materiality and its application in culture. By shaping the figure, artists shape identity, culture, orientation.

### **On queer art, making of gender**

Artwork that is considered 'queer' is often explicitly depicting queer subjects or discernable references to 2LGBTQIA+ culture or history, or is created by an artist who identifies as such (Hall 2013). This is a superficial understanding that is most accessible to the typical museum or gallery attendee. From a theoretical perspective, queer objects are not always obvious, in the same way that gender and sexual identities are not immediately recognizable. There are tiers to the observable queerness in art - the object itself, the material, the immaterial, the context, and the reception. The objects themselves are visual manifestations of ideologies. Whether or not they carry distinct symbology which elicits the viewer to contextualize this piece as explicitly queer - a pink triangle, leather and studs, AIDs quilt references - the object is a vessel of the immaterial, especially when dealing in figural representation. The figure is poised to either follow the boundaries of normative bodily expectations or break them. The viewer will either look at the object and say 'yes, I recognize this as a body and it is predictably what I can perceive to be masculine or feminine' or they will be met with an abstraction of these predications. The object is a vessel for the immaterial, which includes the history, culture, and understanding of gendered experience possessed by the maker. Gayle Salaman writes in *Justification and Queer Method, or Leaving Philosophy*, "queer folks are natural...phenomenologists, since careful reading of our surroundings, of the physical and social circumstances through which we move, is often a matter of survival (Salaman 2009)." The queer artist asks not only of their work but of themselves: what does queerness look like and how can it take up space? It is as philosophical as it is relational, mentions Salaman, as it can show up as explanation or investigation of differences from normative ways of being. What is present is as crucial as what is not, as is often policed in transgender bodies.

In material theory, to queer is to break boundaries and binaries, as does clay in its material potential. Queering materials and objects is a plea between artist and viewer to reimagine, to reject, and interrogate their expectations of what is before them. In part abstraction and confrontation, the queer figure is an expansive dissolution of bodily hegemony and its memorialization in statuary history. Orientations are experiential results - one becomes oriented within their sexuality, as Simone de Beauvoir states, just as objects are oriented by the maker's metaphysical and material journey (Ahmed 2006). The transformative and malleable nature of clay is a perfect analogy for sexuality and gender, in their respective fluidity but also their ability to push against boundaries and transform. Gender transitions in transgender people can be visually mirrored by the many transitions clay engages in before becoming ceramic. The alteration of hormonal and physical composition through HRT and surgery is essentially using flesh as the material and the vessel. Building a figure with clay is similarly a balance between presence and absence of parts of the body, what they represent, and how they relate to the rest of the form, both with flesh and clay bearing the philosophical pursuit of becoming whole.

Sculpture necessitates a relation between viewer and artist, and this coexistence is a contextual foundation of meaning. In figural work, the object is contextualized by its display, gesture, characterization, and performance. There is a perceived value of the body based on specific choices made by artist and curator - how is the body shown, in reverence or in jest? Does it preach the cultural narrative of contemporary art or defy it? "Queer/feminist art practices will hover over the thingness of the body as a way of exploring the weight and history of that body, as a way of exploring the politics of making bodies into things and things into bodies," Jennifer Doyle says in *Queer Formalisms* (Doyle, Getsy 2013). Each of these bodies, these objects, are inseparable from the context of their creation, in the same way that reception of these objects are crucially part of the conversation. How the viewer engages with and responds to the body is an informative part of the objects being (Doyle, Getsy 2013).

Figural sculptors have the unique opportunity to recognize the multiplicity of genders and the ways in which they show up in the body, to canonize nonnormative personhood. But ultimately, to the average viewer, the sculpted figure humanizes queerness because it immediately asks the viewer to see themselves in the object. The body as an object in art is understood as a person that is immediately a canvas for the viewer's projections. In the same way that someone who looks at an image of a person will recognize sadness or joy, it is because they have experienced sadness or joy. These ideas are expressed in texture, colour, gesture, and formalist aspects of art but can be understood as an experience. So if the viewer can recognize the experiential context of identity in visual language, it is more accessible to then examine these labels and idealizations as layered intersections of personal histories, cultural expectations, and critical

interpretations of the body. Figural sculptors are quite literally shaping humanity, and what people understand to be human. Traditional ideologies only exist as much as they show up in contemporary culture. Sculpture can be as directive as it is declarative. It is the sociopolitical imperative of the artist to shape these ideas, to question the hegemony and push critical reflection. Through art, it is possible to shed the constriction of gendered ideology to a more liberative and expansive practice of personhood.

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