The Vampire
inside my Camera

An exhumation of Gender, Monstrosity and Queer Worldmaking
through Photography and Video

Gem Carosin

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A minor dissertation submitted in partial fullfilment of the requirments for the award of the degree of Masters of Fine Art

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DECLARATION
This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signarure:

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ABSTRACT

Gem Carosin's MFA project The Vampire inside my Camera: an exhumation of gender, monstrosity and queer worldmaking through photography and video uses the vampire character as metaphor investigating shame and desire through a queer lens. Examining how the vampire has taken shape in the public imagination, this text discusses folktales, art-historical and literary influences. Through a historical revisionist approach, monstrosity and the example of the vampire are parallelled to the negative assumptions about queer lives.

By recontextualising the compositions and lighting of paintings, Gem draws the past into the present. Temporality, chronopolitics and the disruptive capacity of the undead immortal are of interest to Gem as they explore the limits of heteronormative structures of time-keeping. They break down how and why queer people may use troubled temporality and fluid depictions of gender to imagine utopian futures and queer worlds. This is pinpointed in the horror genre of film and various contemporary artforms that displace linearity.

Gem's photography and video art portrays them as the monstrous vampire character, positioning their project as specific to them and their orientation to the world. Using their queer chosen family as photographic subjects, Gem explores what it means to be a monster among monsters in a safe-haven of eternal night. This body of work emphasises the importance of storytelling and imagining in creating queer spaces. Prioritising humour, joy and pleasure in their video work highlights how queer history is often defined by queer suffering. Gem hopes that their photographs will reach other queer individuals and provide comfort and kinship.

"The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful."

– Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)

Fig. 1: Gem Carosin. 2024. *It's a Blood Moon tonight*.

Prologue:

Vampire Vignette

Myth

I wake up in the safety of my small dark chamber. Every inch is familiar, having lived here so long that I cannot remember the world beyond. The mirror beside me might as well be a wall as I have no reflection in it. I can only look down at myself and wonder at my body's true form. Unable to identify myself, I turn away from the pentaprism toward the lens, allowing light into my cramped space. It's dangerous to look out, and I fear the sunlight settling on my pale skin. Overexposure would lead to my death. But I've been stuck here for far too long, a restlessness itching under my flesh. I am compelled, twitching, to glance through the tunnel of glass. An image takes shape in my eye.

The natural world clings to my retina, starkly beautiful and painful to behold. I step back, shaking from the agony of looking, but already hungry for another glance. Delicious hurt washes over me again as I stare out of the lens of my camera obscura. The landscape outside is filled with breathtaking wonder, and I imagine myself within it, walking through the flowers.

In this daydream, I stand on fleshy, muddy ground, five legs planted unevenly. Two heavy, meaty columns stand beside and between three sharp, thin spider ones, my back bent, hunched over and distended. I twist my neck this way and that, observing the world through one cylindrical eye, my lens now a part of my monstrous, transmuted body. My voyeuristic eye falls upon someone else in

the tall grass. A figure, also bent and troubled, but not in the same way as I.

"Am I where you want me?" The figure speaks, squinting and blinking at the monstrous-me as if there is light shining in their eyes. I am shocked that the figure does not turn to run away from my mutilated form.

"Yes, that's perfect. Hold still." I reply, a mouth I didn't know I had salivating around the syllables. My teeth ache.

My body shivers against the cool air, and in that second of uncontrolled movement I leap onto them, holding them down. I can feel their warm, plump body under my palms. Their sweat is sweet and salty, dripping deliciously down their neck as they turn their face away from me in a strangled scream. My vision blurred with crazed desire, I follow my nose to bite down on the straining artery. Hot blood fills my mouth. I can barely gulp it down fast enough.

Relief. Finally, the sustenance I needed. My heart beats frantically as I plop back down into the tall grass. No, not mine – theirs. It slowly dies away, no longer frightened. My body tingles with life from head to toe. The bliss has me smiling, chuckling to myself in the rush of dopamine.

The corpse lies next to me with their head lolling back like mine. We stare up at the stars together and I slip my hand, flushed with their blood, into theirs.

"It's like we could be lovers, if we just stayed still." I address the form beside me, "I wanted that for so long. I spent hours and hours sitting in the dark, thinking about you. I don't remember your name. Perhaps I never knew it, although you seemed to know me well. Maybe we had the same name – a serendipitous

occurrence signifying our meeting was fate. Then I could have uttered your name as our bodies intertwined, and in doing so I would have made love to myself."

I look at them. Their face is grey. The red smeared across their neck and saturating their clothing seems awfully bright. Too red. I lean forward, hoping to see myself reflected in their eyes. I see nothing there.

I open my eyes, the darkness of the room immediately familiar to me. My body is cold, and I wrap my arms around myself. The violence of the fantasy sticks in my mind, horrible and shameful. I replay it over and over again. Am I really capable of such cruelty? I examine every move or decision I made in that scenario, hoping no one ever finds out about the fantasy. No one can know how terrible I am. How useless and evil and disgusting. I wonder why I was made bad, while everyone else seems to be good. Only a broken mind would make such images. Only a broken person would feel their heart rush with excitement.

Only a monster.

Introduction: A bats-eye view

The Vampire inside my Camera: an exhumation[1] *of Gender, Monstrosity and Queer Worldmaking through Photography and Video* explores queerness, desire and shame through the fictional character of the vampire popularised in Gothic literature, film and contemporary media. The vampire provides a fluid metaphorical examination of the darker elements of queer experiences, as well as emphasising the absurd heteronormative practice of painting queer people to be monstrous stereotypes. By tracing the conception of the vampire character through literary and art-historical media, from Henry Fuseli's painting *The Nightmare* to Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*, the vampire figure submits to the murky taboo cravings of its creators. This is also true for myself and this project.

By using my own body as that of the vampire, this project aims to flesh out my own feelings of shame and tend to my open wounds of unrealised desires. This encapsulates internalised queer shame, the uncertainties of living as a queer person in a heteronormative world, suicidal ideation and intrusive thoughts, and the fantasies I would rather repress, which return to me even more vividly because of my fear. Thus, I position this project and text as specific to me and my orientation to the world. However, at times in this text, my register takes on the voice of the vampire character, which I embody in my images. Together – myself

1. To exhume something, often used when referring to a human corpse, is to unearth or bring back from neglect (Merriam-Webster, 2025).

and my vampire – a process of dual worldmaking takes place, illustrating that 'truth' is not finite. Taking this multiplicity into account, my project possesses more questions than I attempt to answer. I hope to avoid prescriptive answers in this work, as my core queer values invite fluidity and nuance.

While my largely photographic project draws on the lighting and compositions established in Baroque painting, namely the work of Michaelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610), I also make use of contemporary visual language. This aesthetic is influenced by film, social media and the informal dissemination of information taking place in online spaces. In this time of disconnected human interaction, I consider the internet as queer elder,[2] providing queer education to isolated individuals who cannot find community in real life. My body of work takes on the experience of insecurity and self-esteem in the tone of a Young Adult fantasy novel. Using a blend of humour and horror, I explore the painful process of growing into a sense of identity.

My project examines a history of queer recognition within the genre of Gothic horror (which will be discussed further in coming pages), particularly in films that draw on or remake the already overdone monstrous stories, such as *Dracula* or *Frankenstein*. A key example of this tradition of queer fascination with horror and monsters is the cult classic musical film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). This film mocks the campiness[3] of low-budget sci-fi and horror movies of the

2. Queer elders are older LGBTQ+ people who act as role models or mentors to queer youth, either formally or informally.
3. Camp refers to an aesthetic style or sensibility which values something for its exaggerated artifice, especially if this creates irony or humour. Historically associated with the LGBT+ culture, primarily gay men and drag queens. (Bekhrad, 2019).

60's and 70's. It merges the reiterated Dracula storyline and a queer imagination despite not having any vampire characters. The references to Gothic horror are widespread and untethered in their queer forms. This film has a rich historical and scholastic place in queer theory, which is unfortunately too extensive for the limited scope of this document. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* explores queer monstrosity through a camp depiction of repressed 'immoral' yearnings, highlighting and facilitating queer pleasure and a gender-non-conforming body that both desires and is desired.

Fig. 2: *Dr Frank N. Furter on a throne, surrounded by his household staff.* (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, 1975)

With the help of my queer chosen family,[4] I present in my photographs and video artworks an alternative world full of a variety of monsters relegated to the shadows of society, now thriving in the dark. Despite the monstrousness made visible in each of my characters, they are not presented in a frightening way. My monsters are curious, naïve and seeking jouissance.[5] They reflect a very human vulnerability back to the society they are banished from. The images I have created tell queer stories in a variety of modes. I circumvent linear narratives, but still hope to evoke myths and legends in my imagery.

I recontextualise or revise the past as a methodology for queering a history in which queer people have been rendered invisible, made out as villains or tragic victims. In this document, I distinguish between the main body of writing and the text that on occasion runs alongside it. These sidenotes act as a space for reflection – an alternative mirroring of the main text, wherein I can look back in time and insert myself (as a queer person) into the empty spaces traditional historical narratives cannot fill for me. I contemplate on past forms of queerness. While queerness is a fairly contemporary concept (Jones, 2014: 1), I find it useful to consider figures such as Caravaggio queer as an act of revisionist history.[6]

By making my art about queerness and my experience of shame, I desire to find

4. Queer chosen family is also often called a logical family in opposition to the biological family. This refers to a collection of close relationships which provide love and support in ways associated with traditional families but is built intentionally through choosing who you wish to call your family. (Laderer, 2023)
5. Jouissance is a phrase grown from the psychoanalytic studies of Jaques Lacan, referring to a physical or mental experience of pleasure or ecstasy (Braunstein, 2003: 102).
6. Historical revisionism refers to the reinterpretation of historical descriptions in a way that reframes or challenges the primarily accepted narratives (Banner, 2021).

others who feel as I (and my vampire) do. I hope that my work shows other queer people and myself that we are not alone. Reaching out in the dark and wishing to find the comfort of another queer body: In the process of finding each other, we also find ourselves. In loving each other, we can learn that perhaps even what we considered to be the worst parts of ourselves, are not actually so bad.

In Section 1: *Making a Vampire*, I give a historical overview of the vampire. Key aspects contributing to the coalition of the modern vampire are explored through both an art-historical influence and the literary authorities that have shaped this character within a gothic context. This section presents an exploration into the gothic monster as allegory, and how queerness can be read into the metaphorical monster in a variety of ways.

Vampire-related media is examined in Section 2: *Vampire Sightings*, using historic, film and contemporary fine art examples to illustrate how time and temporality can be disrupted by the vampire and instigates potential for worldbuilding.

Section 3: *The Vampire inside my Camera*, encompasses an exploration of the practical component of my MFA project. Discussing my photographic and video works' thematic use of queerness, gender, monstrosity, temporality and worldmaking.

I

Making a Vampire: Historical Context

When I began my MFA, I was looking primarily at queer relationships in my photographs and videos. My reading engaged queer theory and social resistance. Influenced by my own experiences, I examined queerness and queer individuals as the antithesis to heteronormative society, both free from its rules and outcast from its temporal narratives. In this othering, I saw a parallel between the ostracised queer and the monstrous other depicted in horror stories. Researching Gothic horror opened up a fascination with the symbolism monstrosity takes on in fiction, wherein I located queerness in the grotesque bodies of the gothic monster, specifically the vampire.

My focus on the vampire was sparked by their narratological entanglement of gender expression and implied sexuality through a layered symbolic language. I see in the vampire all the ways their monstrousness resembles the negative assumptions about queer lives. Through the blurring of the blood-drinking bite and sexual act, the vampire alludes to a queer history of perceived immoral sexual consumption. Further symbolic links between the vampire and the queer are discussed in-depth later in this document. For their presumed monstrousness, both the vampire and the queer are exiled from 'normal' society to exist on the periphery. I use the analogy of 'feeling like a monster' to process my own shame and desire, informed by my queerness. I examine the dialogue between sexual pleasure and death, followed by the camera's theoretical associations with death. Photographic theory outlines how the photographer becomes an angel of death (Sontag, 1976: i), instilling a kinship between me as a photographer and the vampire, as one monstrous queer to another.

In reading about Gothic[7] horror, I understand Gothic fiction as a general term for a genre of literature characterised by an aesthetic of fear and the uncanny.[8] The designation Gothic is in reference to European Gothic architecture from the Middle Ages. The grand castles of the Gothic era inspired the background settings of the first Gothic novels and helped to create a haunting, suspenseful atmosphere. *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole (1764) was the first novel to frame itself as Gothic, starting a trend that would inspire Romantic writers such as Lord Byron and Mary Shelley. The gothic curiosity would extend far into the Victorian era as well, influencing poet Edgar Allan Poe and writer Charles Dickens, whose use of gothic imagery and temperament paved the way for Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* – perhaps the most well-known vampire story and character in history.

As Gothic literature was introduced into the popular zeitgeist through Walpole's 1764 novel, Henry Fuseli's 1781 painting *The Nightmare* (Fig. 3) emerged soon after. This painting offers an art historical example of a developing visual semantic that would eventually become synonymous with the Gothic. There is no direct evidence that Fuseli would have read Walpole's book, but it is possible, and certainly, there is a comparable milieu apparent in these two forms. In their themes and use of symbolism, both portray the fight to savour innocence, embodied in a woman, from the thrillingly dark manifestations of the human psyche.

7. The Gothic, as it is spelled with a capital letter G, indicates a particular genre or form of the Gothic, such as Gothic architecture and Gothic literature. The term gothic, as it is spelt with lowercase, is an adjective pertaining to the Gothic genre (Edinburgh University Press Online, 2025).

8. A foundational tool in the creation of gothic scenes, the uncanny creates dislocation: to make the familiar seem unfamiliar (Palmer, 2012: 2). More on this on page 64.

Fig. 3: Henry Fuseli. 1781. *The Nightmare*. Oil on canvas. Detroit Institute of Arts.

Fuseli's *The Nightmare* depicts a woman in white, draped unnaturally over a bed. A gnarled creature sits on her chest. Its form blends with the dark around it, sitting in contrast to the 'virginal' white of the sleeping woman. The incubus visits the woman as she sleeps, haunting her dreams. On the nightstand sits a dressing mirror, its reflection invisible to the viewer. The painting allows the

Fuseli is said to have had a "friendship" with fellow art student Johann Caspar Lavater, with whom he exchanged letters professing his love and devotion (Powell, 1973: 24). We can now perhaps read this relationship as homoerotic or queer in some way. It is Lavater's niece, Anna Landolt, who years later became the object of Fuseli's desires and obsessions - the supposed inspiration for the female figure in *The Nightmare* (Powell, 1973: 60). Fuseli wrote many letters to Lavater describing his sexual fantasies with Landolt, but he never made his feelings known to her (Powell, 1973: 60).

Fuseli is known to have had an artistic predisposition toward hyper-muscular and physically huge men and submissive and 'immodest' women (Powell, 1973: 64). This knowledge, as well as his detailed letters describing vicious sexual desires, has led theorists to consider that Fuseli found pleasure in sadism and masochism. With this in mind, it is a compelling theory that the incubus is a reference to Fuseli himself, and his unrealised dark sexual desire for Landolt (or Lavater) (Powell, 1973: 60). The ambiguity of the demon figure is compelling in its possible symbolising of a shameful self-rejection.

innerworkings of the private mind to be publicly observed in a way that is both repulsive and alluring (Pop, 2011: 935). The result invites an analysis of dreamlife and the morality of the soul (Pop, 2011: 935).

Fuseli himself was first and foremost an art theorist, coming to painting later in life than his colleagues in the field (Powell, 1973: 22). While Fuseli was greatly inspired by the art of his notable predecessors, he also drew much creative inspiration from Shakespeare's theatrical literature (Powell, 1973: 28). Fuseli is known to have recreated the compositions of the Sistine Chapel in his painting studies, but he replaced the Biblical characters with the fantastic characters of Shakespeare's tales (1973: 28). Through the lens of historical revisionism, we could consider this as Fuseli appropriating or even queering history.[9]

While figurative representations inform much of *The Nightmare*, Fuseli's aim was to encapsulate a *feeling* commonly associated with the nightmare variety of dream – pressure upon the chest that restricts the breathing (Powell, 1973: 50). The importance of the felt over the seen signifies Fuseli's interest in the subconscious, and in what might be universal psychological encounters (Powell, 1973: 39). The imagery Fuseli used in this work was greatly influenced by European folk-tales, and the symbolic characters of the incubus and the horse are in this case implying the distress and horrible impression felt by the dreaming woman (Powell, 1973: 49). The masculine horse is a reference to the folk-tales of the *mara*, a spirit that rides in on a horse to break into a man's chamber and also his dreams (Powell:

9. 'Queering' or 'to queer' is the verb form of the noun queer. This term describes the analytic practise in queer theory of questioning hegemonic heteronormative binaries. Queering is a way of interacting with the otherwise presumably normative, actively drawing out their non-normative interpretations (Lindsay, 2020).

1973: 55). From a different region of folk-stories, we have the *Morra*, who closely resemble vampires in their desire to drink human blood (Powell, 1973: 56). These might have influenced the construction of the incubus, the nightmare, but it is undoubted that its presence signifies some kind of defiling sexual action (Powell, 1973: 60).

The vampire is a creature from myth and folktale, which feeds off the innocent living in order to sustain itself. In European folk-stories, vampires originated as spirits or the reanimated dead, more similar in physical description to modern zombies. In the 18th century, there was a resurgence of folk belief in the vampire, which resulted in the staking of corpses deemed to be vampires. The contemporary vampire, pale and refined, came to be through a short literary fiction written by John Polidori and published in 1819, *The Vampyre*. Polidori's work clearly inspired Bram Stoker in his writing of *Dracula* (1897), which colours much of the stereotypical vampire genre in current times. These two vampire stories move away from the mysteries of folktales and start to solidify the vampire formula.

Since the 19th century, the vampire has existed within the realm of the cliché, having been represented time and again in films and novels that adhere to a stereotypical exploration of the monster. The vampire is usually a tall, pale man, well-dressed and bearing the markers of hoarded wealth. Part of this ensemble is undoubtedly a black cloak, which might fly dramatically like wings when caught by the wind. The vampire is previously a human being who has died and is now *un*dead. Having experienced mortal death, the vampire is now *immortal* and free from a finite life. In exchange for bittersweet immortality, the vampire must keep

By remarkable happenstance, the writing of *The Vampyre* was instigated by the same friendly ghost-story writing contest that prompted Mary Shelley, then Godwin, to write *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. A group of young writers, including Mary Godwin and Percy Shelley gathered at Lord Byron's Villa Diodati in Cologny, Switzerland in 1816 (Castleton, 2020). Lord Byron was accompanied by his 'close friend' presumed lover and physician, John Polidori (Castleton, 2020). Polidori, the only guest without a history of writing, based his entry on a piece Byron was already working on, later to be published unfinished as *Fragment of a Novel* in 1819, the same year Polidori would publish *The Vampyre*.

Polidori's story follows a young man, Aubrey, as he is about to embark on his Grand Tour of Europe, a time of travel and adventure common for wealthy

young men through the 17th to 19th centuries. A mysterious Lord Ruthven asks to accompany him on his travels and Aubrey naively agrees. Even as Lord Ruthven acts coldly toward him and seeks out the attention of women, Aubrey is still enraptured by him. Eventually Ruthven's vampiric nature is revealed, and Aubrey is appropriately horrified.

This story is commonly analysed as Polidori's bitter and fictionalised account of the dynamic between himself and Lord Byron, whom he accompanied on his travels across Europe. As Byron shifted his attention from one young man to another, Polidori found himself discarded and resentful (Castleton, 2020).

to the shadows of civilization, hiding its true nature and its reprehensible desire for warm human blood (Eldridge, 2024). It is of an unknowable age and preys upon the young, beautiful and innocent (Eldridge, 2024).

Coming out the coffin

Portrayals of the monster, and indeed the vampire as an example of monstrousness, recognise a subversive desire which sits at odds with heteronormative prescriptions. Monstrosity is not something reserved only for works of fiction but is often a label imposed on individuals and groups who stand apart from society. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes the monster as the embodiment of societal prejudices and fears, making every monster specific to their time, place and cultural values (Cohen, 2018: 65). Difference is demonised because it exposes the arbitrary nature of what is considered to be 'normal' (2018: 68). The monster is difference represented in physical form, dehumanised and abject (Cohen, 2018: 68). The categorisation of 'monster' is used to rationalise prejudice and disgust, masquerading it as heroism (Cohen, 2018: 65).

It is by heteronormative and patriarchal 'heroism' that queerness and queer people have been labelled shamefully deviant and monstrous for their ability to trigger disquiet in society, and how fictional monsters take on the characterisations of demonised social groups. I believe that queer people relate to the vampire within

the horror genre because we have felt rejected for our mere existence. Looking at the queer origins of both *The Vampyre* and *Dracula*, we can read the vampire as holding back its desire and encompassed by shame. In this document, I compare the hidden vampire as being the closeted queer, and the unapologetic bloodthirsty vampire as the queer at large.

Unlike the very formulaic characterisations of the vampire, queerness is difficult to define. I will lay out some common threads of queerness which may be interwoven in many directions to form its meaning. While queer is often used colloquially to refer to gay or homosexual, or to generally signify any person who identifies under the acronym LGBT+, I intend to steer away from this perhaps essentialist and narrow demarcation. I hope to avoid using the term queer as a label or marker of a prescribed identity.

Rather, for this project, I lean more towards the following definition: "Queerness denotes an oppositional subjecthood, and in its theoretical application it stands for a political praxis set against dominant or normalising ideologies" (Stielau, 2016: 13). Queerness is often defined in opposition to heteronormativity, and as being able to rupture heteronormative expectations of a valuable life. Heteronormativity is pervasive and present in all aspects of "our individual and collective psyches, social institutions, cultural practices, and knowledge systems" (Yep, 2017: 11). Through heterosexuality's compulsory and prescriptive nature, heteronormativity acts as a tool in male patriarchal dominance (Yep, 2017: 19). Yet, heteronormativity causes many different modes of violence against all kinds of people, heterosexual and homosexual alike (Yep, 2017: 21).

Abraham Stoker was born in 1847 in Dublin, Ireland. He married Florence Balcombe in 1878 (Poletti, 2021). Both Bram and Florence were concerned with their social position and maintaining it, Bram keeping a comprehensive list of all the famous people he had ever met (Poletti, 2021). Some historians find it telling that from this otherwise thorough list, Stoker should leave off the infamous literary name of Oscar Wilde.

Florence Stoker had previously dated Wilde, and Bram and Wilde had socially intermingled often (Poletti, 2021). However, Wilde was persecuted for gross indecency – homosexuality – in 1895. Just a month later Stoker would start writing *Dracula*, published in 1897.

This layered suggestion of homoeroticism is contributed to by the fact that Stoker at 25 years old had written a letter to

American poet Walt Whitman, in which he confessed his homosexual hopes and fear at being discovered (Poletti, 2021). Some historians now view Stoker as a closeted homosexual and *Dracula* as a wistful portrait of Oscar Wilde, his lover at some point, as Count Dracula. Stoker, who historians believe never found the courage he was looking for at 25 in his letter to Whitman, infused *Dracula* with internalised homophobia and shame (Poletti, 2021).

It is still important, however, to capture a sense of queerness that is not only able to fracture (heteronormativity), but also to take productive forms (in individuals and groups). Jack Halberstam posits that "… the queer 'way of life' will encompass subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these wilfully eccentric modes of being" (Halberstam, 2005: 1). Queerness encompasses many practical applications, relationalities and presentations. While there is no one or true way to be queer, "[t]o perform queer through everyday practise means to constantly behave in ways, whether through sexual practise or aesthetically transforming one's body, that defy the conventional sex/gender system" (Jones, 2009: 2). The ambiguous and fluid nature of the term queer has allowed individuals to embody their identities in a multitude of shifting and unbound ways (Jones, 2009: 1). This queer relationality at its core implies social exclusion and the creation of the 'other' as outsider to hegemonic and heteronormative societal structures (Bradway, 2021: 713). I appreciate queerness as something undefinable. In defining the concept, its intended flexibility is constrained and its meaning diminishes.

Richard Dyer discusses the concept of an 'open secret' and how it pertains to both vampires and queers (1988: 112-113). When interacting with vampire media, the open secret influences characters and viewers alike. Simply by its designation as a 'vampire movie' or 'vampire novel', the audience enters the exchange already knowing what and probably who the vampire in the movie is, perhaps from the movie poster or trailer. The human characters in the story do not know and must

decode a collection of signs to pinpoint who/what the monster is. This secret is contradictory as it relies on vampirism being something you cannot deduce from someone's appearance (Dyer, 1988: 113).

However, it also insinuates, through the use of stereotypes and signs, that there *are* visual markers that signify a person's vampirism, and this in turn applies to queerness (Dyer, 1988: 113). As someone who has experienced queerness through a body that did not 'look queer' and one that decidedly does, I have insight into the visual codes that signify queerness both within queer spaces and heteronormative spaces. Since coming out[10] and dressing in a way that is more overtly aligned with my gender identity, I now find that my sexuality is something that I inadvertently wear on my sleeve. This is largely due to a growing cultural understanding of what queerness may look like, informed by queer flagging[11] as well as stereotyping. However, in my experience, another factor is illiteracy at the intersection of sexuality and gender. The contradiction of the open secret becomes a nuanced insight into a queer experience (Dyer, 1988: 114).

The tropified markers of a vampire can easily be paralleled to the negative conjectures about the lives of queer individuals – living in solitude in the dark corners of society, hoarding opulent wealth and an immoral and decadent (sexual) appetite (Dyer, 1988: 111).[12] The descriptions and visual renderings of vampires

10. 'Coming out' is a shortened version of the metaphor 'coming out of the closet', which refers to the process experienced by queer people of disclosing their gender or sexual identity with themselves or others.
11. Queer flagging is the use of agreed upon visual codes that communicate to other queer people in the know details such as sexual preferences or desires.
12. The vampire trope of being immensely rich may well have been to reinforce the stereotype of unrestrained indulgence, but could also have been influenced by the ill-concealed queerness

offer an overt queer reading, as gender stereotypes are often subverted in this genre. The vampire symbol has the flexible ability to be applied to many differing conditions of otherness (Dyer, 1988: 111). Despite this, vampirism as a sexual act is difficult to overlook, the blood-draining bite so often equated to a kiss (Dyer, 1988: 111-112). In vampire stories, the vampiric acts are frequently portrayed as similarly intimate as sex, transpiring in a private setting such as the bedroom previously visualised in *The Nightmare* (Dyer, 1988: 112).

Dyer presents different ways of positioning oneself as a queer person to the vampire text. One such way is to conspire with the narrator in the fear of the vampire (as a metaphor for queerness), and thus self-oppress (Dyer, 1988: 113). An alternative is to openly relate to the vampire, revelling in the ignorance of the mortal characters, as they become othered to the secret you and the vampire hold together (Dyer, 1988: 113). This dichotomous viewpoint is practical and highlights a nuanced experience of 'feeling like a monster' for queer individuals, such as myself. As discussed above, the feeling of monstrousness is something first projected onto the queer by heteronormative values. Internalised homophobia is a poignant factor in the process of making a monster. Speaking to my own experiences, it is in the final acceptance of my queerness that I have felt the most monstrous. Heteronormative society can tolerate a self-hating queer, but the normative hierarchy is threatened by the loud and proud queer individual.

Robert Phillips (2014: 20) offers insight into the experience of being called a monster and reclaiming the term. Phillips states that for queer people, and

of affluent men such as Lord Byron, whose wealth afforded him some semblance of social protection despite his sexual 'immoralities' (Dyer, 1988: 111).

particularly for Trans activists, aligning themselves with the monster allows for a political strategy of abjection.[13] This destabilises the structures of power that thrive off marginalising by dictating who is 'normal' and who is 'monster' (Phillips, 2014: 20). Meaning is stripped from ostracising words and qualified identity alike, presenting the individual as a queer object (Phillips, 2014: 20). Phillips refers to the work of writer and activist Susan Stryker, wherein she aligns her transgender body with that of Frankenstein's monster, noting "Stryker acknowledges and welcomes her abjection when she declares, 'I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster' [...] Through this declaration, she is reclaiming the word monster in order to relieve it of its power; but more importantly, abjection becomes a tool with which to further challenge and problematize conventions of socially constructed gender categories." (Phillips, 2014: 21).

The feeling of monstrousness has grown in me as I come out again and again, revealing my vulnerable self and killing the expectations that others had of me. I have seen varying degrees of disappointment from people in my life, with a few wonderfully accepting experiences in between. However, this reinforces the instilled shame I already felt about my existence. I am now all the happier for having recognised myself, but I still find it a constant practice of self-acceptance to combat the many years of self-rejection and the societal discomfort I still face. I have chosen to position myself and this project deviously in league with the vampire as queer. This enables the vampire to act as a figure for queer resistance and absolute queer acceptance without hiding or negating the shame that I, and

13. Phillips defines abjection as follows: "Abjection refers to the vague sense of horror that permeates the boundary between the self and the other." (2014: 19). Phillips goes on to say that abjection is a process of rejecting unclassifiable bodies from systems of identification (2014: 19).

other queer people, bravely work against and which has made me who I am.

Post-mortem: Death, the queer and the photograph

I emphasise another key connection between the vampire and the queer – their inexplicable link to death. Lee Edelman theorises that queers inherently have oppositional relationality to the symbol of a future 'child' for which heteronormative society must work toward providing a structured future, at the expense of the already living (Edelman, 2004). Edelman proposes that the 'child' stands for life, heteronormative linear temporality and futurity, and the queer as its antithesis is bound to the death drive (Edelman, 2004). In my opinion, this is a cynical view on queer futurity,[14] but does offer a nuanced interaction between the queer and death. By looking at the queer's relationship with the death drive and the pleasure drive, I can tease out a complex yet hopeful position on death away from Edelman's anti-future negativity.

Encapsulated by the French phrase *la petit mort*, meaning 'the little death', which refers to the feeling of absolute finality after an orgasm, there are many similarities between the human desire for pleasure and the drive toward death (Seitler, 2019: 600). Jack Halberstam links the death drive and sex drive in masochism – obtaining sexual pleasure from one's own pain. Halberstam describes a

14. Queer futurity is the practise of theorising how queerness will exist in the future. This is often imagined through a utopian lens, wherein queer pleasure and joy take centre stage (Muñoz, 2009: 1).

Freudian understanding of sadomasochism[15] as "a byproduct of the unsuccessful repression of the death instinct to which a libidinal impulse has been attached" (Halberstam, 2011: 136).

Queer American photographer Catherine Opie provides a fine art framing of this concept in her self-portrait *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994). In this photograph (Fig. 4) Opie is pictured wearing a BDSM[16] leather hood and collar, sitting before an ornate patterned backdrop. Down both of Opie's arms are neat rows of surgical needles, punctured through her skin. Across Opie's bare chest, the word *Pervert* has been elegantly carved with a scalpel in an act of scarification.

15. Psychological tendency or sexual preference characterised by obtaining sexual pleasure from one's own pain or the infliction of pain onto others (Burton, 2024).
16. BDSM stands for Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism. This acronym is generally used in place of the specific term sadomasochism, as it can be used as a blanket term for many related deviant sexual preferences other than and including sadomasochism (Carlstrom, 2019: 404).

Fig. 4: Catherine Opie. 1994. *Self-Portrait/Pervert*. Chromogenic print. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Opie's photographs portray a relationship between pain and pleasure physically embodied in the queer. Using her own body as a site of political and personal masochism, Opie presents the viewer with a drag persona, Bo, who she expresses in several of her photographic projects (Opie et al, 2008: 72). Opie's interest in personas began in the 1980s while participating in the leather community, and

allow an otherwise repressed side of Opie's conscious to be explored (Opie et al, 2008: 72). For Opie, this portrait is about the desire for queer visibility (Opie et al, 2008: 73). Opie's portrait is simultaneously seductive and repulsive. She tricks the conservative eye into lingering by using a familiar visual language of art historical paintings (Opie et al, 2008: 73). Opie states: "I wanted my identity to be hidden, but yet I would wear what people would call me on my chest, reclaiming it in the most elegant and beautiful way" (Opie et al, 2008: 73). In this image there is a confession, a declaration of a very personal felt experience of pain, pleasure, existence and death. Halberstam writes that "reconciling the supposedly irreconcilable tension between pleasure and death, the masochist tethers her notion of self to a spiral of pain and hurt. She refuses to cohere, refuses to fortify herself against the knowledge of death and dying, and seeks instead to be out of time altogether, a body suspended in time, space, and desire" (Halberstam, 2011: 144). This quote, like Opie's character Bo, exemplifies the narrative, temporal qualities of pain and pleasure.

Dana Seitler likens the pleasure of unfolding a narrative (or life/story) to both sexual desire and the death drive (2019: 600). The audience's experience of pleasure is desire for the closure of final jouissance (Seitler, 2019: 600). Hurtling toward death, queerness manifests in all the ways finality can be delayed, to savour the deviance of a narrative (2019: 600). Seitler muses that we can "understand nonnormative sexuality or wayward desire within the temporality of lingering," but that this will not stop the "final push to conventional love or punishing death," an ending that is comfortingly normative to the average reader and marginalising

to the queer (2019: 601). Seitler examines the narrative device of death, and in particular the fantasy or desire for death (suicidal desire) as able to disorganise the normative and sequential narrative of a life (2019: 602). Seitler observes, "suicide acts as a narratological strategy for enabling a queer pleasure that conventional, which is to say heterosexualized, narratives otherwise refuse" (2019: 602). The desire for self-annihilation allows a breaking away from normative expectations and rules of life (2019: 599). In this way, the death fantasy becomes a form of queer resistance (2019: 599).

While to some this may seem morose, I find that my own desire for death (suicidal ideation) plays a significant role in my ability to live openly as a queer person. Speaking from my own experience, I believe that queers undergo a kind of 'death' upon realisation of their queerness. This merely metaphorical death is that of the heteronormative life I believed I would have, including all the normative relationships and milestones I sacrificed. That is not to say that homosexual individuals cannot live heteronormative lives, either by remaining closeted or by ascribing to assimilationist values. I needed to kill and mourn my heteronormative life because the alternative for me at the time -seemed only to be death (suicide).

Upon 'dying', I was free to finally be my authentic self, as monstrous as that might seem to heteronormative values. I feel ashamed that I experience suicidal ideation, a sign of psychological weakness in a society just coming to terms with mental health. Yet, I am loathe to say that I am mentally *unhealthy* compared to the white, cisgender male which has served as central subject to developing Western medicine. Gerald Gaylard locates interest in the Gothic in a cultural experience

of thanatophilia,[17] "the love of death and the opposite of eros and biophilia, the irrational urge to cripple and/or extinguish life" (2008: 3). Gaylard explains this as the felt occurrence of the "return of the repressed", the past haunting the present and future (Gaylard, 2008: 3). Gaylard likens this experience to the living dead, such as the vampire (2008: 3). The spectral presence of death and mortality invigorates the present moment (Gaylard, 2008: 4). My personal romance with death has drawn me to photography as a way of bearing death without touching it.

The camera offers me, as a photographer, the chance to make 'still' the movement of life. Susan Sontag (1976) writes "[p]hotography also converts the whole world into a cemetery. Photographers, connoisseurs of beauty, are also – wittingly or unwittingly – the recording-angels of death. The photograph-as-photograph shows death. More than that, it shows the sex-appeal of death". I am the subject of many of my photographs and know how it feels to present my body as a site of exploration by the camera. As Roland Barthes (1981) suggests, in front of the camera, the subject becomes a presented mixture of who they think they are, who they wish to be perceived as, who the photographer believes them to be and the version the photographer hopes to capture for the purpose of their photographic inquiry. When I am both photographer and subject, this might be slightly simplified, but the result Bathes hypothesises remains pertinent: that in this process of objectification, authenticity cannot be realised, and a kind of death takes place (1981: 14).

17. 'Thanato-' comes from the Greek God Thanatos, meaning the anthropomorphism Death. Not to be mistaken for 'necro-' (e.g. necrophilia) meaning relating to a corpse or the dead in a physical sense.

In the case of Catherine Opie, the above (Fig. 4) denies the viewer access to the authentic self of the artist through covering the face to hide human emotion, presenting the persona of Bo as a political object (Opie et al, 2008: 72). Despite the obvious pain Opie must have been experiencing, the figure is still. Barthes astutely observes of photography that the victim of the camera is unlikely to struggle, resigned to an uncomfortable fate (1981: 14). The moment of photographic capture passes and the image remains, a grave encasing a body left behind. The photographic image outlives the subject, and even as the photograph is taken, the image begins its independent (after)life away from a mortal body.

Sontag comments that "[p]hotographs turn the present into the past, make contingency into destiny. Whatever their degree of 'realism,' all photographs embody a 'romantic' relation to reality" (1976: i). In this manner, photography makes myths and idols of the everyday world and its inhabitants (Sontag, 1976: i). As much as I, the photographer Barthes describes, struggle to keep the image alive, the portrait will always be of Death (Barthes, 1981:14). By photographing my close friends, I 'kill' them and consume their image in an act of vampirism. I become a monster behind my camera. Guiltily crouched behind my tripod, I am not always able to recognise myself. The violent act of shooting my friends also carries the hope of empathy and mutual recognition of our queerly undead states of being.

My vampire, a creature drawn from myth and television, only exists within my camera. My vampire is protected and likewise imprisoned inside the camera, the 'dark chamber' from the Latin 'camera obscura'. Like the latent analogue

photograph, the vampire is light-sensitive, and must keep to the cover of dark or risk exposure and death. The camera's lens has captured the vampire again and again, affirming the fictional, constructed, fantastical nature of photography over the presumed truthful quality of the photographic image. The vampire sits in the pentaprism of my DSLR, staring into a mirror that they cannot see themself in. They gaze voyeuristically out through the peephole lens, seeing mostly darkness, and then a ray of light that becomes an image. They hope to see themself out there. What they see is a shadow of a person, a projection of self. This shadow-self is an amalgamation of monstrosity and hopefulness – a not-yet-formed being, barely visible in the dark.

Tracing the making of vampires through their early inspiration in Gothic horror, picturing the felt over the seen, and appearances in literature, I set the scene for the monstrous vampire as a symbolic manifestation of the queer. The early literature of the gothic vampire genre provides insight into the foundations of vampires and their inherent queerness. Examining the many ways monsters can be made, in both fantasy and reality, allows me to process my own experience of queer shame, with the help of my camera. Death is not only a thematic underpinning of the undead vampire, but speaks to the experience of being in the eye of the camera. Monstrosity, and the vampire as a gothic example, provides a framework for understanding queerness through a photographic lens. Using narrative devices from Gothic literature, I materialise a world for my project to take place.

2

Vampire Sightings: Vampiric precedents in art and media

My project draws from many different creative mediums, including paintings, contemporary films, and conceptual art practices. This section illustrates the varied ways in which I can locate my queer vampire in the methodologies and symbolism of a variety of artists. This includes several films, both within the vampire horror genre and completely external to fantasy. I examine the performance art of contemporary artists such as Steven Cohen and Agnes Questionmark in their individual portrayals of monstrosity through their own bodies. While these artists evoke queer futures in their work, I am first drawn to the ways queerness manifested in times long passed. Reaching further back in time than Henry Fuseli, to another painter influenced by theatre and drama, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio lived from 1571 to 1610. My project is greatly influenced by the paintings of Caravaggio, his life and through the work his art has inspired. My discussion of Caravaggio is centred on his subversive capabilities, as well as a ripple effect from him of disrupted temporality which I believe exemplifies a queer interaction with time. While queerness is a fairly contemporary concept, I find it useful to consider Caravaggio queer as an act of revisionist history. In doing this, and analysing the biopic film *Caravaggio* by Derek Jarman, I showcase how otherwise tragic queer histories might be reframed through a lens of creation that does not forget the painful experiences of queer individuals.

Achieving immortality: Caravaggio's lasting influence

Caravaggio's life is often retold as a dramatic narrative of unfortunate events: "including street brawls, sex, scenes in restaurants, wealthy patrons, libel trials, manslaughter, rejected commissions later bought up by dukes and cardinals, and knighthood and its rescinding, all ending with death in Tuscany" (Champagne, 2015: 29). If queerness is disruption to the norm, Caravaggio embodied a queer temperament and is imagined to have had relationships with both men and women (Champagne, 2015: 9). John Champagne examines Caravaggio's life and artistic sensibilities through a lens of queer melodrama,[18] asserting "rather than being mimetic, melodrama is more productively considered as allegory in that it is not chiefly an imitation of reality but rather the deployment of certain reality-effects in the effort to signify a 'something else'" (2015: 22). The performativity of the hauntingly familiar is a contemporary queer enactment toward queer futurities and will be considered further in pages to come (Muñoz, 2009: 49). Caravaggio's use of performance rather than the naturalistic depictions of Biblical scenes causes a temporal disruption that I relate to the dead yet immortal vampire's ability to trouble heteronormative conceptions of linear time.

18. Champagne notes that the Italian male has always appeared 'queer' compared to Western masculinity, and all the melodramatic idiosyncrasies of Caravaggio's life and art can be theorised as queerly subversive as revisionist history (Champagne, 2015: 8).

Like Fuseli, both the theatrical melodrama and Caravaggio's paintings engage allegory to generalise a sensation which a wide array of spectators might relate to and even find reference to their own specific emotional states within (Champagne, 2015: 22). Melodrama is able to spark deep emotional reactions from its audience, just as Caravaggio's paintings do (Champagne, 2015: 29). Caravaggio's paintings invoke the theatrical stage in many ways, including tableau, drapery, lighting and costumes. Melodrama offers the moment of tableau to visually summarise the characters' emotional states in a moment of stillness (Champagne, 2015: 40). In Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (Fig. 5) an enhanced narrative quality becomes evident, as the viewer is compositionally invited into a horrific set of circumstances (Champagne, 2015: 41). As the title suggests, the painting captures the Catholic biblical tale of violent murder of the enemy general Holofernes by the widow Judith. What the tableau's single frozen moment allows is an inferred future – another single moment after this one, and then another and another (Champagne, 2015: 41). In *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, Holofernes is frozen between life and death, the moment that the throat is cut but the head not yet detached (Champagne, 2015: 41).

It is theorised that Caravaggio worked with a mirror to reflect a representation of his tableaus, from which he painted (Champagne, 2015: 46). This created a strange untruthful perspective in his work that suggests a slanting of represented reality[19] (Champagne, 2015: 46). This quality caused much scandal in Caravaggio's day, as the church, who policed religious art, required Biblical illustrations to purport sublime veracity. The Church was just as dismayed that Caravaggio made use of common people as models for divine characters, such as a prostitute on which he modelled the Virgin Mary. Caravaggio disregarded biblical accuracy through the costuming of his actors, who he depicted in

19. The mirror inside a camera is positioned to direct light (and the image the light holds) from the lens into the camera's viewfinder. This allows the photographer to see the image before taking the photograph. Like Caravaggio using the mirror to gain easier access to his final painting compositions, the mirror is used in the camera to frame the image before it exists.

a mix of authentic and contemporary dress (Champagne, 2015: 47). His performative paintings transformed laypeople into legends in a way that transcends time. Performance, and the not-quite-as-it-seems is an important aspect for understanding Caravaggio's subversive nature (Champagne, 2015: 38).

I am not the only one who has found Caravaggio's temporal interleaving of interest, as filmmaker Derek Jarman has continued this queer tradition of confusing time in his biopic film titled *Caravaggio* (1986). Jarman (1942-1994) was a prominent and queer British independent filmmaker (Aebischer, 2013: 21). Jarman's films brought a poignant discussion of gender and queer theory (Aebischer, 2013: 21).

Caravaggio (1986) is a loose biopic of the life of Caravaggio. Beginning notably with

Fig. 5: Caravaggio. 1599. *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. Oil on canvas. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica.

Caravaggio uses the lighting technique chiaroscuro, lending another layer of theatricality to his work. The radiating light coming down upon the subjects, absorbing into the dark contrasts of the room, creates depth and drama (Champagne, 2015: 46). The lighting is comparable to modern spotlights on a stage (Champagne, 2015: 46) What perhaps emphasises Caravaggio's theatricality

is that he painted from real life – models holding still in complicated tableaus for lengthy periods of time.[20]

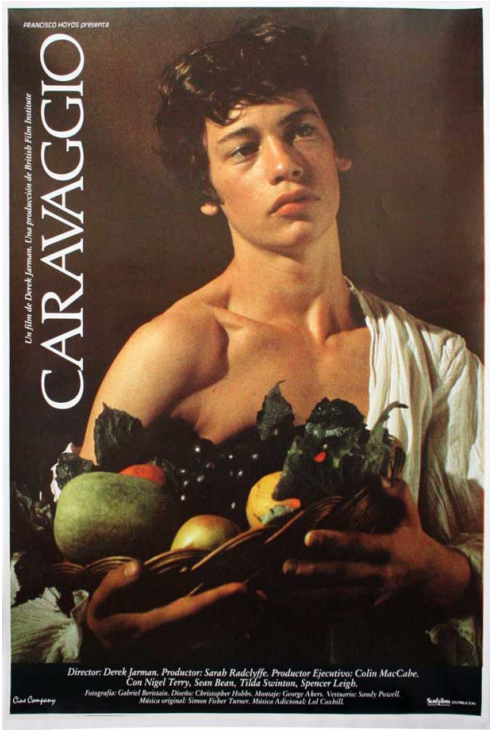


Fig. 6: *Caravaggio* movie poster, 1986.

20. Photography, known for its early constructed tableaus for portraiture, would only come into being over 200 years after Caravaggio. Yet, the photographic portrait would continue to mimic Caravaggio's sets. Two centuries after Caravaggio's models held their uncomfortable gestures for Caravaggio to paint, similar models would hold their poses in the making of Daguerreotypes, albeit for shorter amounts of time (Newall et al, 2024).

his death in 1610, the film is a patchwork of flashbacks and untethered side-quests, which returns to Caravaggio's deathbed at its close. The sets are minimal, echoing the subtle and stage-like quality of Caravaggio's paintings. Indeed, many of the scenes are constructed as meticulous recreations of his painting tableaus, or other art-historical references, as seen in Figures 6, 7 and 8 (Aebischer, 2013: 28).

Film, in many ways a modern stage, presents the audience with a highly planned, directed, redirected, cut and edited performance. The film may be striving for authenticity in some areas, but Jarman has made it clear that this is not always the case. Using Caravaggio's own mixing of biblical and contemporary costuming in his paintings as rationalisation, Jarman signals his own present-day throughout the film (Aebischer, 2013: 28). While these items – a typewriter,

a calculator, a motorbike – stand out when one is looking for them, they enrich the characters in a visual language the contemporary viewer will understand.

Jarman's films are all in some way influenced by his politic of "viewing the past through the eyes of the present" (Aebischer, 2013: 21). His preoccupation with the *interpretation* of the past can be considered an appropriation of early modern figures into contemporary narrative. Jarman, through his knowledge of queer theory, was aware that projecting contemporary ideas of queerness onto and into the 1500s can only be speculative and limiting. However, relating to Caravaggio as one queer man to another, separated by expansive time and space, allows for *Caravaggio* to take on an autobiographical tone – at its essence a story of a young visual artist coming into his queerness and

Fig. 7: *A young Caravaggio poses to be painted* (*Caravaggio*, 1986)

Fig. 8: Caravaggio. 1593. *Boy with a basket of fruit.* Oil on canvas. Galleria Borghese, Rome.

trying to make a difference in a resolute society (Aebischer, 2013: 27).

Disrupting of linear time, through intertextuality, anachronisms and 'deviant' sexual practises, proposes a queer temporality which allows both Jarman and Caravaggio to travel in time. José Estaban Muñoz asserts that "performances both theatrical and quotidian – transports us across symbolic space, inserting us in a coterminous time when we witness new formations within the present and the future" (Muñoz, 2009: 56). Muñoz theorises that performing what he calls queer utopias, which critique the respective present while incorporating memory, opens up a collective imagining for potential queer futures (Muñoz, 2009: 1).

The harmful implications of heteronormative temporal logic can be counteracted by centring queer pleasure as historically significant (Freeman, 2005: 59). The performativity of Caravaggio and Jarmans' art offers a queer history that is not structured around queer suffering, but also around creating (Freeman, 2005: 59).

Fig. 9: *Ranuccio working on his motorbike* (*Caravaggio*, 1986)

Temporality and gender in the vampire genre

The dramatic visual symbolism and storytelling Caravaggio developed in his paintings is comparable to the gothic theatricality associated with the vampire, particularly in television. As Caravaggio and Jarman disturb time, the undead immortality of the vampire accentuates temporality's fluid state. As film is a time-based medium, temporality is flexible. Across a two-hour film, the viewer may travel across a human lifetime, such as in the biopic *Caravaggio*. Cinema proposes an agreement with the viewer, wherein the viewer enters the film already knowing the genre, the themes, the actors and what the characters will look like from the movie poster or trailer. With horror films in particular, the viewer agrees to be disquieted, shocked, shamefully aroused for a specific length of time, and then released back to their comfortable reality. Films can also disturb time through their contents: imagery, themes, setting and characters. For myself, a particularly notable marker of the hegemonic structuring of time is gender, as the linear decent of a life seems to be demarcated along the lines of male and female. Stepping out of the narrow limits of binary gender presents an overflow of temporal possibilities for the vampire horror genre to agitate their heteronormative viewers and imagine alternate realities for those who relate to the monster.

The vampire story engages temporality in a disruptive capacity, crushing

expectations of how societies relate to time (Lau, 2018: 3). Elizabeth Freeman writes about chronopolitics as time and tempo becoming tools in strategies of power (2005: 57). Normative structures of time-keeping (for example the registering of births, marriages and deaths) can be considered structures of control (Freeman, 2005: 57). For example, in the largely Christian Victorian England which informed Bram Stoker's *Dracula* story the epoch was greatly concerned with the idea of good breeding, eugenics and genetic progression (Stuart, 2018: 223). This society was focused on a reproductive, linear understanding of time which ensured their futurity (Stuart, 2018: 223).[21] The vampire is an antithesis to this, free from the constraints of sexual reproduction. In the vampire's immortal, undead state, the passage of time is frozen around them like a tableau (Stuart, 2018: 223).

Thomas M. Stuart suggests that this trope taps into the anxieties surrounding genetic advancement, creating a feeling of fear (Stuart, 2018: 223). The vampire is a vestige of a time long passed, but they do not deteriorate (Stuart, 2018: 224). The vampire's supernatural aptitudes are incomparable to the juvenile abilities of humans, locating the humans as genetically inferior and even obsolete (Stuart, 2018: 223). Even more damning, the vampire (as with the queer) embodies a rejection of the reproductive futurity which heteronormative society relies upon (Stuart, 2018: 224). The immortal vampire threatens heteronormative chronopolitics in their ability to step outside of the linear requirements of a 'worthy' life (Lau, 2018: 3). As chronopolitics often include gender-specific experiences such as

21. In Victorian England the average life expectancy was 41 years old. Adulthood was not as lengthy as it is in contemporary times, making ensuring the future of your family more pressing (Dunn, 2023).

child-bearing, the vampire trope signifies their temporal disruptions through transforming gender binaries (Lau, 2018: 4).

In the 1992 film *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, there are many instances visualising active condemnation of gender stereotypes. The viewer follows the human Mr Harker as he visits the home of Count Dracula, a gothic castle falling into ruin. Mr Harker, disorientated and fearful at finding himself a prisoner in Dracula's castle, falls into the clutches of Dracula's three vampiric wives. This scene introduces a complex bending of gender roles – the feminisation of the male body and women as predators. The vampire women, feminine, powerful and animalistic, exist as perverse monsters that excite and frighten Harker (Halberstam, 1995: 100). In the original literature of *Dracula* (Bram Stoker, 1897: 381), the female protagonist is fed blood from the chest/nipple of the Count to begin her transformation into a vampire. In the movie remake *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), it is first the human man, Mr Harker, that is fed upon by the female vampires through suckling at his nipples. Further into the narrative, we see the human woman and love-interest/heroine, Mina Harker, attempting to suck blood at the bosom of the Count to be turned into a vampire.

Fig. 10: *A wife of Dracula drinking blood from the human Mr Harker's nipple* (*Bram Stoker's Dracula*, 1992)

In both instances, the men become 'mothers', giving their life force to sustain another. Their bodies become feminine as they take on the position of breast-feeder. For the Count, he is giving something more than sustenance – he is providing from his bosom the liquid of rebirth into immortality (Halberstam, 1995: 101). The male Count, not any of his many wives, is the creature of reproduction in this narrative (Halberstam, 1995: 101). These sexual/feeding sequences illustrate the dichotomy of repulsion and desire for the monster (Cohen, 2018: 72). The forbidden aspect of the monster offers an escapist fantasy for the movie-goer away from strict social conventions (Cohen, 2018: 72). The vampire is attractive for the very same reasons they are loathsome to their society – they are enviably free from the rules (Cohen, 2018: 72).

Fig. 11: *The human Mina Harker drinking blood from the chest of Count Dracula* (*Bram Stoker's Dracula*, 1992)

The female vampire is portrayed as the hyper-feminine temptress (Halberstam, 1995: 99). To further signify the female vampire's break from valued womanhood, she feeds on children. The vampire is framed as completely unnatural, illustrating their refusal of heterosexual reproductive futurity (Stuart, 2018: 224). She is the antithesis to the caring wife and mother archetype that is valued in heteronormative society (Halberstam, 1995: 100). The character Lucy Westenra, the object of much masculine desire in life and friend to Mina, is turned into a vampire (*Bram Stoker's Dracula*, 1992). Lucy leaves her crypt at night, wearing the opulent wedding dress that she did not get a chance to use before her untimely (un)death. Lucy entices children back to her grave and drinks their blood. The child's red blood still drips from Lucy's lips. Her virginal white dress, reminiscent of the vulnerable

woman in Fuseli's *The Nightmare*, is now subverted and grotesque. The horror of her transgressions is returned to her in the ritualistic second killing of Lucy (Halberstam, 1995: 101). Lucy's ultimate betrayal of valued womanhood firmly displaces the teleology of mortal gender (Lau, 2018: 8).

Fig. 12: *The vampire Lucy carrying a child to her crypt to feed upon* (*Bram Stoker's Dracula*, 1992)

Fig. 13: *The vampire Lucy as she is confronted by a mob to kill her* (*Bram Stoker's Dracula*, 1992)

The moral superiority that is often taken up by the vampire-hunter is comparable to the anti-queer sentiments of modern reality. For many queer people, the best-case scenario is to assimilate into heteronormative systems to avoid a higher level of prejudice (Sizemore-Barber, 2016: 202). Performance artist Steven Cohen could be considered the antithesis of those principles. Pictured below carrying a banner at the 1996 Johannesburg Pride March, Cohen makes it quite clear that he finds dark humour in shocking the heterosexual onlooker. The banner slogan states: "GIVE US YOUR CHILDREN – WHAT WE CAN'T FUCK WE EAT" (Sizemore-Barber, 2016: 202). Cohen's use of horror and comedy is meant to highlight the absurdity of the monstrous image conservatives have crafted of queers and allows queers to laugh at bigoted discomfort (Sizemore-Barber, 2016: 203). Halberstam comments that "being taken seriously means missing out on the chance to be frivolous, promiscuous, and irrelevant" (Halberstam, 2011: 6). While not everyone, queer or otherwise, would find the slogan humorous, it shows a comical parallel to the vampire Lucy, who does indeed eat children.

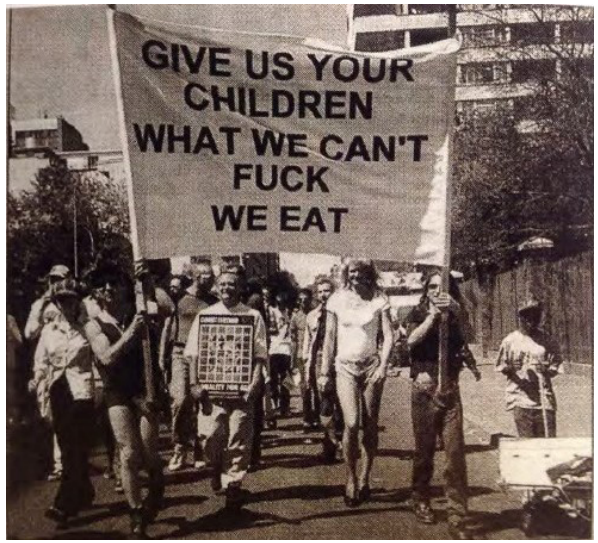


Fig. 14: Steven Cohen carries a banner in the 1996 Johannesburg Gay Pride parade. Reproduced from S. de Waal and A. Manion (eds) *Pride: Protest and Celebration*. 2006. Johannesburg: Fanele Books.

The example of Cohen's slogan illustrates how humour can disrupt the monster's threatening nature, and how this can be used as a tool for both protest and pride (Sizemore-Barber, 2016: 202). Many queer people might feel uncomfortable with Cohen's banner slogan and would prefer something less confrontational or even something to endear themselves to their conservative counterparts. I believe that if name-calling is meant to illicit shame, then the way to cancel it out is with pride. If you fear being called a monster, the most direct way to overcome it is to desire to make yourself as monstrous as possible. Claiming the negative stereotype and reclaiming the monster takes away its power to be used as a weapon against you.

Cohen's "Monstrous Drag"[22] is unapologetically horrific, transforming him into the beast that conservatives fear him to be (Sizemore-Barber, 2016: 202). In 2017, after the sudden and visceral death of Cohen's partner Elu Keiser by haemorrhage in 2016, Cohen's art explores grief and life after death in a show titled *Put your heart under your feet ...and walk!* (Cohen, 2023). Out of this collection of haunting recorded performances and sculptural layouts of Elu's ballet shoes, I will focus on the 'performance for video' work, *Abattoir*. The video-recorded performance follows Cohen in full ballerina drag, as he "ethically but illegally" navigates a slaughterhouse (Cohen, 2023). Cohen dangles from a meat hook alongside pig carcasses, blending in with the animals' white and pink flesh (Fig. 15). As pictured below, Cohen climbs into a vat of drained blood, reliving the physical and figurative experience of his partner's death (Kritzinger, 2017).

22. 'Drag' refers to a genre of performance art or entertainment wherein individuals dress in exaggerated femininity, masculinity or other forms of gender expression. Drag's disruption of normative gender has had an influence on me and my art. However, a full discussion of drag is beyond the scope of this document. See Sizemore-Barber (2016) and de Araujo (2023).

Fig. 15: Steven Cohen. 2017. *Abattoir*. Still from performance for video.

Fig. 16: Steven Cohen. 2017. *Abattoir*. Still from performance for video.

Fig. 17: Steven Cohen. 2017. *Abattoir*. Still from performance for video.

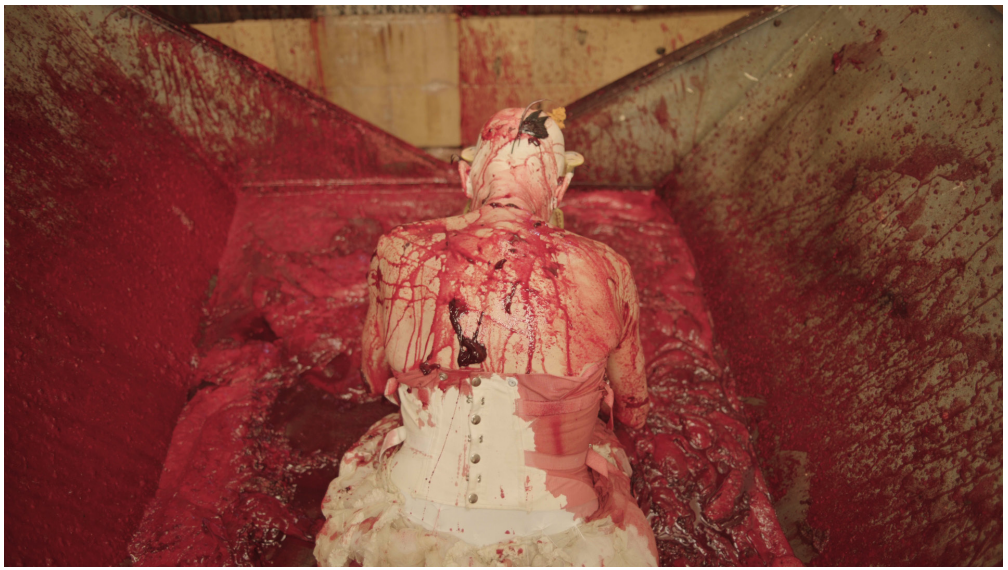


Fig. 18: Steven Cohen. 2017. *Abattoir*. Still from performance for video.

Fig. 19: Steven Cohen. 2017. *Abattoir*. Still from performance for video.

Cohen's aim with this work was to bathe in the blood of the blameless innocent, divulging his struggle with survivors' guilt (Cohen, 2023). The act of covering himself in blood was dangerous as the fluids contained harmful bacteria which could poison and contaminate him through his bare skin. Cohen conceives this work as a resolute yet heartbreaking acceptance to live on without Elu, describing the two of them as parts of a whole. In an interview with Nicole Kritzinger at Arthrob, Cohen states: "I don't feel like I have the same body at all, since Elu died, and I thought it was because we shared a body and he took it" (2017). Cohen's desire to live is thus informed by his desire to die, signified by his perilous performance. To live on despite it all. In this way, death is allowing a continued yet haunted (after)life for him.

Cohen's drag performance utilises the unsettling quality of the uncanny. The transformation of the known into the unknowable is felt through Cohen's grief and determination, as well as his visual storytelling. Cohen, through his drag, makes the human body uncanny – a fusion of man, woman, creature and swinging carcass. The disquieting sensation the uncanny evokes frames a queer disruption of the psyche, which the despairing monster, either drag performer or vampire, might employ (Palmer, 2012: 3). It is through Cohen's nuanced portrayal of death, blood and guilt that evoke the vampire within the queer. These topics portray dichotomies, as well as the muddling of binary gender expression, that are overtly queer and monstrous.

Monstrosity takes a trans-embodied form in the sculptural and multi-media artworks of Italian artist Agnes Questionmark (born 1995). Questionmark's artwork *CHM13hTERT* (2023) is a hyper-detailed sculpture of a trans-body, "transspecies, transgender, transhuman," suspended in a medical sling as a scientific specimen. The creature is presented for viewing in a sterile white-walled and glass pavilion. Upon further investigation, the viewer sees that the sculptural creature is actually a hybrid being – an extension of the artist herself. Lying, suspended for 12 hours a day over 16 days, Questionmark is the human-half to her undiscovered monster. She is inspected by her audience, who inadvertently become part of the artwork as modes of surveillance over the trans-body are critically engaged with (Stasinopoulos, 2024). This sculptural performance, pictured below, examines and problematises the medicalisation and dehumanisation of the transgender body as it is under scrutiny by society and the public who view it (Stasinopoulos, 2024).

Fig. 20: Agnes Questionmark. *CHM13hTERT*. Silicon, metal and resin sculpture with video screens. 2024. Multimedia. Lancetti railway station, Milan, Italy.

Fig. 21: Agnes Questionmark. *CHM13hTERT* (Detail).

Reimagining the fear of genetic monstrosity that Stuart identified in the eugenic Victorian society from which the vampire sprung (Stuart, 2018: 223), Questionmark challenges the current constraints of the human body. She offers herself up as a monstrous being, futuristic and trans. Her artworks address the misinformation around the 'unnaturalness' of trans bodies and invite empathy for the supposedly alien body-in-transformation, despite the changeability of the human form across life/time (Stasinopoulos, 2024). Questionmark celebrates a body that defiantly refuses taxonomy, imagining a futuristic fantasy beyond the human (Stasinopoulos, 2024).

CHM13hTERT proposes ways of conveying queer visual stories through character and atmosphere. Whether it is the suspense of narrative movement, surprising relations created by contiguity or the rupturing of closure, queerness may manifest through an unbound number of ways to position the queer somewhere new and ultimately futuristic. This ability to imagine fantastical futures expands beyond narrative, to a greater sense of queer worldmaking. As stated by Gust A. Yep, "[q]ueer world-making is the opening and creation of spaces without a map, the invention and proliferation of ideas without an unchanging and predetermined goal, and the expansion of individual freedom and collective possibilities without the constraints of suffocating identities and restrictive membership" (2003: 35).

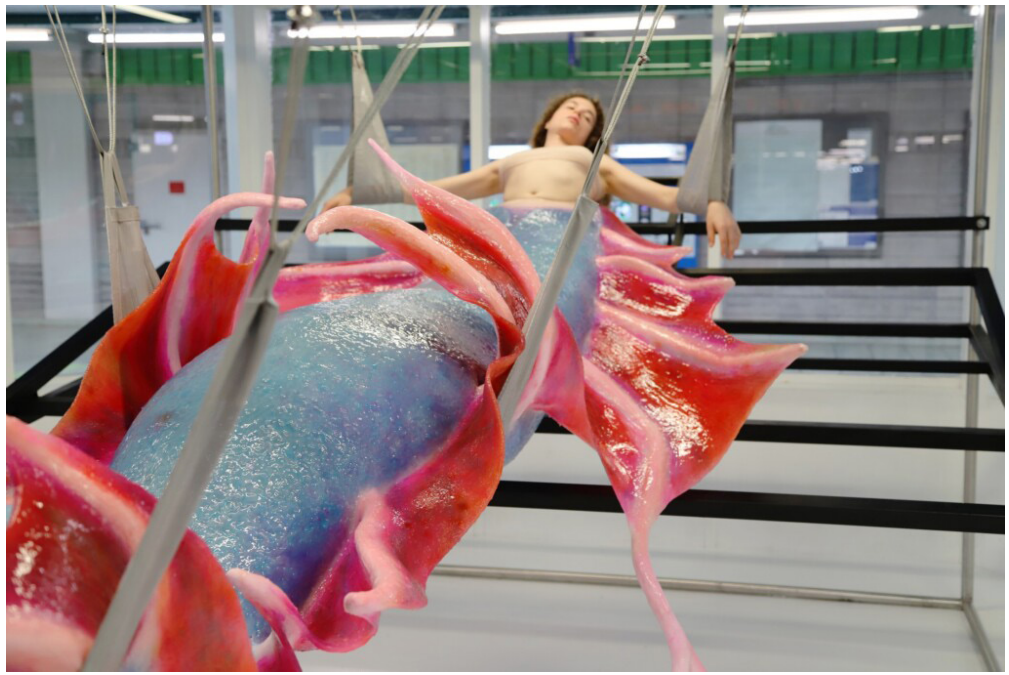


Fig. 22: Agnes Questionmark. *CHM13hTERT* (Detail).

I would suggest that this enriched dream of queer worldmaking is also often characterised by utopian thinking. Queerness, and queer worlds, are idealist in their openness to changeability and their unwillingness to take solid form (Muñoz, 2009: 1). This openness always infers a future where queerness could be *more* or *better*, refusing the here and now for a utopian there and then (Muñoz, 2009: 1). Muñoz conceives of these potential queer utopias as concretely aware of and shaped by the historic subordination of queer lives, yet refigures a future framing queer pleasure (2009: 1). Similar to the pleasure drive and the death drive discussed previously, the futuristic envisaging of queer utopia is what drives desire toward and instigates our performance for queer futurity (Muñoz, 2009: 1). By performing herself as a fantastic other-worldly character, Questionmark instigates a darkly imaginative experience of worldmaking.

Realism as seen in Questionmark's meticulous sculptural performance is not always necessary for worldmaking. As a non-binary trans person, I have felt that my body is not part of who I am – a painful disconnection from my physical reality. In the monstrous bodies from works of fantasy, for example, the vampire, werewolves, aliens, ghosts and zombies, I find my relationality to my own body. There is glee and relief in imagining my body as rotted flesh, falling from me and freeing me. Or indeed as half-beast as in Questionmark's performance of a deep-sea alien, removing me from the genital-focussed categorisation of gender offered in heteronormative society. The body of the vampire presents its own blurring of gender that I find comforting in my desire to escape prescriptive womanhood.

The image of the vampire, while primarily a Eurocentric creation, has been

reimagined in multiple ways outside of its traditional forms. This is easily located in the previously mentioned *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) film, which takes some liberties with its depictions while still maintaining the original plot. Further removed from the Western film industry, Nollywood provides a wealth of strange and exciting vampire imagery.[23] It is known for its resourcefulness in crafting mise-en-scene. Realism is not the aim in these movies, as it is not a necessity in imaginative worldmaking. South African photographer Pieter Hugo documented the make-up and costumes of the Nollywood horror genre through his captivating portrait series *Nollywood* (2009), see Figure 23.

Nollywood films are produced by locals and consumed by locals, embedded with a cultural understanding that allows for deeper probing of their specific societal issues (Hugo, 2009). Unlike Western and European films where black representation is hard-won, Nollywood films facilitate extensive self-representation (Hugo, 2009). Hugo's photographs documenting the make-up talents of a local artist in this industry highlight the practicalities of presenting monstrous characters (Hugo, 2009). These photographs illustrate a transfer of gothic sensibilities into a postcolonial context. In Figure 23, the vampire is portrayed as a young black man casually dressed in modern clothing, blood dripping from his mouth and glowing red eyes. This image overrides the common analogy of the white coloniser as the vampire who comes to drain both people and land on the African continent (Duncan, 2018: 2).

23. Nollywood is the Nigerian film industry that rivals the production rates of India's Bollywood and the USA's Hollywood film industries.

Fig. 23: Pieter Hugo. 2008. *Izunna Onwe and Uju Mbamalu*. Enugu, Nigeria.

Gerald Gaylard proposes that gothic values are present in the context of the global south as it is a mode well suited to expressing the horror of Imperial colonisation, apartheid and its consequences still present in postcolonial times (Gaylard, 2008: 2). Rebecca Duncan builds on this idea, suggesting that it is not the location of the Gothic that marks its identity as such, but rather that the Gothic materialises the anxieties of groups undergoing the upheaval of change (Duncan, 2018: 3). On the topic of utilising the Gothic away from its European roots, Duncan writes of southern African literature:

> Not concerned with historical authenticity, their early authors fashioned visions of the medieval from previous visions: from Shakespeare, from portraiture, from half-finished drawings of castles and cathedrals now long-ruined or perhaps entirely imaginary, entirely – as in Walpole's *Otranto* – unseen. This unrootedness facilitates adaptation and reappropriation, rendering gothic's signature tropes wandering and flexible: a vocabulary through which varying meanings might be explored.
>
> (Duncan, 2018: 4).

Duncan proposes that, by appropriating the Gothic, audiences might experience "a reconstruction of the past as the inverted mirror image of the present, its darkness allows the reason and virtue of the present a brighter reflection" (Duncan, 2018:6). This description illuminates the Gothic's unstable and shapeshifting abilities wherein the past is reflected into new contexts.

Fig. 24: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Just kissing*.

3

The Vampire inside my Camera:

A project in photography and video

In my MFA project, I embody a vampire character. My vampire allows me to explore queer monstrosity while hiding my authentic self behind the character, revealing tenderness and vulnerability. My vampire facilitates multiple layers of monstrosity and embodied desire. Through the monstrous vampiric transformation, I bare my internalised queer shame, fear of homophobic violence, suicidal ideation and gender dysphoria[24] to be judged or healed. I locate the vampire within the natural world as a space for queer transformation and growth, as well as a refuge in my photographs and video work. These environments have the potential to provide space for queer pleasure, joy and empathy. Emphasised in my photographs by my references to art historical paintings, intertextuality allows me to engage in temporality and time travel. Furthermore, video as a time-based medium facilitates my mythical power over time as a material in my practice. My photographic and video work creates pockets of fantasy, worlds within worlds, but grounded in my real felt experiences.

24. Gender dysphoria is a sense of unease associated with one's gender, often specifically related the primary or secondary sex characteristics. This feeling of misalignment of felt gender identity and physical traits can often lead to depression and anxiety (Cooper et al. 2020).

Kiss me, bite me: The monster, my vampire

My photo-series *Pinkie Promise* examines dark feelings of shame and desire, pressed into a compact and shadowed space. The four portraits that make up the series depict different stages of cutting and dying hair. These actions of care and self-image require trusted help. Asking for help can also come with a lot of shame, especially for those who have been rejected by normative society and may not feel worthy of care. In making these images, and my project in general, I have relied on the assistance of my own queer chosen family. As the title suggests, a major theme in my work is intimacy. Making a pinkie promise, perhaps in the wake of a revealed secret, one is purposefully signifying mutual confidence and vulnerability.

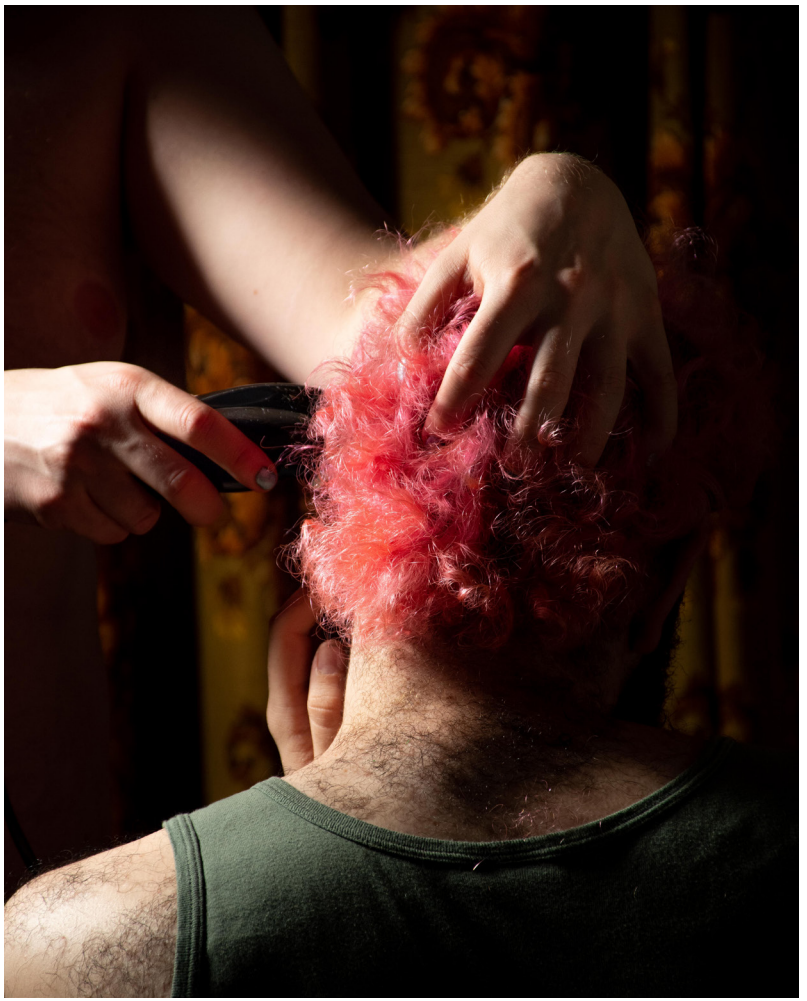


Fig. 25: Gem Carosin. 2023. *Pinkie Promise*. Series of four photographs.

The characters in *Pinkie Promise* fill their frames in an almost claustrophobic manner, their bodies pressed closely together. While each image has a specific subject, it is otherwise difficult to tell who the other disembodied figures, limbs and gestures belong to. Monstrosity is located in the ambiguity of the images, and the subtle allusions to sexuality. In the far-left portrait, a bearded figure sits contemplatively, a vicious blur ripping the calm of the portrait. The unrecognisable limbs and subject alike are bathed in neon red light. The fluorescent illumination is mirrored in the far-right image, suggesting the sensual lighting of gay bars and clubs. However, the background of the images are all distinctly domestic – a patterned curtain hangs in the background, or a decorative tiled wall.

The two middle images present their subjects from behind. In one, a hand holds the figure's head in place, the pressing of clippers to the side of the head mimics a gun to the temple. The middle-right image is a self-portrait. The photograph is taken through a mirror, just noticeable in the distortion at the bottom of the frame. What is hair dye, but could be interpreted as blood, runs down my bare back, my head glistening with sticky wetness evocative of a head wound. The last image is an advancing gloved hand, glowing violent pink under the lights. While contextually we can assume the glove is to protect the wearer from hair dye, the photograph conjures a different kind of protection. Suggestive of the condom imperative in early HIV blocking, this image cements the series' connection to a queer history of 'deviant' and dangerous sexual activities. These portraits explore the violence done to monsters, or indeed the violence we do to ourselves as we, wounded animals, seek the comfort of tender arms.

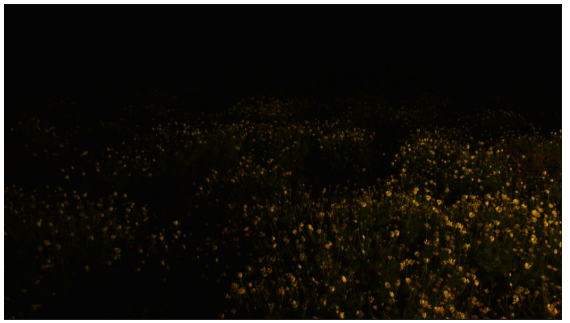
Despite the activities being acts of communal care, the images are both sensual and ominous. This plays on the forbidden yet desirable position of the gothic monster, the vampire (Cohen, 2018: 72). The uncertainty of fear and attraction, as well as the disembodied limbs, evokes the abject (Cohen, 2018: 74). Jeffery Jerome Cohen writes in *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)* that the gothic monster is akin to "abjected fragment" orientated towards reformation of potential identity (2018: 74). Like the violent bite of the vampire, the images hold potential for transformation. The vampire bite, or kiss, is the moment of acceptance of myself as queer and allowing the previous version of me to die, stripped away like my mortality. The body is depicted as obscured and in the process of transformation, aided by unseen custodians. In my bittersweet cocoon, I start to change, dying and being reborn in the same moment.

The emotional response to the monster/vampire is riddled with dichotomy (Cohen, 2018: 72). The vampire is forbidden and desirable, repulsive and attractive (Cohen, 2018: 72). My particular

interest resides in the felt dichotomies of pain/pleasure, repulsion/desire and shame/pride, as they manifest within the queer just as they are embodied within the vampire. The shame of succumbing to the monstrous desire is overlaid with relief at the fight being over and new pleasure being discovered.

Throughout my photographic and video project, I perform the Dracula-esque vampire, wearing a theatrical red and black cape over a white shirt. This becomes my vampire costume, just as society elicits certain costumed performances of gender. My body becomes the site of monstrous reimagining, as I impersonate a male vampire. I do little to conceal my feminine features, breasts and hips, yet my form becomes that of a vampire before any gender-markers. The gender confusion that the gothic vampire invites provides me with the perfect playground for performing my experience of gender. Portraying myself as a vampire is an act of acceptance, and I am afforded freedom in exchange. Embodying the shameful creature allows me to subvert expectations and confront assumptions about my experience, using satire to do so.





My vampire character is introduced and explored in the video artwork *Yellow Flowers*. The video plays out against a background of darkness. The foreground is lit from a source unseen, illuminating a glade of yellow daisy bushes flowering brilliantly and inexplicably at night. The flowers shift slightly in a gentle breeze. A figure wanders into the frame: a vampire, indicated by their quintessential black and red flowing cloak and sharp teeth. The outfit is costume-like, but their expression of untamed joy is genuine. As the vampire character obsessively picks flowers and enjoys their warm, yellow glow, the viewer cannot help but recognise the vampire's pleasure, and empathy is potentially shared.

The vampire's unbound emotional expression of innocent joy breaks with tropified expectations, inviting curiosity. They look at the yellow flower, holding it up and imagining that its glow is that of the sun they cannot be touched by. They find glee in how they have cheated their mythological biology, basking in the faux-sunlight. The vampire looks around with wonder, but also a hungry longing which they satiate through their gaze. This video takes place over three screens, the outer two tilted inwards slightly – an altar-piece honouring the vampire's joy.

Fig. 26: *Yellow Flowers*, 2023. Stills from video (02:29) Gemma Carosin

Fig. 27: *Yellow Flowers*, 2023. (Detail) Still from video (02:16) Gemma Carosin

Fig. 28: *Yellow Flowers,* 2023. (Detail) Still from video (03:50) Gemma Carosin

The vampire character depicted in *Yellow Flowers* is hardly a fearsome beast. My vampire is deliberately humorous, defusing the potentially threatening traits associated with this gothic monster (Cohen, 2018: 73). The vampire's happiness is intended to be disarming compared to the gloomy stereotypes associated with the Gothic horror genre. This allows me to use surprise and pleasure as temporal mechanisms which invite deviant chronopolitics (Freeman, 2005: 57). *Yellow Flowers*' depiction of a joyful monster undermines the assumption that queers are doomed and self-hating. Elizabeth Freeman writes that reframing a history of queerness through the lens of pleasure is essential in dismantling hegemonic and oppressive politics and assumptions (2005: 58). José Estaban Muñoz builds on this by proposing that performing queer pleasure is vital in the potential for queer worldmaking, and utopian thinking for a queer future (2009: 1). *Yellow Flowers*, I hope, fulfils this anticipatory feeling of queer futurity, while also maintaining a thread of memory, which Muñoz claims is necessary in building a concrete utopia (2009: 1).

Forward-thinking and -feeling engages the sense of timelessness evoked by the undead vampire in a multitude of ways. Like an old photograph, the vampire is a vessel for memory from the past, likely to forget the details over their exceptionally long 'life'. The vampire instigates a dislocation of time not only for themselves, but for those who interact with them (Stuart, 2018: 225). Those who surround the vampire fall into the slowed time in which they exist, and all the temporal uncertainty that comes with it (Stuart, 2018: 225). This loss of time is additionally a loss of self, of identity, as the vampire's monstrousness throws all into a liminal stasis (Stuart, 2018: 225). Like a memory, or indeed a photograph, the vampire traps all in the past.

Fig. 29: *Yellow Flowers*, 2023. (Detail) Still from video (04:41) Gemma Carosin

Nocturnal emissions: The natural and the unnatural

As an adolescent, I found my home environment increasingly difficult. As each day progressed, the tension in my house grew, often erupting into frustrated arguments as the pressure of night brought out words my father, mother and older brother could not say in the daylight. I was seldom an active participant in these domestic rows and often found myself feeling like a ghostly observer. I felt helpless to stop the arguments. It was as if I didn't really exist at all. When it all became too much to bear, I would quietly escape into the refuge of our back garden. The sounds of nature at night drew me from that garden, out the gate, to the croaking wetlands near my parent's house. Here I could no longer hear the raised voices of my family. To my knowledge, my family did not realise I had slipped away, and I would return to a dark and silent house. When I was free to wander the fields in the dark, my eyes adjusting to the shadows and my unsteady feet finding earth, I felt held. The landscape in my photos is a refuge for queer monsters like me.

Having felt invisible and insubstantial, my camera is now the tool which allows me to see myself and the fictional vampire brought to life. Through the camera, I can return to my memories and reshape the past. However, the camera's mirror withholds its image from the vampire. The result of which is a two-way mirror, allowing me to watch the vampire, and reflect its image back to a society from which they are banished. Of course, as I am both the photographer and the vampire, I use the camera to spy on myself. As discussed previously, Roland Barthes suggests that the object of the portrait cannot realise authenticity for the camera. The character I present in these photographs is clearly not me, just as Catherine Opie uses the persona of Bo to explore a less visible side of herself. My vampire airs my insecurities. In visualising my monstrousness, I am faced with how insubstantial my 'failures' are when removing the heteronormative viewpoint.

Fig. 30: Gem Carosin. 2023. *My Vampire.*

Fig. 31: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Brad's Tree*.

Fig. 32: Gem Carosin. 2024. *How do I look?*

My video work *Salve* (Figures 33 - 37) takes place in a domestic garden which shelters the two figures who reside there. One bearded figure shaves the hairless chin of the other. The gendered act of shaving is dislocated from its intended purpose, transforming into an act of care. The razor slips, cutting a thin line on the recipient's neck. Their lips part, revealing their vampire fangs. Their attendant gently wipes the blood away and licks it off their finger. The vampire stares quizzically as they opens their mouth to newly budding fangs. The two laugh together – the fear of the vampiric transformation dissipated by circumstance. The new vampire retrieves capsicum chillies from a nearby plant pot, chewing them into a pulp to dress the vampire's neck wound. The vampire winces at the pain of the hot chillies pressed against their flesh.

Fig. 33: *Salve*, 2024. (Detail) Still from video (00:43) Gem Carosin

Fig. 34: *Salve*, 2024. (Detail) Still from video (01:53) Gem Carosin

Fig. 35: *Salve*, 2024. (Detail) Still from video (02:45) Gem Carosin

The video is titled *Salve* for the ointment used in healing the skin. The world imagined in a garden space discovers an ease in changing states of being. From safe to bleeding, the figures react in a slowed, thoughtful manner. Filming this work I hoped to travel back in time to my parent's back garden and undo the pain I experienced and caused. I imagine this vampiric version of me is still there, waiting for the pain to stop, but happy to wait forever alongside their vampire kin.

Fig. 36: *Salve*, 2024. (Detail) Still from video (03:58) Gem Carosin

Fig. 37: *Salve*, 2024. (Detail) Still from video (05:05) Gem Carosin

Fig. 38: Gem Carosin. 2023. *The two of us*.

Many of my photographs to follow are taken in the wetlands near my parent's home. These images and more make up a larger series of photographs titled *Fantasising* (including Figures 38 – 48). Even with the keen eye of the camera present, I find a freedom in stumbling through the long grass. The cover of night allows me to move my body in an unselfconscious way. The bright photo-lights obscure my vision just enough to create a dream-like aura, my mind submitting to the elements that govern the success of the shoot. The feeling is almost intoxicating. The space is dislocated and timeless. Bringing my chosen family into this environment, sharing in my jouissance, transforms the wetland into a queer safe haven removed from reality. *Fantasising* is constructed through a process of contiguity rather than continuity. The images, each of which has the potential to stand alone, work together to paint a landscape for my vampire and various other monsters to live in. When I am not the subject of my lens, which is often the case in the *Fantasising* series, I still transform into a kind of monster. I imagine myself as a predatory creature, preying

upon the kindness of my friends who put up with my photographic 'hobby'. I feel self-conscious, even though I am not the one under the scrutiny of the camera. But my subjects see me and are not afraid of my horrific form. They accept and reassure me. Queers alike, we have found each other in the dark.

The figures in the photographic landscapes are spread out, as if wandering alone and unaware of the others. The images placed in sequence extend a world of eternal nighttime, receding and advancing across the walls. The presumably natural environment, while expansively dark, is illuminated by an unseen light source. In some of the images, such as *Werewolf* (Fig. 46), a speck of light can be made out in the background – perhaps a bright moon or watchful glare of a camera's lens. The glowing spark signifies the vast distance of this world to our own bright reality. Shooting in an environment of darkness was not only to stay true to the vampire character, but furthermore speaks to the invisibility of queerness and the lives of queer people that unfold on the periphery or in the shadows of society.

Fig. 39: Gem Carosin. 2023. *Ophelia*.

Fig. 40: Gem Carosin. 2023. *I promise I'll find you again tomorrow.*

Fig. 41: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Afterworld*.

Fig. 42: Gem Carosin. 2023. *Guilty Pleasure*.

Fig. 43: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Narcissus*.

Fig. 44: Gem Carosin. 2023. *I have something to tell you*.

Fig. 45: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Transmogrify*.

The mythological creatures/characters I present are never obscure, as I hope to depend on the viewers' already-established knowledge of these stereotyped popular characters. This allows me to merely suggest a creature, rather than painting a very detailed image of what a vampire or a werewolf should be/look like/act like. Established knowledge about these fictional creatures also permits me to subvert the preconceived expectations the audience might have for these characters. The above photograph, *Werewolf* (Fig. 46), references the creature of myth and horror by the same name. Werewolves are men most of the time but become snarling wolves on the night of the full moon. Often depicted as a curse, the werewolf has a long history, intertwined with the vampire, of being symbolically paralleled to the lives of gay men. The ferocious image of the hyper-muscular and rugged werewolf is humorously subverted in my photograph. My photograph presents a person kneeling obediently in the dirt, their masked head slightly cocked to the side curiously. For those in the know, the dog-mask is recognisable as a Pup Play mask. Puppy Play is a specific avenue of BDSM consensual roleplay, wherein participants dress as puppies or dogs, and ultimately act as dogs or animals, often with an 'owner' nearby to facilitate the roleplay. This can be done in couples or in groups, but is most common in the gay male leather community.

The figure's pink and black polyurethane hood sits in contrast with the earthy tones of the surrounding landscape. A twinkling metal chain dangles from their collar. The person depicted is decidedly not a werewolf and not a real dog. Roleplay brings up questions about what is real or imagined. This echoes an old and harmful line of questioning around queerness – is it natural or unnatural, a form of illness? I choose to conflate the imagined, the unreal and real, the natural and the unnatural. The unnatural monster looks alien in the natural landscape, which in itself appears otherworldly illuminated at night. Imagination can give any type of person a much-needed break from the burdens of reality. In performing our queer fantasies, worlds can be created.

Fig. 46: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Werewolf*.

Fig. 47: Gem Carosin. 2024. *She's been such a good girl.*

Fig. 48: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Chaste*.

Wherefore art thou? Performing temporality and gender

Despite the -natural landscape, there is a distinct constructed quality in my photographs and videos. The wetland and fields I used to set up my scenes feel like tableaus in a photographic studio. The images are indeed stages for characters to enact desire away from the constraints of reality. I evoke the theatrical and the melodramatic. Several of my images are direct references to the paintings of Fuseli, Caravaggio or Artemisia Gentileschi, another 1600s painter working with chiaroscuro lighting techniques in her paintings. I find it illuminating to consider the latter two artists as illustrators, or in fact, makers of 'fan-art'[17] of Bible myths, making use of the popular characters. While their paintings reference specific stories, I have found that the famous paintings are as recognisable, if not more so, than the literature they are inspired by.

One of my more overt references is to *The Incredulity of St Thomas* by Caravaggio, as recreated in my image *Authenticating the wound* (Fig. 49). In the Bible story as illustrated by Caravaggio, Jesus presents his wound, proof of his death and reanimation, to be probed and examined by his entourage. In my version, I also present my body as proof of my own suffering. My breasts, indicators of my femaleness, cause me to experience gender dysphoria – a common experience for transgender people wherein your felt experience of gender troublingly misaligns

17. 'Fan art' is the predominantly amateur artistic renderings made by fans of specific media, depicting the existing characters in canonical or imagined situations.

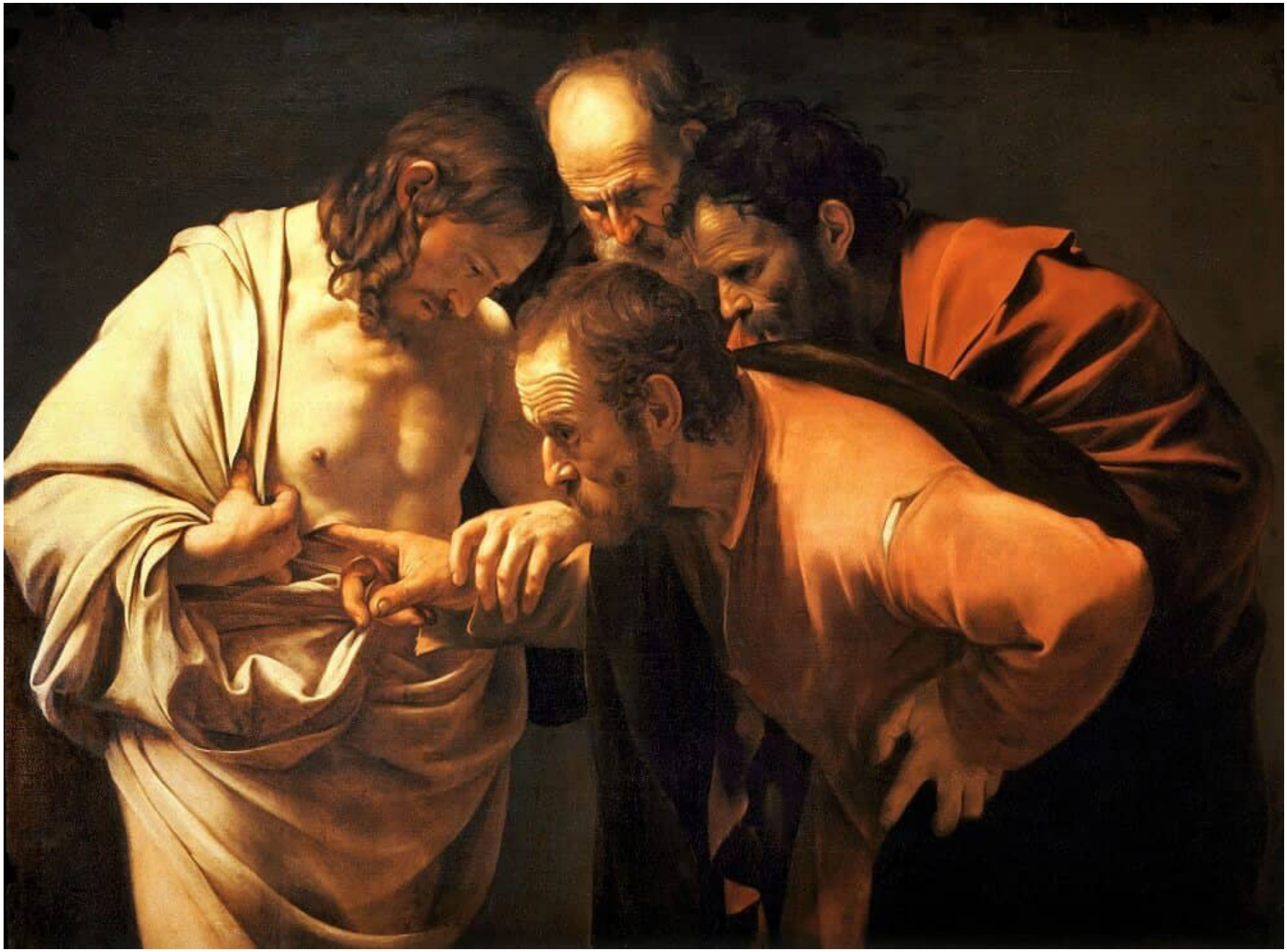
with your physical body.

Joshua Heal proposed in an intellectual sermon on art-historical depictions of Jesus, that Jesus could be read as having a trans body (Moss, 2022). Despite the ensuing conservative horror, the examination of the wound as bearing a resemblance to a vulva is compelling and has led to other theories hypothesising Jesus' transness (Moss, 2022). For this reason, I take on the character of Jesus in *Authenticating the wound* (Fig. 49), allowing my close friends to examine and witness that which causes me pain and decide if it (my dysphoria and transness) is real. This references the harmful medicalisation of transness and institutional interference in discussions of identity, wherein individuals are probed to prove their commitment to being transgender through a variety of tests and psychological evaluations.

The paintings' worldmaking capabilities are powerful and trans-cultural. The commissioned Biblical depictions intended to bring the tales of the Bible to the illiterate masses. However, they also facilitated an exploration for the artists. Borrowing from Caravaggio, I employ an aesthetic of theatre and performance using the language of theatrical lighting. Employing ominous shadows to instil the villainousness of my more sinister characters, and heavenly spotlights to create a sense of hope. By positioning my models in tableau, I draw on similar melodramatic sensibilities as Caravaggio, emphasising relationality between my characters and building narrative.

Fig. 49: Gem Carosin. 2023. *Authenticating the wound*.

Fig. 50: Caravaggio. 1602. *The Incredulity of St Thomas*. Oil on canvas. Sanssouci, Potsdam.



By directly referencing these paintings using my own monstrous characters, I relate to Fuseli as he studied the Sistine Chapel and painted the compositions with fictional characters from Shakespeare's plays. I put myself in the shoes of Derek Jarman as he pondered the life of Caravaggio, recreating his tableaus but ultimately fictionalising his life story through his 1986 film. However, I question whether it is enough to insert queer bodies into the white, Western male gaze in striving to *queer* an image. Working in this mode allows me to make use of the queer tradition of reclaiming and revising history. I am able to reach back in time and look through the eyes of queer artists long gone, recontextualising their art and contextualising my own queer experiences.

Using the widely known visual semantics of paintings makes my work accessible to a larger audience, who perhaps do not have a queer visual literacy. Yet, my work is also specific to me. The figures I photograph are not just queer bodies, but also my trusted friends. My images have particular meanings that speak to our relationality to one another. My painting-inspired photographs are multiple in their ability to hold themselves as individual and new creations, while also containing what came before and without which they would not exist. I give these paintings a monstrous second life within my compositions.

Fig. 51: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Beheading Scene*.

Fig. 52: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Requiem*.

Fig. 53: Gem Carosin. 2023. *The story of painting*.


THE STORY of
PAINTING


DRACULA
BRAM STOKER
BORED GAY WEREWOLF
TONY SANTORELLA
COLLINS CLASSICS
OSCAR WILDE

Fig. 54: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Wilde*.

Fig. 55: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Ecce Homo*.

Fig. 56: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Succumb*.

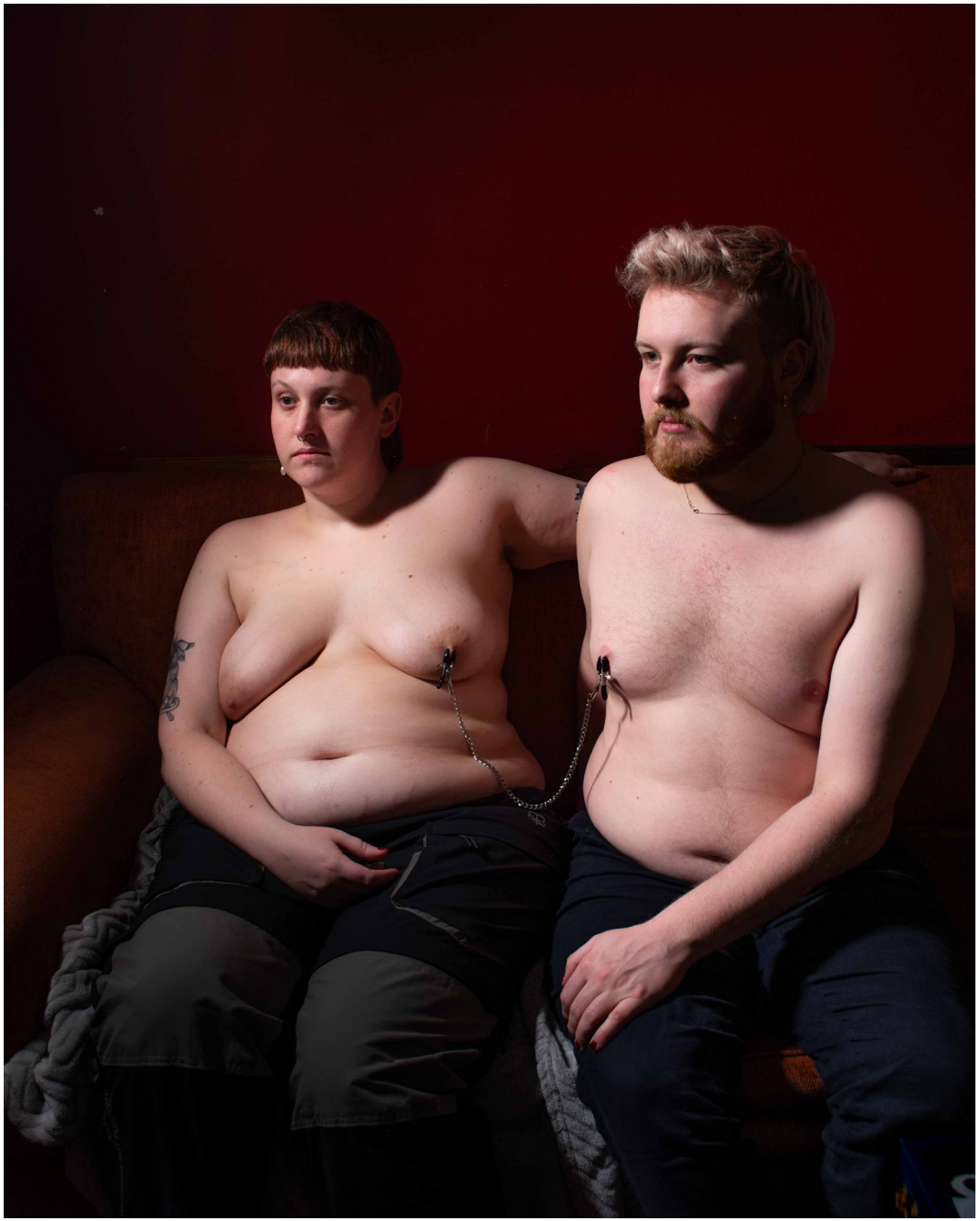


Fig. 57: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Umbilical cord*.

The multiple and the repeated image are effective in their capacity to divert linear time. This makes video a particularly persuasive avenue for exploring the vampire's experience. In each of my four video artworks, I attempt to queer chronology and temporality. In *Yellow Flowers* (Figures 26 - 29), I play with time by stopping, slowing, reversing, and repeating time. Fragmentation and recoalescence are acts of monster-making, mimicking that of the vampire (Cohen, 2018: 68). At my editing station, I too gain the supernatural ability to manipulate the materiality of time.

My photographic stop-motion video *Transylvania* uses a quick succession of photographs to create a sense of movement. Each image relies upon the previous and the next to create an illusion of life. The title of the video is in reference to the supposed geographical origins of the vampire, Transylvania, located in present-day Romania. This association comes partly from Romanian folklore of vampire-esque creatures, and partly due to Bram Stoker's Dracula being somewhat inspired by the infamous 15th-century Romanian governor, Vlad the Impaler. The region of Transylvania boasts brilliantly gothic mountains – the perfect setting for a vampire horror. The word *Transylvania* translates to 'from across the woods' or from the other side of the woods. It is this meaning, the coming from elsewhere and inherent otherness, that is of interest to me in my stop-motion video.

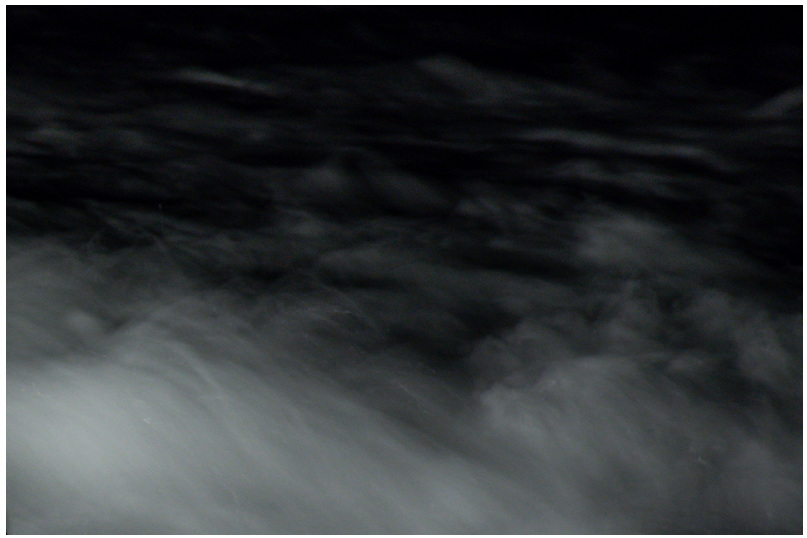


Fig. 58: Gem Carosin. 2023. Still photograph from *Transylvania*. Photographic stop-motion video.

Fig. 59: Gem Carosin. 2023. Still photograph from *Transylvania*. Photographic stop-motion video.
Fig. 60: Gem Carosin. 2023. Still photograph from *Transylvania*. Photographic stop-motion video.

In many vampire stories, for example, *The Vampyre* (1819) and *Dracula* (1897), the vampire must leave his home and travel across the ocean in order to find blood and power. My stop-motion, *Transylvania*, observes the thrashing waves, beginning with photographic stills, which jump cut from one to the next. The cuts may speed up as the waves froth and dissipate again and again, eventually reaching the rapidity of a dynamic video. From the dark water, a figure rises – the vampire in their usual cape and white shirt. The monster emerges as if bewildered by its release, able to stand easily. The vampire, still pushed and pulled by the waves, looks around meekly. Their facial expressions are only free from blur momentarily as they stare and laugh manically at the unseen shore. The fast-moving stills might slow again to single images as the vampire bows, a strange gesture before dropping to their knees into the water again. They slowly submerge, and the video momentarily loops to a reverse of their assent from the water. They disappear, and again the viewer is presented with stills of the foaming waves, which continue with the perceived beginning of the video. The moment of start and end are false, as a single photograph has no start or end, save the edges of the frame. Time both extends and collapses, like the breaking wave.

The dislocation of the vampire as they leave Transylvania behind is mirrored by the jolting photographic images. The viewers of this work are presented with power over the artwork, invited to control the passage of the photographic frames. The audience becomes a participant in the artwork, deciding whether the vampire will be stuck from one slow still to the next, or animated in the crashing waves, by speeding up the sequential clicking through the images. The audience carries the fate of the vampire in their hand, able to reject them or bring them to their new home. My desire to animate the otherwise still image holds its own undead vampiric undertones.

Fig. 61: Gem Carosin. 2023. Still photograph from *Transylvania*.
Photographic stop-motion video.

Breaking the fourth wall: The vampire (me) in context

The majority of my project takes place in worlds of fantasy, with few interruptions from our reality that might break the suspended disbelief. However, my scenes and the experiences that inspired them are rooted in a specific context of growing up in suburban Cape Town, South Africa. Away from the monstrous 'truth' presented in my photographs, the suburban world and the fantasy meet awkwardly in my video artwork titled *Camp*. *Camp* chronicles my mother and I as we work together to put up a tent in an open field. Once the tent is assembled, my mother assists me in putting on my vampire costume, including the insertion of my fangs. In return, I hand her a carved wooden stake with which to kill vampire-me. We position ourselves in the tent, my head resting on her knees. She raises the stake above my (the vampire's) head, aiming it into my chest. The stake falls, viewed from a distance, not revealing whether the blow drew blood. The video seems to end, but then comes back to life, this time with myself as the murderer with the stake in hand. The stake hovers above my mother's body indefinitely, and the audience is left wondering if I was ever able to make the blow.

Fig. 62: *Camp*, 2024. Still from video (02:40)
Gem Carosin

This video is one of the few that includes a member of my biological family. It is also the only video in the project that has accompanying audio – the insistent sounds of crickets and our bodies as they move about the tent.

Fig. 63: *Camp*, 2024. Still from video (05:24)
Gem Carosin

Fig. 64: *Camp*, 2024. Still from video (06:07) Gem Carosin
Fig. 65: *Camp*, 2024. Still from video (06:25) Gem Carosin
Fig. 66: *Camp*, 2024. Still from video (06:29) Gem Carosin

Camp can be understood as an exercise in acceptance wherein my mother performs the act of killing me to accept my identity. My mother facilitates my death, which in turn instigates a rebirth – a vampire's baptism. Another reading is that my mother is hoping to kill the monstrous part of me, the queer part of me. She hopes that in doing so, she will return me to 'normal' life. I allow her to try this sombrely, not wanting to disappoint her. Perhaps she will succeed, and I will finally be the child she wanted me to be and worthy of her love, or her attack will kill me outright and I will be freed from the shame.

Fig. 67: *Camp*, 2024. Still from video (06:48) Gem Carosin

Fig. 68: *Camp*, 2024. Still from video (07:23) Gem Carosin

The integration of violence and care seems only natural to the contradictory qualities the vampire embodies. Lauren Berlant theorises that it is the disposition of intimacy to contain contradictions (1998: 281). These incongruities surround the misguided assumption that intimacy is a wholly private experience (Berlant, 1998: 282). Intimacy often crosses the threshold of institutions; most notable for me are the ways in which intimacy can be externally therapized (Berlant, 1998: 282). Berlant specifies 'witnessing' as a form of public therapy for our intimate connections (1998: 282). Berlant writes: "Intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation." (1998: 282). My mother and I find ourselves in a world in-between, liminal, and not quite ready for us. Our intimacy takes on unexpected forms, mutating from how it was in my childhood years.

These worldmaking capabilities are comparable to how Freeman and Muñoz write about queer pleasure as a catalyst for future thinking. *Camp* depicts the tent as an intimate space, a shared space, yet outside of the domestic home. The structure offers a bridge between the natural world and the encroaching of humanity. In spite of the vampire's monstrous queerness, they collaborate with their mum in putting up a tent – a sweet, regular type of familial intimacy. In this, there is a radical acceptance of the vampire's difference. The ordinary middleclass family activity of camping is both realistic in this video, as mother and adult child fumble to construct the tent, and also a fantastical act of theatre in this case. By allowing for my painfully vulnerable intimacy to be witnessed by my mother (and by the unseen audience), my experience is validated, and I practise holding empathy for myself/the vampire and my mother.

Fig. 69: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Must like long walks on the beach*.

Till death do us part:

To conclude

My project poses questions that do not have exact answers: How can queerness be defined while maintaining its intrinsic fluidity? Can the monsters of Gothic horror provide a window into queer experiences? Can the monstrous queer find resistance and empowerment through identifying with the monster? How can the queer disrupt heteronormative structures of time and temporal control? Where might queerness find unlikely places to transgress heteronormative values? Does the queer body displace the white, western male gaze in re-staging the paintings as queer tableaus?

The vampire offers me a multifaceted and dichotomous viewpoint from which to explore the fluid topics of queer temporality and futurity. It is a layered metaphor for queer experiences, yet in trying to dissect the precise correlative meanings in the metaphor, the nuance is lost. Some things are better left to ambiguity. The connections between the fictional vampire and the camera provide an entry to my photographic and video-focused MFA project. I embrace the monstrous stereotypes as a form of political and social resistance. The pain of this submission is reformed as pleasure as my darkest desires are freed from heteronormative perceptions of 'good' and 'bad'.

By baring to the camera my feelings of shameful desire tethered to queerness, I clear space for queer joy in my life and within the images this project has generated. This has instigated potential for queer worldmaking. This project has allowed me to explore, play and imagine hopeful queer futures. I have aimed to do this while still acknowledging the queer histories entombed in tragedy

Fig. 70: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Unbound*.

and shame. However, like Elizabeth Freeman, I yearn for queer futures that historicise queer pleasure above suffering in legitimising queer experiences as human experiences. The power of laughter, especially through the most difficult situations, establishes happiness as a form of resistance. This ability asserts the resilience of queer people.

As I turn away from the past to imagine a future for this project, I return to the question of where. Where does my vampire come from, and where might my vampire continue to live as decades turn into centuries? I am only beginning to learn how to live with my 'vampiric' desires, and I do not imagine this project will come to a final closure, a death, as I complete my MFA. Together, my vampire and I must find a home wherein to continue our love affair.

Fig. 71: Gem Carosin. 2024. *Gift*.

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