

Dress Blues

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STAMPS SCHOOL OF ART & DESIGN

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Acknowledgements

To Levi, my late service dog, longtime partner, protector, and companion that shaped me into the man I am today.

I wish we could have finished this journey together, but you'll never be far from my mind. Please haunt me forever.

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Abstract

Dress Blues is a soft sculpture made from dress patterns in the form of a DDG 111, the guided missile Destroyer I served on. I used to think that because I transitioned after the military that the two events had nothing to do with each other. Now I see them as intrinsically linked and I can hardly think of one without the other. This project addresses the military through the lens of queer and trans theory. Using dress patterns, I am able to reject expectations for the heteronormativity surrounding the military. In this way, I critique the power of this institution and return the power to myself. Not only am I the builder of the ship, but I am also able to fold it up, to carry it with me.

Keywords

Military, navy, fleet week, transgender, transing, queer theory, wabi sabi, radical softness, sculpture, warship, boat, soft sculpture


USS SPRUANCE DDG 111
COMMISSIONED
Commanding Officer
LT3
BRIDGET T. REYNOLDS

ANCHORS AWEIGH!

When I have flashbacks, I'm on the deck of the ship, line handling. My ship is about to be attacked and I can feel the line biting into my palms.

When I have nightmares, the ship is sinking and I have to rescue someone. Over the years, the "someone" changes, but the dream stays the same. We weave through airlocks and portholes until the rising water catches us. When the waves start crashing into the daytime and I can smell the salt again, they up my meds. What veteran gets a good night's rest?

I was 19 when I enlisted in the United States Navy. I have continually tried to grapple with my experiences through the use of alcohol, therapy, and eventually art. Trying to understand life as a newly disabled man, I looked to the past for answers about the nightmares and flashbacks I experienced daily. Did I really read my contract before I signed it?

THERE AREN'T MANY PEOPLE THAT GET RUNG OFF THE SHIP. IT'S AN HONOR TO HEAR THE SHIP'S BELL RUNG FOR YOU, TO HEAR YOUR NAME ANNOUNCED OVER THE SPEAKERS,

"IT^2 REYNOLDS DEPARTING!"

ONLY OFFICERS AND PLANKOWNERS GET THIS PRIVILEGE. IN THE OLD DAYS, PLANKOWNER MEANT YOU WERE OWED AN ACTUAL PLANK OF THE SHIP WHEN IT WAS LAID TO REST. NOW IT'S A MORE SYMBOLIC OWNERSHIP.

WILL I COME TO STARE AT THE CORPSE OF MY SHIP AND PICK AT IT LIKE A VULTURE WHEN IT'S READY FOR THE GRAVEYARD? WILL I STRIP OFF A PIECE AND PUT IT IN MY POCKET TO REMEMBER IT BY? AND WOULD IT RECOGNIZE ME WHEN I COME TO GRIEVE FOR IT?

Don't Ask, Don't Tell was repealed in 2011, halfway through my service. The transgender ban on military service in the United States wouldn't be lifted until 2021. I spent my service in the closet, fearing for my safety. When I left the Navy in 2013, I was angry. I was medically discharged, newly in a wheelchair with severe PTSD. I left all military things behind in order to survive. It is only now, nearly 12 years later, that I have been able to slowly allow the military and veteran community back into my life. Only now can I truly survey the damage and see just how twisted all the threads had become.

When I initially started this project in 2023, I was focused on war, oil, and the political aspects of my deployment. I focused on post 9/11 America and its increasing militarization. Following my summer research in New York for Fleet Week, I experienced a major shift in my understanding of the Navy and myself as a veteran. I realized that I was still compartmentalizing my experience, separating facets of my personality into different boxes: trans, queer, veteran. I had anxiety about how I would be received by the military community now that I was an out and proud trans man. I had also never reconciled my queer identity and my veteran identity, keeping those sides of myself very separate in terms of friends, experiences, and even the art I made.

While touring the USS Bataan, I found out that the Navy had recently named a ship after the late Harvey Milk. Milk had previously served as a Naval Officer before running for office and subsequently being assassinated. Standing on the deck of a naval ship, I was speechless. How would Milk feel about this "honor," as a man that had later been staunchly anti-war and had even been dishonorably discharged for being gay? Was it signs of changing times, improvements? Or a gross misunderstanding of his legacy?

Despite "running away" from my military service, I continually circle back to it. I am pursuing this project in many ways as an attempt at closure. But, as this project has progressed, it has become clear that

closure is not an option. As of February 28th, 2025 the Department of Defense announced that service members diagnosed with gender dysphoria will be separated from the military.[1] Closure is not an option when our rights are in flux and our community is once again targeted.

For my master's thesis, I created a sculptural recreation of the ship that I served on, the USS Spruance, DDG 111. The ship was designed to curve in a circle and is made of dress patterns sewn together. This project tackles themes of gender identity through a veteran lens. My intention with this project is to make the object in order to put it away as a metaphor for resolving issues from the past.

Being disabled, I feel that I am often given the "wrong tool" for a job. It's like needing a ramp when there are only stairs. In both my personal life and my art career, I have had to adapt equipment meant for able-bodied people. Because of this, I often pick materials that are ephemeral, fragile, or in other ways cumbersome to work with. The dress patterns are thin and often tear throughout the process. In a way, I have begun to view the ship as my body and the tears as the various scars or wounds on my body. When tears happen, I dutifully suture them close or patch them with applique. It is important for me to try not to hide the mistakes, but to care for them.

I used to think that because I transitioned after the military that the two events had nothing to do with each other. Now I see them as intrinsically linked and I can hardly think of one without the other. This project addresses the military through the lens of queer theory, which emerged in the early 1990s out of gay and lesbian studies.

1 *Department of Defense News. "DOD: Gender Dysphoria Incompatible With Military, Service Members Must Serve in Accordance With Sex." February 28, 2025. https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4086111/dod-gender-dysphoria-incompatible-with-military-service-members-must-serve-in-a/.*

Using dress forms, I am able to reject expectations for the heteronormativity surrounding the military. In this way, I critique the power of this institution and return the power to myself. Not only am I the builder of the ship, but I am also able to fold it up, to carry it with me.



ALL HANDS ON DECK

When I began my thesis, I instinctively knew that I wanted to build a boat.

I knew I needed to build a boat in the same way that I knew my name was Charlie as soon as I discovered within myself that I was transgender. However, what form the boat would take eluded me for some time.

Since the military was violent, in the beginning of my project, I was focused on violence too. The violence done to me, the violence done to other people. I watched dozens of war movies, trying to decipher what made them pro and anti-war. How could I make art about the military that wouldn't be misunderstood? The question wracked my mind and affected everything I made. I naively wondered if there wasn't a special formula that would make my art free from misinterpretation.

IT WAS THE BIGGEST GUN I HAD EVER SHOT. IT WAS THE BIGGEST GUN MOST PEOPLE HAD EVER SHOT. I AIMED THE BARREL AT THE GIANT RED TOMATO THAT FLOATED IN THE WATER, NOT KNOWING IF I EVEN CAME CLOSE TO HITTING IT. I DIDN'T REALLY CARE. TO BE HONEST, THE GUNNER'S MATES WEREN'T PAYING ATTENTION. IT WAS MORE ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE. ABOUT FEELING THE BEAST IN YOUR HANDS AND NOT LETTING GO. IF YOU COULD LAND A SHOT ON THE GREAT BIG BEHEMOTH, THAT WAS A PLUS.

AS SOON AS I LET GO OF THE GUN, GM1 WAS ONTO THE NEXT PERSON. WE HAD ALREADY BEEN TOLD NOT TO TOUCH THE SHELLS, BUT I SCOOPED DOWN AND GRABBED ONE OF THE SHELLS I HAD JUST SHOT. THE STILL HOT SHELL SIZZLED IN MY HAND AND I SHOVED IT IN MY POCKET, HURRYING AWAY. I KNEW I WOULD NEVER SHOOT ANOTHER GUN LIKE THIS AND I WANTED A PIECE OF IT. THE WARMNESS IN MY POCKET REMINDED ME OF MY CRIME.

The first time I watched The Act of Killing, I couldn't finish it. But the documentary haunted me for years until I saw an interview with Errol Morris about the film and felt compelled to watch it again. Even the first time I watched it, I saw the brilliance in it. A truly surreal experience, filmmaker John Oppenheimer asks a number of Indonesian death squad leaders, celebrated as heroes in their country, to reenact their crimes. Rather than just passively interviewing them, Oppenheimer has the men play active roles, reliving the mass executions via musical numbers, American inspired action scenes, and comedy sequences. It is difficult to watch as the men joke and laugh, showing the proper method to decapitate a person.

During an interview about the movie, executive producer Errol Morris said the movie ultimately asks the question, "What if you commit a terrible crime but you're rewarded for it? What if 40 years pass and the memories of what you did still stay with you?"[2] At the beginning of my thesis research, questions like Errol's haunted me. When people thanked me for my service, was I not thanked for the bad things I did on deployment? Every time I climbed the 13 flights of stairs to load crypto at 3am, I knew I just made those tomahawk missiles on-board our ship live and functional. I would never see where they landed and thinking about this made me sick. What would happen if I had refused to fulfill my role? Presumably someone else would take my place eventually, but that small form of resistance was something I thought about.

The second time I watched The Act of Killing, I didn't see Indonesian men. I saw us, the United States military. I saw Chris Kyle, The American Sniper, who called Iraqis "savage, despicable evil" in his mem-

2 *"Werner Herzog and Errol Morris Talk about 'The Act of Killing'- YouTube." VICE. Accessed April 19, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLQx-Vy7R9qo.*

oir[3]. A man who described killing as "fun" and something he "loved" seemed like a modern successor to these aging Indonesian soldiers. As Errol continued, "Can you commit a terrible crime and pay no penalty? I'm not just simply talking about criminal penalties or legal penalties. I'm talking about psychological penalties." When you do something terrible and perhaps expect punishment but receive none, what does that do to you, psychologically? There are other, smaller forms of punishment that we inflict on ourselves every day, particularly in the veteran community. I took to alcohol and drugs for years to both punish myself and forget about the people I had seen die.

Punishment is an idea intrinsically tied to the military and often the tool with which lessons are taught. In boot camp, the idea of mass punishment is one the first things you learn. In Chelsea Manning's book ReadMe.Txt, she says, "If one person out of thirty messes up, all thirty do push ups. This understanding, that an individual's actions affect the group, gets ingrained in soldiers so deeply that they don't even realize they've internalized it."[4] The military group-think starts when you become dependent on each other's actions. If one of the group was slacking, we did the work for them so everyone didn't suffer. Eventually, you stop thinking like an individual. As Manning explains, "I'm a part of us, thinks a soldier, and out there is a them."[5] And how delicious it is to be part of "us,"' to belong, to have that kind of privilege and power. But of course, that made everyone else a "them," an enemy. When they told us the men in the Persian Gulf were dangerous pirates, I believed them without a second thought, without considering that we had traveled over seven months to their home. The conditioning had done its work.

3 *Kyle, Chris, Scott McEwen, and Jim DeFelice. American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History. New York: William Morrow, 2012.*

4 *Manning, Chelsea. README.Txt: A Memoir. First edition. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2022, 149.*

5 *Manning, Chelsea. README.Txt: A Memoir, 149.*

When I enlisted in 2009, I was in a pretty desperate situation. I had been in college for a year, working three jobs and I was failing out. I was living at home, and although I wasn't out as queer or trans, the signs were there. After a particularly bad fight with my dad where he fractured my ankle, I decided I needed to get out as soon as possible. I wasn't going to give him another chance to hurt me.

Despite the military's historic stance on LGBT+ people, there has been a long appeal for us to join. As Manning states,

> *Enlisting, I began to think, might solve a few problems. For one thing, it would get my dad to stop needling me. And I wanted his respect. For another, I thought it would be a good way to externally enforce my own masculinity. I figured I wouldn't have the desire to wear women's clothing in such a regimented environment- if there was a uniform, I wouldn't have to think about gender presentation at all.*[6]

Manning thought that joining the military would force her to stop cross dressing and wearing makeup "cold turkey." In a similar way, I hoped that a uniform would take the weight off of my gender presentation. I wouldn't have to worry about what to wear everyday, and I hoped that being in a male dominated environment, that I wouldn't be expected to fret over my hair or wear makeup. I was shocked when my experience of shipboard life had the most strict gendered presentations of my life. Because of the drab, often sack-like uniforms worn during the day, the expectation was that the women would be hyper feminine by wearing exaggerated makeup, excessive jewelry, tight clothing and extra high heels off duty (akin to drag clothing today). An entire essay could be written about the various ways women learned to feminize their uniforms around regulations. In many ways, I joined the military hoping for the freedom

6 *Manning, Chelsea. README.Txt: A Memoir, 55.*

to be more masculine, only to find that the gender roles were even stricter here than in the civilian world. I began to disassociate more and more, letting other people dress me, tell me what to do, where to go, on and off duty. Looking at the pictures from back then, I barely recognize the girl in short skirts.

Reading Manning's book was revolutionary for me because there just aren't many narratives of trans people in the military and for so long I felt like the only one that felt the way I did. I was starting to hate my job and I was starting to hate myself at the same time. The military was a hyper, jacked up version of the binary, and I was starting to think I wouldn't survive it.

As Chelsea remarked, "I was just trying to survive every day. Compartmentalizing is something I was good at. I was grappling with my gender identity and working inside an army that didn't officially allow people like me to serve openly."[7] Surviving meant separating who you are from the job you worked. I couldn't talk about my private life at work or friend any of my coworkers on social media. If I looked at a girl for too long, would they guess I was gay? I felt like I was constantly being hunted, being targeted, and living on a 300 ft ship meant there was nowhere to hide.

After I got discharged, I had all this...stuff from the military. All these bits and bobs that just reminded me of bad times, but I couldn't quite get rid of them. So I just packed them up and they lived in my garage for years. When I moved, I took the boxes, but I never opened them. They just sat there, weighing on my mind. During my undergraduate degree, I opened them. I took the military uniforms out and burned them in order to make a new object, a new memory. Cast in wax, the ashes became part of my first big installation, Little Soldiers.

7 *Manning, Chelsea. README.Txt: A Memoir, 4.*



Wax figures mixed with the ashes of my military uniforms are pinned to the wall. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie



A collection of military artifacts are spread out on a table.

The next thing I did was gather everything I had left from my military service to see what was left. After 12 years, much of it had been lost to moves, carelessness, or deliberate purges. I began to write stories about each item, trying to remember why I had bothered to keep them. Why had these items survived the years?

My question then was why do we hold onto “bad” souvenirs, or things that are associated with bad memories? In a way, my question now is a continuation of this conversation. How can we talk about

difficult memories and topics? What does the conflict between soft and hard reveal? What does it mean to depict masculine, patriarchal weapons of war with soft, feminine material?

At Fleet Week, we (or rather my husband) gathered water to bring back home with us. At the time, I didn't know what the water would be used for, but I wanted the water that these naval vessels had moved through. This connection felt important to me. So three gallons of the dirty, questionable New York water followed us home and every drop would later become integrated into my sculpture.



A man gathers water in the New York City harbor.

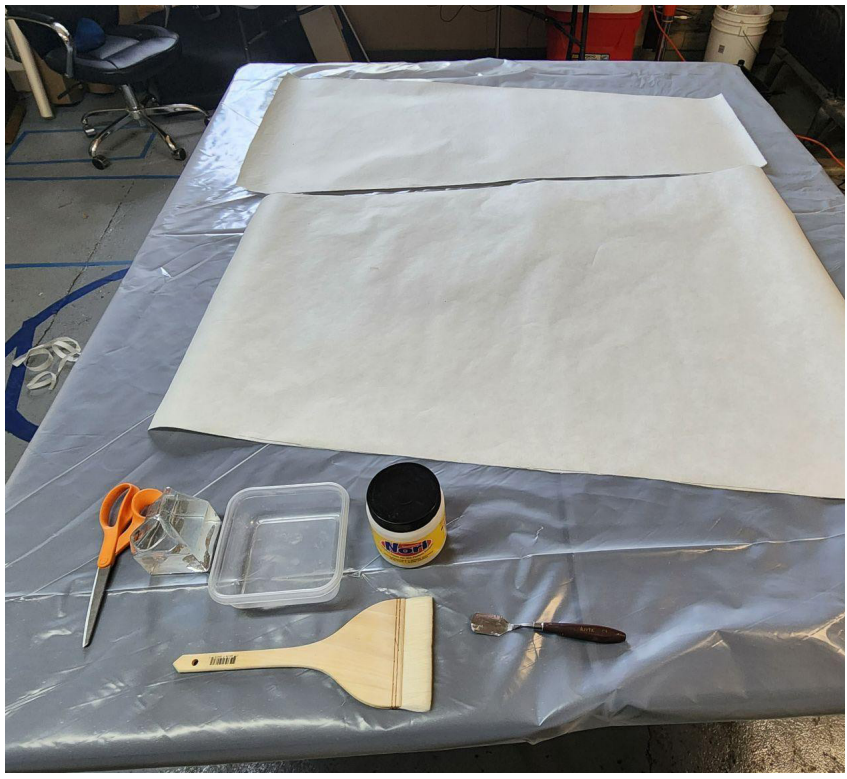
Until very recently, my artwork lived very internally. I struggled to connect to my fellow veterans, feeling excluded from the very world I used to belong to. As a gay, trans artist, I had changed a lot since I served and I no longer felt comfortable with my enlistment. Weren't these the same people that victimized and harassed me? Could I trust them?

Everything changed for me after Aaron Bushnell self-immolated on February 24, 2024. Suddenly, I saw other veterans being vocal and saying the same things I was feeling. For the first time since serving, I felt the need for a community. Shortly after, I joined About Face, an antiwar organization for post 9/11 veterans like me. I realized I had been looking in all the wrong places. Here was a group of likeminded veterans who were activists and artists like me.

Now I have begun collaborating, connecting, and talking to other veteran artists. It's nice to talk to people whose experiences mirror my own and I have learned a lot from them. At every turn, I have folded their advice and participation into my practice, making for stronger, more in-depth projects. And importantly, some of the most gripping, influential work about war has been done by civilians caught in the grips of a horror they never signed up for. Wafaa Bilal, an Iraqi artist, based his performance, Domestic Tension, on the horror of living in a conflict zone during Saddam Hussein's regime.

In the beginning of my research, I had a particular affinity for the work of Wafaa Bilal, and his book, To Shoot an Iraqi was the first one I read in the program. In his book, Bilal goes over his project Domestic Tension while also weaving in stories about his life under Saddam Hussien's rule.[8] His view of the war, soldiers, and the United States provide a unique outside view that helped shape his project and

8 *Bilal, Wafaa, and Kari Lydersen. Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun. New York: City Lights Publishers, 2013.*



There is a table with supplies laid out for making the boat. Two pieces of paper, a hake brush, nori paste, and a small glass of the New York water.



Charlie Reynolds and Aaron Hughes, from About Face.



Wafaa Bilal crouches in a yellow room during his durational performance, Domestic Tension. Photo by Wafaa Bilal

the response to it. Of particular interest to me is the account of the people that formed the Human Shield that protected him during the latter part of the project.

I felt an instant connection to him as he spoke about survivor's guilt, something he felt as he was now safe here, but his family was still getting bombed. I have similarly felt intense guilt that I am safe now. That feeling is twofold, one in the sense that I am now in Michigan and my queer friends in Tennessee are still in danger. The other side of the guilt is that I survived my service, survived the war when others did not. It is a complicated feeling that comes and goes, but Bilal wrote about how those painful feelings led to Domestic Tension. I understood.

During the project, Bilal confined himself to a room where he was monitored 24/7. He invited viewers to watch and chat with him. They were also given the choice to shoot him with a computer-controlled

paintball gun. This amount of control really brought out the cruelty of people. A couple times the gun was hacked to be more dangerous, causing Bilal to duck around the room, protecting his head from a fatal shot. There were also moments of connection, though. He began to form friendships in the chat room, some people staying up all night just to keep him company. He became good friends with the owner of the restaurant across the street, who often showed up to feed him.

And the most bizarre thing happened in the form of the Human Shield. At first it was just a small number of anonymous members in the chat, but their numbers quickly grew. Bilal noticed one day that the gun started jerking right before it was about to shoot. He checked the chat and realized that people were trying to save him by canceling out the commands by the people trying to shoot him. The members got serious about their mission and began to create shifts to thwart the hackers from shooting Bilal. No one had asked them to do this, it was something that happened organically in the face of injustice. Their empathy wasn't something I expected. I started to consider how to engage the audience in the way Bilal did, which led me to dip my toe into performance.

In An Attempt to Carry A Heavy Burden, I dragged an oil barrel off a Persian rug to the exit of the studios. The oil barrel symbolized the oil platform our ship protected with the rug representing the Persian Gulf we were deployed to. The discomfort of the audience as I struggled with the unwieldy, difficult object mimics the psychological toil that deployment had on me. To carry the memory alone, the weight of this oil is almost too much for one person to bear.

What I ultimately learned from this performance, and from Bilal, is that performance has a place in my practice in a very specific way. I have never considered myself an actor or performer, per say. When I struggled to drag the oil barrel, that struggle was real. When Bilal was dodging the paintballs aimed at his head, that danger was very real. Thus, I was more interested in exploring time or endurance based performances in the future.



A man in a wheelchair drags an oil barrel across the floor.

As I was considering performances, I was also very interested in the ephemeral. Following my traumatic brain injury, I had lost a lot of my military memories. My two deployments had begun to meld together in mind, making it hard to separate them. I thought it would be fitting to make something that I either destroyed or gave away at the end of my show. I had heard of a veteran artist that gave all his work away, an idea that intrigued me. That led me to Ehren Tool.

Ehren Tool is an interesting guy. If you ask him, he just makes cups, but it is profoundly more beautiful than that. His work is heavily influenced by his time in the Marine Corps. He has been relentlessly making and giving away his handmade ceramic cups since 2001. His cups which tell of the horrors of war and grief are Ehren's way of starting hard conversations. I think it's significant that you can't buy one of Tool's cups, you have to be given one. His exhibitions feature shelves of hundreds of unique cups that slowly empty as they are given away. This is something he feels called to do, much like I feel compelled to make art about my service.



A ceramic cup sits alone that says "I just make cups." Photo by Madison Metro

I've spoken to Ehren on the phone and over email. He was clear that he isn't necessarily anti-war, he just wants people to make informed decisions. He wants them to know the truth. That's why he puts the images he does on his cups. I want to consider how I can start conversations myself and perhaps how giving back could benefit my practice.

As Tool remarked,

> *People are always talking about how it's therapy for me. I'm like, 'It's not therapy; I'm making art.' But, you know, now that I'm creeping up on 22,000, I'm realizing, 'OK, it might be therapy.' Even now, as we're talking, I can feel it: I've just gotta go make cups — quit talking about it, and just do it.*[9]

Tool might deny that his cups are therapy, but it's hard to deny the compulsion to make. I started to make art after I got out of the military as a way to cope. Suddenly I was in a wheelchair, with too much time on my hands. I started by painting my service dog every day and moved on from there. Now, I too, feel a compulsion to make or I start to feel that dark cloud starting to surround me. As a part of the military machine, we took so much. Perhaps the act of giving away art is how we heal.

In the veteran art world, no organization is more well known than Combat Paper. Working with a variety of veteran groups, anti-war groups, and grassroot organizations, Combat Paper transforms military uniforms into handmade paper. Using emotionally charged material makes the collaborative art making process special and memorable, transferring those stories and experiences into the fibers. Their workshops occur across the country, and they have also done collaborations like Conflict Exchange with Wafaa Bilal.[10]

9 *Brice, Anne. "Ehren Tool's Cups Aren't for Sale. They're for Starting Conversations — about War." Berkeley News, February 20, 2020. https://news.berkeley.edu/2020/02/20/ehren-tool-war-cups/.*

10 *COMBAT PAPER ®. "Projects." Accessed April 19, 2025. https://www.combatpaper.org/projects.*



The photo advertises Conflict Exchange as a new project between Bilal and Combat paper. There are examples of paper made from uniforms hung up. Photo by Combat Paper

Conflict Exchange focused on relationships post conflict. Combat Paper produced paper from donated military fatigues in the gallery. Visitors were encouraged to interact with the artisans during the making and to purchase the conflict byproducts. This collaboration was meant to be an extension of Bilal's work 168:01, which invites the audience to contribute to the rebuilding of the University of Baghdad's library through the purchase of blank white books.

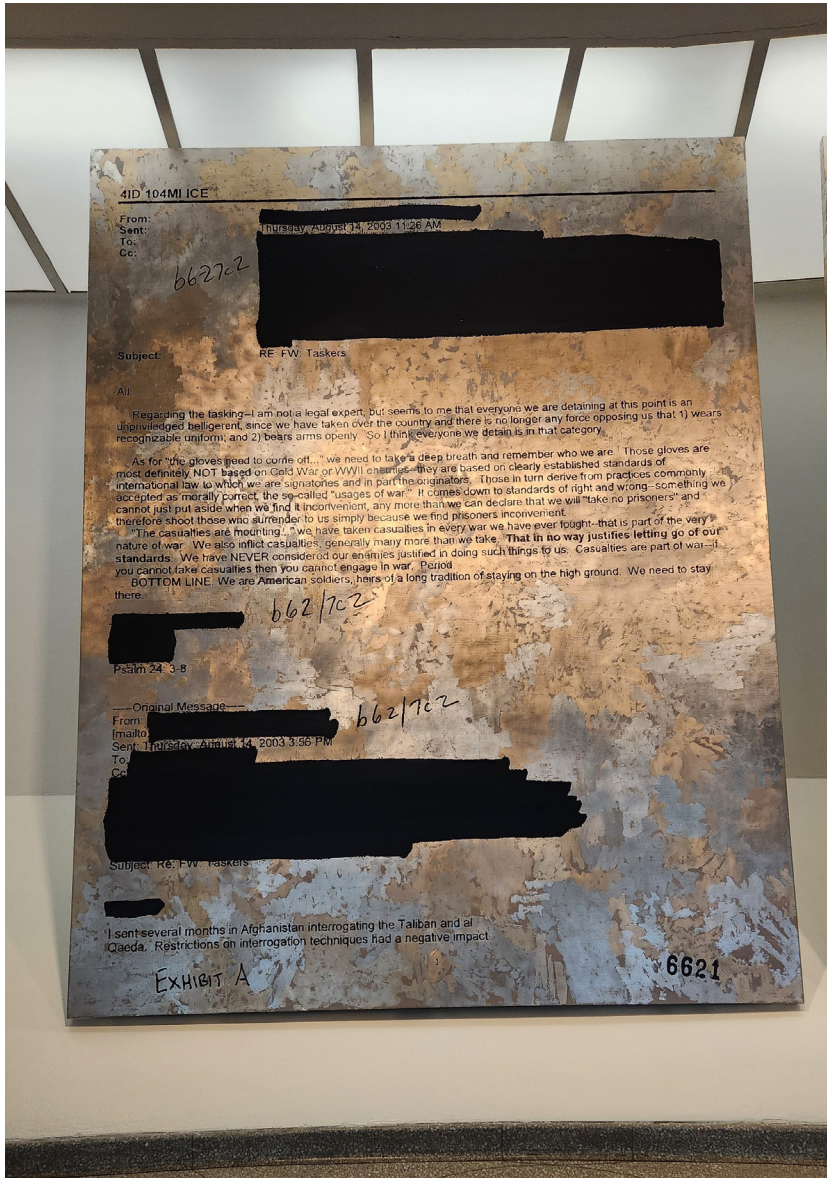
I like how Combat Paper transforms the uniform into a new medium while also involving the audience in the process. I find their collaboration with Bilal significant as well. Before their collaboration with Bilal, I was unsure how to feel about Combat Paper and their politics. In Conflict Exchange, I read a sense of remorse that I didn't feel in their other projects. In a veteran bubble, it is hard to tell how someone feels. How do their projects read? Is it sympathy for veterans? Or approval of the war on terror? In Conflict Exchange, perhaps because of their Iraqi collaborator, the motivations and underlying emotions seem more clear to me. It has made me recontextualize the rest of their work and wonder what my inherent bias towards veterans made me dismiss the first time.

Other artists like Jenny Holtzer made some interesting work with military material. Having worked with a lot of classified material during my service, Wish List/ Gloves Off from 2007 stood out to me. I instantly recognized the familiar format and jargon of a military email. The metal panels show an email circulated by an Army captain in 2003, requesting a "wish list" interrogation methods for dealing with aggressors. This email sparked an internal debate about whether or not using torture was necessary, justified, or if ethics should come first.[11]

The large size and materiality Holtzer chose says a lot about the artist's opinion. It is as if the panels say "you cannot hide me, I am here." Sitting in front of them, I felt that the enormity of both the panels and the words would crush me. The black sections of redaction felt ominous and foreboding blown up to such size. I feel like the materiality was chosen specifically to preserve something that should never be forgotten. Emails get lost and paper decomposes. But Holtzer wants to remember these emails and wants us to remember them too.

I saw a direct correlation between Holtzer's work and my weavings Laying the Keel. Also using military documents, I wove my military contract and my discharge paperwork (DD214). In the middle is my military portrait, duplicated over and over. Black bars are purposely placed over my eyes, hands, and mouth. In these bars, is a different type of story. My story. The middle weaving hangs lower for a wheelchair user. As it's my story, the middle weaving is for me, at my height.

11 *jackstin. "Deeper Look: Jenny HolzerWish List/Gloves Off | MASS MoCA," May 19, 2017. https://massmoca.org/event/deeper-look-jenny-holzer-wish-listgloves-off/.*



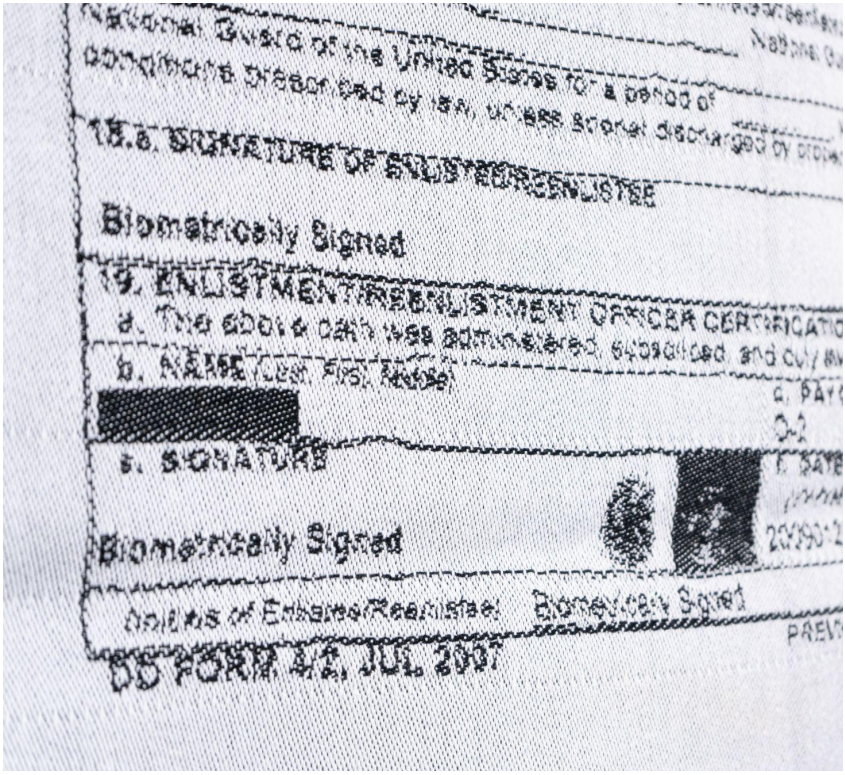
Wish List/ Gloves Off by Jenny Holtzer features a military email that Holtzer engraved on a large metal slab.



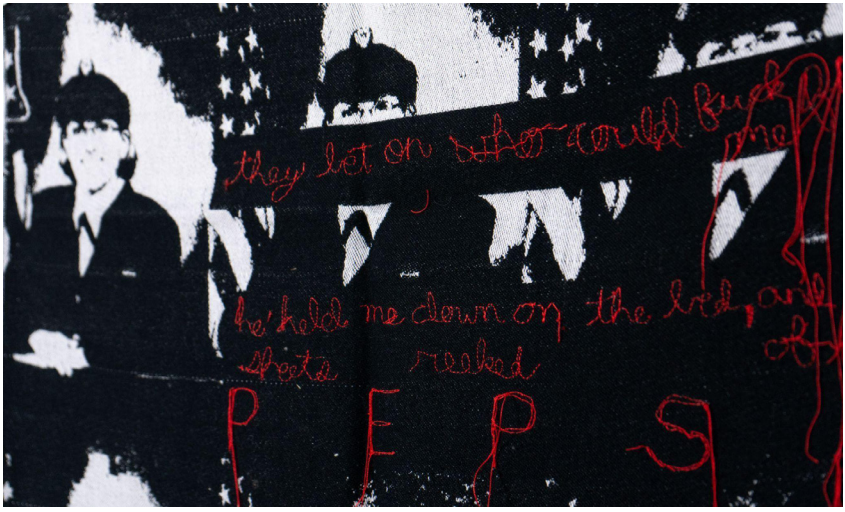
Three weavings are pinned to the wall, with the middle one lowered than the other two. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

Holzer's work immortalizes an email, not letting it fade in the public memory. In a similar way, by weaving my contract, I was able to meditate and focus on every line in a way I never had before. I was adding weight and importance to two documents that changed the course of my life, but were usually reserved to only paper.

As I continued to grapple with how to depict political topics without being too overt, I began to work at UMMA, the University of Michigan Museum of Art. A particular painting in the gallery caught my eye, Flay by Titus Kaphar. After asking my boss about it, I was directed to his talk online.



Close up view of woven document. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

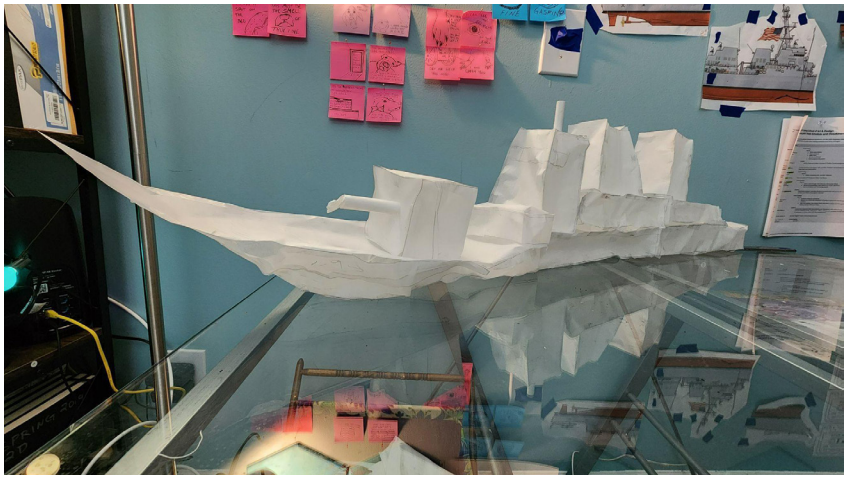


A bootcamp photo is replicated in black and white. Black bars are placed over the mouth and hands. Text is written in red thread. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie



Painting of James Madison, oil on canvas. Named Flay, the painting is shredded and the pieces are nailed to the wall. Photo by Titus Kaphar

During Kaphar's talk at the Stamps Speaker Series titled Unsettling Histories[12], he discusses the difficulty he had approaching hard topics in his paintings. He realized he didn't want to paint tortured bodies and it wasn't healthy for his spirit. Instead, he considered how to torture the painting and manipulate the painting by cutting and flaying to get his point across. I enjoy his conceptual approach to his subject matter. As I also depict difficult topics, like sexual assault and war, I want to find creative ways to start conversations without retraumatizing the communities I'm depicting. How can I use my sculpture to emote without being graphic? Laying the Keel had been very direct, perhaps too direct. I started to understand what the boat needed, but I struggled to picture it as a 3D object in my mind, making model after model.



An early model of the ship, made out of tracing paper.

12 *"Titus Kaphar: Unsettling Histories - YouTube." Accessed April 19, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyZIfwFer38.*

LABEL AW 328

A SMOOTH SEA NEVER MADE A SKILLED SAILOR

When I was a child, my grandma and my great-grandma taught me how to crochet, knit, sew and other traditionally feminine pastimes.

I hated these useful hobbies that would one day make me a better wife. That they assumed one day I would suddenly become feminine, settle down, and want children. I wanted to be rough, hard, and dirty. Masculine. Still, I dutifully took my sewing machine to the local Sew'N Vac where I was taught to put the dress patterns together like puzzle pieces until they produced a pair of pants or a shirt.

Later, sewing became a utility, a way to make money. On a ship surrounded by men that didn't know how to sew and found it quite beneath them, that hobby could make someone a lot of money come promotion season. As an artist now, sewing is a medium I keep coming back to. The accessibility of the sewing means that even on my worst days, I can still create. Now that I can live as a man and I'm comfortable with my masculinity, I find myself drawn to the softer crafts I neglected in the past.

I HAD ALWAYS ENVIED THE MALE SAILOR UNIFORM. THE CRACKER JACK UNIFORM WITH THE CRISP WHITE DIXIE CUP HAT. SO NATURALLY WHEN MY LSI SAW ME IN MY DRESS BLUES AND TOLD ME I HAD TO CHANGE, I WAS READY. I WAS IN COLOR GUARD, RIGHT RIFLE. "YOU CAN'T WEAR THAT," HE HUFFED, SAYING SOMETHING ABOUT RULES AND REGULATIONS. I TOOK OFF TO FIND SOMEONE IN MY DIVISION THE SAME SIZE AS ME.

I STOOD IN MY BERTHING, STUDYING MY REFLECTION. I STOOD A LITTLE TALLER, MY SHOULDERS A LITTLE BROADER. AS I FIXED THE DIXIE CUP ON MY HEAD, I FELT MY BREATH LEAVE MY BODY. "YOU LOOK HANDSOME," SOMEONE SAID BEHIND ME. THE OTHER WOMEN WERE CHATTERING, WATCHING. I WAS BREAKING ALL THE RULES. I COULDN'T HEAR THEM, SOMETHING HAD LOOSENED WITHIN ME.

I finally realized that maybe the only way to talk about hard topics is through soft, delicate materials. My life in the Navy was all steel, missiles, guns, and patriarchy. What I find both compelling and necessary is the examination of the military culture I so easily subscribed to through the dissection of the military artifacts and symbols I previously worshiped. Now that I can live as a man and I'm comfortable with my masculinity, I find myself drawn to the softer mediums I neglected in the past.

This is why when I started building my boat, I used fabric. I reasoned that if my boat was also a representation of a dress, fabric seemed a natural choice at first. In the beginning, the 'dress' in dress blues was very literal. I wanted a soft sculpture that was both a dress and boat, made out of uniforms.

What I soon learned was that fabric, though soft, was too durable, too long-lasting. Something magical happened when the patterns themselves became the material. Flimsy, delicate patterns. Meant to be used and discarded. Disposable, ephemeral. A means to an end.

I liked the subversion of expectation. If you give someone dress patterns, traditionally you expect to be given back a dress, or clothing of some kind. But I refuse that exchange and offer back a boat.

As Be Oakley discusses in their essay Radical Softness as a Boundless Form of Resistance, "A radical softness is something that is not always voiced or enacted; it can be an internal feeling that drives how we embody ourselves in the world."[13] For me, radical softness is not just a choice of materials, but how I choose to move through the world as a trans man, choosing to stay 'soft' and vulnerable.

13 Oakely, Be. Radical Softness as a Boundless Form of Resistance, 24-25.

What does it mean to make weapons of war out of soft, frail materials? What does it mean to be purposely soft when you were trained to be brutal, to kill? As Oakley suggests, "this softness is often what actually carries protest through to following generations of marginalized peoples. It is a source of strength that can never be taken away, even in death, because softness does carry on."[14] The softness itself is a form of protest that can't be taken away, even in death. The vulnerability of queer existence, Oakley proposes, is something to embrace as a source of strength. In our queerness, we find strength in being sensitive and compassionate.

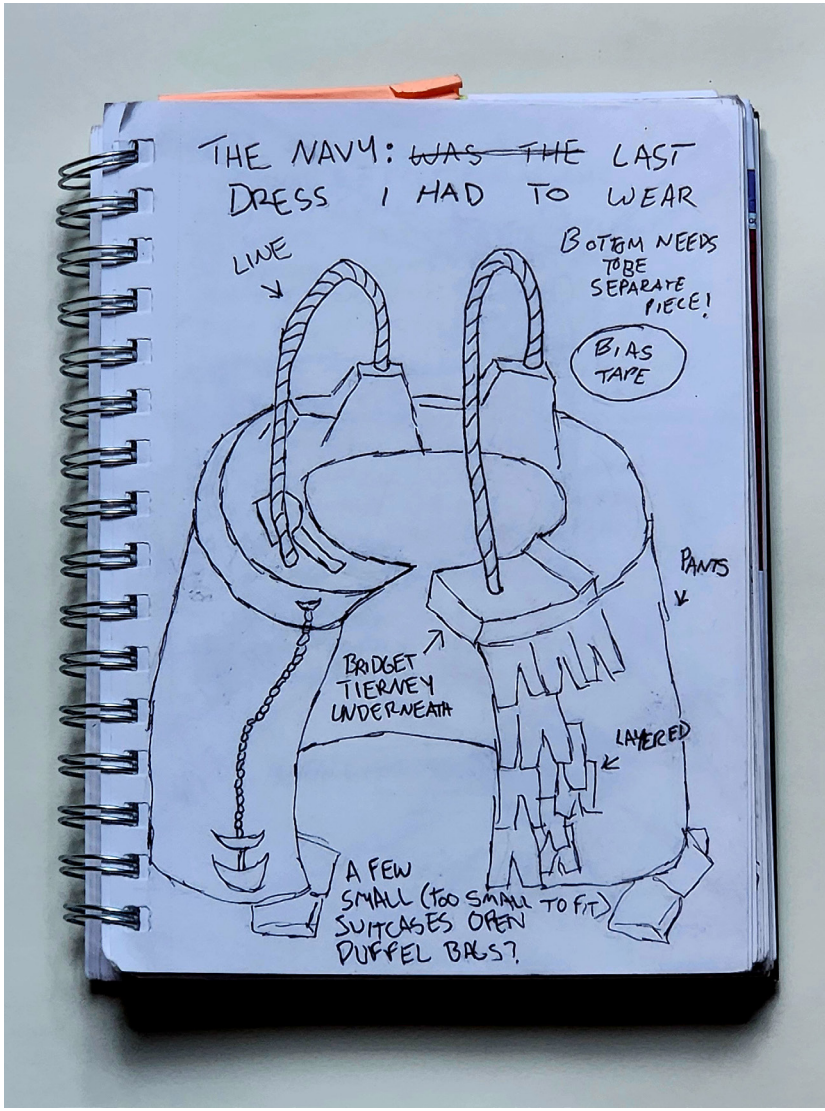
Oakley warns that the radical softness theory is not a utopian idea, but rather an adaptable open that tries to grapple with the unique and distinct realities we all face.[15] As a disabled person, I appreciate this attempt to establish an idea that encompasses the diverse types of resistance. In my younger days, resistance looked like attending protests and holding signs. Now as I have grown more sick and disabled, the ways I can resist has changed.

Even as radical softness works as a queer and disabled form of resistance, Oakley points out that "as white people (including myself), our privilege in the 'experimentation' with softness, especially in a queer post gender binary world, is often one that is taken for granted."[16] As we explore softness, we must remember that there is privilege inherent in the freedom to experiment with softness. No longer needing to be "hard" to survive, I now have the "luxury" of being soft when many people of color and other marginalized communities will never be afforded that.

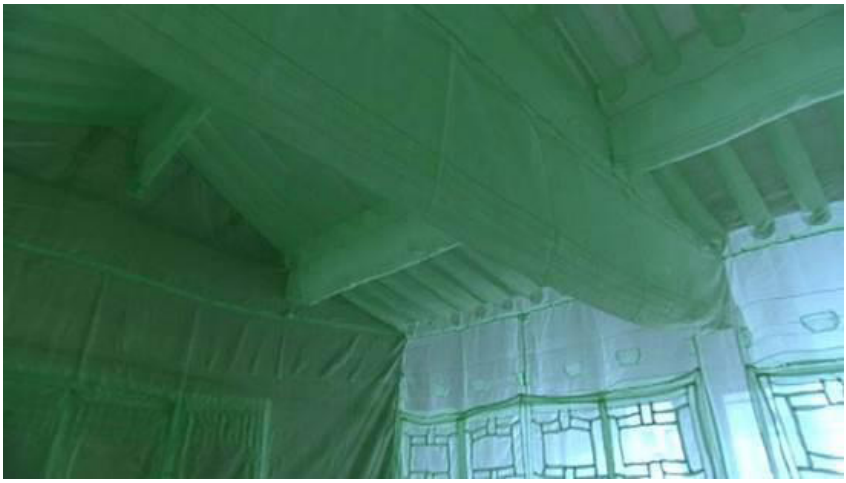
14 *Oakely, Be. Radical Softness as a Boundless Form of Resistance, 25.*

15 *Oakely, Be. Radical Softness as a Boundless Form of Resistance, 30.*

16 *Oakely, Be. Radical Softness as a Boundless Form of Resistance, 47.*



A sketch shows a circular ship with straps that act as the sculpture's bustier. The bottom section of the boat is made of pants and acts as the dress. The sketch is titled The Navy: The Last Dress I Had to Wear.



Inside view of Seoul Home / LA Home by Do Ho Suh. Production still from the Art21 Season 2 episode, Stories. © Art21, Inc. 2003

When first exploring the concept of 'soft,' one of my first inspirations was Korean artist Do Ho Suh. His fabric recreations of architecture create soft, haunting ghosts that act as transparent memories of the places they represent. His replication called Seoul Home/ LA Home rendered his parent's Korean home.[17] Suh was living in New York when he first conceived of the project, and he couldn't sleep well. He began thinking about the last time he slept well and that was at his parent's house in Seoul. And he wanted to bring that house to his apartment in New York.

The diligent green seams depict every beam and outline every window with care. The attention to detail says a lot about the love in which it was constructed, but also to the room that was remembered and the long hours spent there. The use of different seams gives the fabric room space, depth, and even a fictitious weight.

The way Suh thinks about and recreates spaces in fabric is exciting to me as a fiber artist. He creates every object out of fabric from the

17 *Art21. "'Seoul Home/L.A. Home'—Korea and Displacement." Accessed April 19, 2025. https://art21.org/read/do-ho-suh-seoul-home-la-home-korea-and-displacement/.*



A soft, impotent gun with pink fringe and a green trigger. Photo by Natalie Baxter

toilets to the outlets. How does an item change when you soften it? Or make it translucent? Suh's work has made me consider how I move through spaces and how I might replicate the spaces I remember. I have considered the way the ships I lived on have become living breathing entities in my mind, people in their own rights. What would it be like to be able to fold the ship and finally put it away, in both my mind and reality?

Natalie Baxter's work Warm Gun is a collection of colorfully quilted guns whose droopy, impotent quality examines issues of gun violence and masculinity in the United States through the lens of femininity.[18] I first learned of Baxter's work during my undergraduate studies when my art history professor brought in some of her work that he had purchased. Natalie was taught to sew by her gun toting Granny and was struck by the way guns were displayed like trophies on the wall of her hometown in Kentucky.

18 *Frank, Priscilla. "The Soft, 'Impotent' Gun Sculptures Taking On Toxic Masculinity." HuffPost, November 7, 2016. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/natalie-baxter-warm-gun-sculptures_n_581cba14e4b0e80b02c976e8.*

Barb is a fabric gun made in 2018, about 9 inches by 25 inches. The pink fringe attached to the barrel makes the gun droop in an unnatural way. The large bright green trigger stands out against the patterned body, making the gun look playful.

I was really struck by the way she tackles masculinity by making objects soft. The gun's impotence was something that really affected and angered some of her audience. She took the killing out of the object, neutered it in a way. This caused some men to attack her gender. As I deal with gender in my own work, I'm interested in the way materiality can elicit such strong emotions when tied to gendered objects. Was there a way to use sewing and craft as a gendered language without fabric?

Before I met Phranc, I was convinced that the boat had to be made of uniforms. Having previously worked with military uniforms, I was drawn to the materiality and the history of the uniforms. The uniforms had been lived and breathed in by service members, gone on deployments, and seen experiences like the ones I was trying to work through. The material resonated with me.

However, in the fall of 2024, I was running into a problem. The uniform I had worn in the Navy in 2010, the Navy Working Uniform, had been retired. My second choice for material, Navy Coveralls, had also been retired. I was having difficulty finding the quantity of used uniforms I would need from Army/Navy Surplus Stores and I was running out of options.

While I was having a dilemma over material, I met Phranc. I was shy to talk to them at first, but then I noticed a small metal USN pin on their jacket. That instantly caught my attention and I gathered enough courage to speak. I pointed to the pin and asked. Phranc explained that she wore it for a family member, but that it's a great conversation starter.

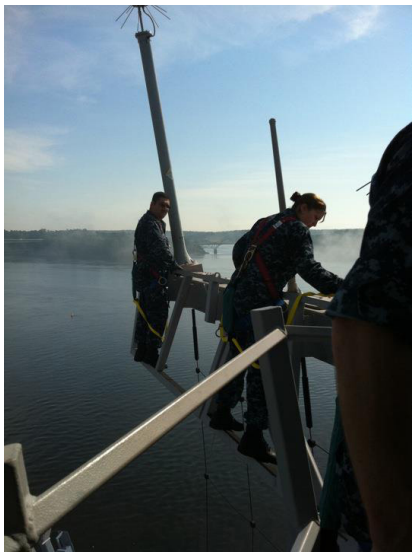


Photo of several sailors aloft on a mast, fixing antennas. The sailors are wearing the Navy Working Uniforms that were standard in 2010.



Charlie Reynolds and Phranc smile at the camera, the first time they met.

I loved listening to Phranc talk about paper. The universal utility of it, the affordability of it, how fun it was. I had been making demos out of dress white uniforms, but somehow I had stopped having fun. I was frustrated, fighting with the fabric. When did I stop enjoying my work?

Attending the opening for Phranc's Butch Closet at Institute for Humanities, playfulness was in the air. The melancholy was less obvious, but present in the small details and in the stories carefully laid out in the companion booklet.

The companion booklet lets bare an undercurrent of pain with a combination of beautiful photography and heartfelt stories. The importance of clothing was something that resonated with me as a former queer child. My childhood was full of arguments over dresses, uncomfortable ruffles, and reminders to cross my legs.

Underneath all these careful details and delicate painting is the fragility of paper, which Phranc often sews together like a traditional garment. One rip and the illusion is broken. I loved the idea of dedicating so much time to a material that might break down on you. Phranc said the most delicate moment was flipping the garments inside out after they finished sewing it together. This is the same way seams are sewn, with the garment inside out, but I was surprised that Phranc turned the whole sculpture inside out in order to hide the seams. If it ripped, she started over.



A small paper jacket painted plaid hung on a hanger, neatly on a hook.



On the concrete floor, blue tape outlines five sections that will make up the ship.

I began to question my own work and what I enjoyed about it. Writing a pro/con list in my sketchbook, I kept coming back to a paper model I had previously made. It was only the top portion of the design, at the time, but I really enjoyed making it. Cutting each piece and delicately putting them together was the most gratification I had had for months. Taking that model, I taped the outline down in my home studio, and for the first time my ship lived in the physical space.



IT'S NOT GAY IF IT'S NOT UNDERWAY

Queer is a simple, five letter word burdened with a world of baggage.

As someone that has at some point identified as lesbian, gay, and bisexual, queer felt like a simpler explanation. A word with magic powers, full of possibilities.

Despite being queer myself, I had never dove much into queer art or queer artists. In winter 2024, I had the great fortune to meet and develop a friendship with Witt resident Machine Dazzle. Rolling by their studio every day, I would stop to say hi and admire their growing piles of (cleaned) trash. Having come from Tennessee, and earlier than that in the military, I hadn't had the opportunity to develop many queer friendships, often having to hide who I was for my safety.

IT WAS SUNDAY ON GRADUATION WEEKEND AND WE WERE THE ONLY GRADUATES WITHOUT VISITORS. THE HARRY POTTER MOVIE HAD JUST COME OUT AND WE MADE A DECISION TO GET OUR UNIFORMS ON AND TREK DOWN TO THE NEAREST MOVIE THEATER ON OUR LAST DAY OF FREEDOM. I HELD HER HAND WHEN DUMBLEDORE DIED AND WE CRIED ON EACH OTHER'S SHOULDERS, FABRIC DAMP UNDER OUR CHEEKS. IT FELT LIKE WE WERE THE ONLY ONES IN THE THEATER.

MAYBE I WAS A LITTLE IN LOVE WITH THIS GIRL WITH HER RED HAIR, PUSHING ME FOR TINY DETAILS ABOUT HER CRUSH. THE GROSS BOY THAT STOOD IN LINE BEHIND ME, PICKING HIS PIMPLES. ANY SMALL ANECDOTE.

ON THE WAY BACK, WE PULLED EACH OTHER INTO A PHOTO BOOTH, MAKING SILLY FACES.

I got the chance that summer to model for Machine's show Ouroboros, Act III. It was extraordinary to watch Machine work on Opening Night under pressure, dressing performers with so many moving parts, but never dropping his friendly attitude. Since then, Machine has been a constant source of advice, a mentor and confidant.

Being part of such a diverse, queer cast during Ouroboros felt transformative. For three days, I was surrounded by queer acceptance and love in a way that I had never felt before. The experience was both magical, fleeting, and transformative. I desperately wanted to hold onto the moment, and once it was over, I wanted to replicate it. I knew I needed more queer mentors, queer art, and queer artists in my life. The next semester I took a trans studies class, read some queer books, and made an effort to queer up my life.

Defining what queer is can be just as difficult as defining queer theory. It seemed like every book I read had a different opinion. After meeting Machine Dazzle and Phranc, I felt the need to investigate queer theory further. Dr. David Halperin discusses the origin of queer theory in his essay, "The Normalization of Queer Theory." He explained that, "queer theory originally came into being as a joke. Teresa de Lauretis coined the phrase 'queer theory' to serve as the title of a conference that she held in February of 1990 at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she is Professor of The History of Consciousness."[19] Although it's hard to imagine in 2025, de Lauretis was being rather brave when she used the rather scandalous word 'queer' in her presentation. To use a term thrown around by street kids and pair it with 'theory' was unheard of. As Dr. Halperin illuminates, de Lauretis purposely wanted to disrupt the complacency of "lesbian and gay studies," which implied that the relation of lesbian to gay male

19 *Halperin, David M. "The Normalization of Queer Theory." Journal of Homosexuality 45, no. 2–4 (September 23, 2003): 339–43. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v45n02_17, 339.*



Machine Dazzle and Charlie Reynolds gossip and sign art.



A person in a wheelchair dances, in a costume made of trash. Two big balls are attached to the back of the wheelchair. Photo by Woobenz Deriveau

topics in this field was equitable, fair and balanced.[20] Despite having a diverse community, lesbian and gay studies focused primarily on the white middle class gay man, something that still prevails today.

As an effort to break away from that narrative, queer theory was born, as a disruptive escape from the white male hegemony at the time. Rather than an already established theory, "Queer theory was a placeholder for a hypothetical knowledge not yet in existence, but whose consummation was devoutly to be wished."[21] As Dr. Halperin explains, queer theory was birthed in reserve, having a name and being presented before the idea was fully formed.[22] This makes it very difficult to pin down what queer theory actually is, as it had to be invented after the fact to feed the demand evoked by the promise.

Dr. Halperin goes on to say that because queer theory was a theory and not a discipline, it posed no threat to established academics. With the institutionalization of queer theory, 'queer' was essentially abstracted, generalizing the "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or transgressive content of queerness."[23] The flexibility and broadness of queer theory unfortunately undermined the specific needs of the groups they meant to serve. Dr. Halperin posits an ultimately paradoxical situation: as queer theory becomes more circulated throughout other disciplines, it becomes harder to pinpoint "what's so very queer about it."[24]

In fact, queer theory could be applied to established fields, to advance their disciplines- by "queering" them.[25] The act of "queering," refers to queer not as an identity but as a verb. According to the

20 *Halperin, David M. "The Normalization of Queer Theory." 340.*

21 *Halperin, David M. "The Normalization of Queer Theory." 340.*

22 *Halperin, David M. "The Normalization of Queer Theory." 341.*

23 *Halperin, David M. "The Normalization of Queer Theory." 341.*

24 *Halperin, David M. "The Normalization of Queer Theory." 342.*

25 *Halperin, David M. "The Normalization of Queer Theory." 342.*



Nine military artifacts are pictured, each carefully painted pink, as an early study into queering.

Merriam-Webster dictionary, the verb "queering" means "to consider or interpret something from a perspective that rejects traditional categories of gender and sexuality."[26] This technique is used to challenge heteronormativity by analyzing places in media that use heterosexuality or identity binaries as default.

When I first approached queer theory following my revelations at Fleet Week, I mainly focused on queering. Queering the military seemed like the perfect framing for my project. After all, I went back and forth on whether I fully rejected the military. In many ways, it saved a queer kid like me. But I wanted to know where someone like me could fit within the machine. And if I couldn't fit within it, how could I break it?

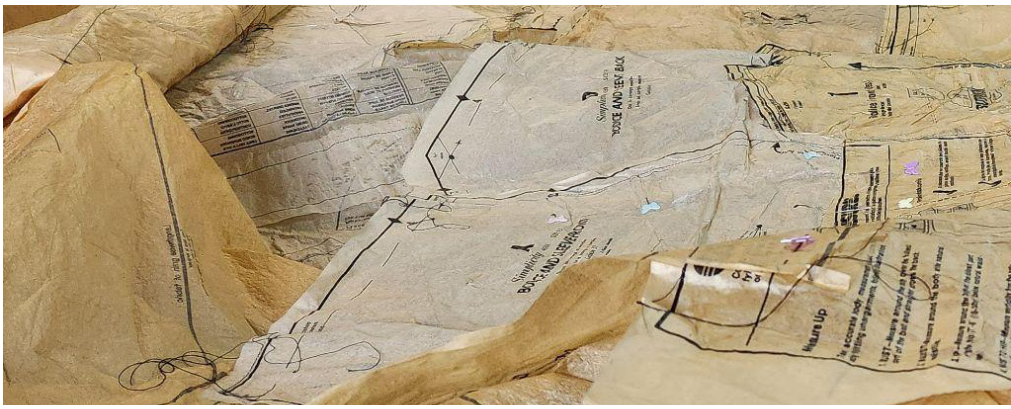
26 "Definition of QUEER." Accessed April 20, 2025. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/queer.

One of the first things I did when searching for graduate schools was to look for trans studies. There were shockingly little options. When I came down to two or three options, having trans theory classes was one of the reasons I ultimately chose University of Michigan. I had never had the opportunity to study disability or trans theory in an academic setting before.

One day when talking to my trans studies professor, we were talking about my thesis and I mentioned studying queer theory and queering. He questioned whether I was queering the boat or transing it. It stumped me. I didn't know. I came here to study trans theory, but I hadn't considered it any different than queer theory. There were experiences specific to being trans that "queer" didn't cover. Was I doing myself a disservice by being too broad? It felt like a big blindspot. After asking him to send me a bunch of essays, I dove back into reading and tried to ask myself: Is my boat queer? Is it trans? Is it both? Where does trans fit into queer theory? Where do I fit into queer theory?

Traditionally trans studies has been housed within either queer or women studies, an imperfect and sometimes unwelcome guest. As Cael Keegan writes in their essay, "Getting Disciplined: What's Trans about Queer Studies Now?" the trajectory of trans studies in universities is promising.[27] In roughly fifteen years, trans studies has become a recognized field and that should be celebrated. Still, the tension remains as trans studies tries to grow outside the restraints of queer and/or women's studies. (Interestingly, classes at the University of Michigan that are classified as 'trans studies' come up in the directory as both Women and Gender Studies and American Culture, giving you the option to register under either designation.)

27 *Keegan, Cáel M. "Getting Disciplined: What's Trans* About Queer Studies Now?" Journal of Homosexuality 67, no. 3 (February 23, 2020): 384–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1530885, 2.*



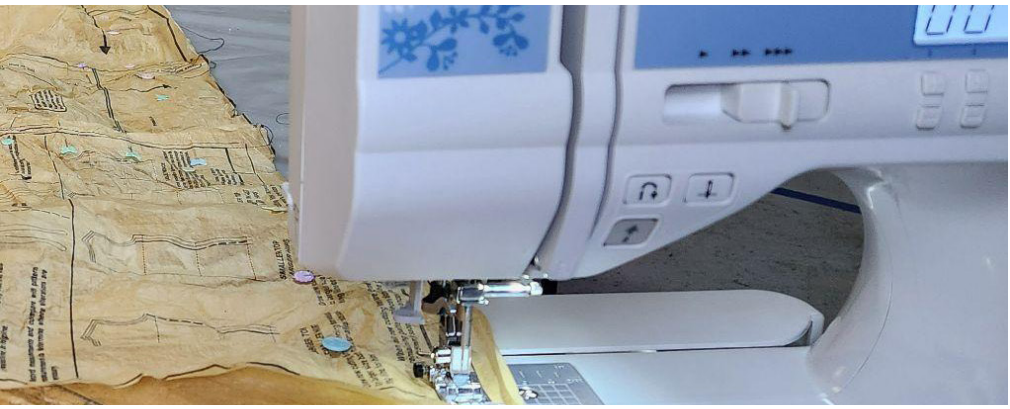
Assembling the dress patterns with a sewing machine on a 10ft table.

The earliest versions of trans studies, under the protective umbrella of queer studies, didn't pay attention to the specific needs and the difference that comes with being 'trans.' Keegan writes of a general suspicion that "gender means sexuality, that gender… is merely a cover story for not only sex but sexuality as well."[28] With this assumption that we were merely confusing gender for sexuality, or perhaps lying about our intentions which caused trans narratives to become swallowed up within queer theory. When your own people don't believe you, who will?

Thus, the only investigations into trans culture came through the lens of queer and women's studies programs. As Keegan asserts, scholars and pedagogues working within these contexts run the risk of "becoming the problem by bringing up the problem" of the cold shoulder trans studies received in these spaces.[29] This strategy of dismissing legitimate concerns blames the person complaining for pointing out the problem by redirecting the attention onto the complainer, often a marginalized person. The unsaid message is clear, be happy with what you have.

28 *Keegan, Cáel M. "Getting Disciplined: What's Trans* About Queer Studies Now?" 2.*

29 *Keegan, Cáel M. "Getting Disciplined: What's Trans* About Queer Studies Now?" 3.*



From another angle, we might consider trans studies as an interruption, a barrier, an intervention. Inspired by trans poet of color Shraya's piece, "often brown feels like but," this but performs many functions.[30] As Shraya used but to underscore the limitations and barriers inherent in brownness, we borrow the term to scrutinize the problems intrinsic to trans studies. As Keegan proposes, "but might alert us to the existence of a barrier or problem through contrast, surprise, or the assertion of impossibility, only to be viewed as constituting a barrier or problem itself."[31] Naturally, these interruptions or barriers, as they are found, are both vital to talk about, study, and push back on. This is also exactly the kind of thing that will label trans studies as disruptive, difficult, too much trouble.

As long as trans studies have to behave under someone else's umbrella, we will never be able to pursue our own agenda. Trans studies has long focused on narratives, illuminating the experiences of trans people. Without that, we don't appear as anything else than a problem in someone else's narrative. As Sara Ahmed put it, "not being

30 *Keegan, Cáel M. "Getting Disciplined: What's Trans* About Queer Studies Now?" 3.*

31 *Keegan, Cáel M. "Getting Disciplined: What's Trans* About Queer Studies Now?" 3.*



Weight test for Section 3. The sculpture now uses paper and holds up to two more layers, although the top two are starting to crumble.

accommodated can be a pedagogy."[32] As someone that had to fight every step of the way to transition, this spoke to me.

If 'queering' wasn't right, was 'transing', as my professor had suggested?

One thing that became clear to me as the ship began to take shape was the frustration, difficulty, and confusion inherent in the process. As with my own transition, it was awkward and strenuous, messy. As I tried to listen to the sculpture, the phrase that kept coming to my mind was that it didn't want to be a boat. What did this mean?

32 *Keegan, Cáel M. "Getting Disciplined: What's Trans* About Queer Studies Now?" 4.*



Dress patterns overlap to make up the side of the ship.
Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

As Hil Malatino suggests in their essay "Future Fatigue," gender isn't an identity but a territory. Thus 'trans' is treated as an adjective, not a noun. Trans-ing can then be defined as "a practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces. . . a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly"[33] By thinking of trans-ing as a process that allows for the disassembly and reassembly of gender, an exercise with limitless outcomes and potential.

33 Malatino, Hil. "Future Fatigue," 644.

When my advisor suggested that I try working with Japanese paper, I already had paper in my head thanks to Phranc. By backing the dress patterns on paper, they were stronger and could stand on their own. What was more, the nori paste lended the paper a texture that made it look wrinkled and skin-like. I was becoming the ship and the ship was becoming me.

As my boat design simplified and the 'dress' became less literal, the beauty of the sculpture began to take shape as the concept and form merged. The dress patterns became abstract architectural designs as they make up the sides of the ship. The dress patterns start to symbolize my life as a child, my girlhood, my femininity. As I twisted them into a ship, I knew they were transitioning. I know trans-ing is right. Viewing the military through the lens of trans knowledge, allows me to dissect the institution through my own specific narrative.

I am often asked when I knew I was trans. It's a tricky question. Although I couldn't see the signs for a long time, now I look back and see a breadcrumb trail of memories that all lead back to 'trans.' Weirdly, being trans and a veteran run in my family. I was punished for being trans long before I was ever aware of what trans was. My dad, who was now since transitioned, likely wanted to punish the parts of me she saw in herself. As a Navy veteran himself, my dad would frequently do white glove inspections at the house. It wasn't until I joined the military that I found out that she had been holding me to military standards and doing military inspections on me all those years. As annoyed as I was, it made boot camp inspections a breeze.

I say this to point out that I was preconditioned to be a perfectionist. I was taught at a young age that every task had to be perfect or you were going to do it again. And again. And again. There is power in letting go, but I struggled when my ship experiments weren't matching what I was imagining.

Halberstam advocates for "queer failure," the idea that failure can bring forth new knowledge and can be a productive way to critique heteronormative society. Halberstam doesn't just suggest getting lost, but posits that that's the goal. They advocate for a kind of untraining or unlearning so that we can "read the struggles and debates back into questions that seem settled and resolved."[34] When we know where we are going, we rarely learn anything, but wandering foreign streets and alleyways can teach us a lot.

The first thing I can ever remember really failing at is being a woman. And I really tried. From negotiating how much makeup I have to wear in pictures with my step-mom (I'll wear a little eye shadow, but I draw the line at mascara) to letting my shipmates dress me up like a doll before going to the club. I thought maybe if I just wore the right dress or got a certain haircut, maybe it would click. Surely, I just had to learn more. Then I could be better.

Many trans men have a hyper feminine period right before they come out. A last ditch effort. A final hurrah. I wore tight dresses and heels. I did my hair and makeup. All while I was crawling in my skin. Halberstam muses, "Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasure."[35] Here, Halberstam suggests that because the framework of success is inherently patriarchal, there can be real freedom and euphoria from breaking or failing those standards. That moment of finally giving up the facade, of admitting defeat to living up to unrealistic expectations has its own power to it. Not succeeding at womanhood was devastating to me, and freeing. It allowed me to finally figure out who I was.

34 Halberstam, Jack. The Queer Art of Failure, 11.

35 Halberstam, Jack. The Queer Art of Failure, 4.

The media often portrays queerness or trans-ness and the process of coming out as an open/shut door. The reality is that being "out" or "passing" is constantly in flux. As Malatino suggests, "Many trans subjects experience "passing" only in discontinuous, situationally dependent ways."[36] Despite transitioning over a decade ago, I still find myself in situations where my gender is questioned, challenged, or needs to be reinstated. I recently visited my grandparents for the first time since transitioning. All the pain and awkwardness of coming out was fresh again. For the first time in ten years, I was being dead-named and called she/her again (despite my grandparents' best efforts). Suddenly, I was thrust back in time to the beginning of my transition, back in limbo.

Malatino writes about a future harmonious moment between the felt and perceived body. They continue, "The trouble is that this horizon sometimes seems to be infinitely receding. When is one "post" transition? Who experiences such unity between feeling and perception, given how radically thrown—non-sovereign, out of one's control—modes of intersubject corporeal perception are?"[37] So who gets to be post transition? Who gets to be perceived as a man or woman when it's a moving goal post, completely dependent on the situation, location, and people involved? How can one come out and be out when the water is not only deep, but murky?

Last year, when I went to meet my new endocrine doctor, I got asked the dreaded question: "So, when are you going to finish your transition?" I was taken aback. I got red and replied that I've been on testosterone for over ten years now. I am finished. My new doctor responded that I haven't had bottom surgery, right? There were multiple things she did wrong, from asking an invasive question in a rude manner to pressing me when I already said I was done transitioning. But her attitude follows many in the medical community that surgery

36 *Malatino, Hil. "Future Fatigue," 641.*

37 *Malatino, Hil. "Future Fatigue," 640.*

+ surgery = transition. As Malatino points out, the medical transition viewpoint encourages trans people to bank hope on a medical industry that lacks empathy and has the potential to economically exploit them.[38] Malatino goes on further to discuss . . . :

This means that doctors become saviors, capable of enabling or disabling the possibility of a better future for trans subjects. It also means that the politics of access to forms of medical transition – which are simultaneously geographical, economic, racialized, and gendered. . . . If one is unable to access, or has compromised access to, the large ensemble of transition-related technologies, they are placed in a position of lag, their desired futured deferred, perhaps perennially.[39]

The lag that Malatino refers to shapes our experience of transition. This lag can look like saving pennies for a gender affirming surgery that insurance doesn't cover, waiting months or years on waiting lists for gender clinics, and the repeated, persistent transphobic hostility that wears down trans subjects daily. A big reason, Malatino speculates, that trans people buy into trans-medical narratives is that misrecognition and hostility breeds fatigue and we hope that with hormones and surgeries, one day that fatigue will lessen and subside.[40] As trans scholar Atalia Israeli-Nevo wrote about her own transition:

As trans subjects in this transphobic world we are encouraged and forced into a position of not being present. We are dissociated from our bodies, our loved ones, and our general environment. This dissociation throws us into a far future in which we are safe after we have passed and found a bodily and social home. However, this future is imagined and unreachable, resulting in us being out of time.[41]

38 Malatino, Hil. "Future Fatigue," 640.

39 Malatino, Hil. "Future Fatigue," 640-41.

40 Malatino, Hil. "Future Fatigue," 641.

41 Malatino, Hil. "Future Fatigue," 646.

The disassociation Israeli-Nevo speaks of is both a mental and physical separation from society. By being pushed to the margins, we are pushed out of the present. While this idea of 'not being present' is different from 'lag time,' it is only different in margins. It is important to note the different ways trans people are forced to the peripheries of society. The political, economic, and medical gatekeeping of trans care is a systematic way of removing transgender people from public life is a form of dehumanization and genocide. This makes the accessing of healthcare and other gender affirming services essential to trans survival.

A real world example of how we are forcibly removed from the present is President Donald Trump's recent order to push out transgender troops.[42] According to the order, being trans negatively affects military readiness and doesn't align with military values. This is despite the military being the largest employer transgender people in the United States. While my personal feelings about the military fluctuate and there is plenty to critique about the United State's foreign policy, it's undeniable that military service has frequently been used as an economic step-up for marginalized citizens.[43]

When I served from 2009-2013, Don't Ask, Don't Tell was both active and later repealed. Even later, the transgender ban would be lifted and soon reinstated by Trump. I would never get to serve openly. At all times, I was aware of the danger that was promised if I was found out. Even when Don't Ask, Don't Tell was repealed and NavyTimes

42 *PBS News. "Trump Aims to Push Transgender Troops out of the Military. Identifying People Will Be Complicated," January 31, 2025. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-aims-to-push-transgender-troops-out-of-the-military-identifying-people-will-be-complicated.*

43 *Manning, Chelsea. "Transgender People's Inclusion in the Military Is a Key First Step - but Not the Last." The Guardian, July 29, 2015, sec. Opinion. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/29/transgender-peoples-inclusion-military-key-first-step-not-last.*

had two women kissing on the front, I couldn't breathe. They could take it back. As Malatino continues, "If 'being present' means occupying space with a degree of un-self-consciousness, lack of anxiety, and without projections about what forms of violence might occur, then 'being present' is a form of privilege that the majority of trans subjects lack."[44] If Malatino sees being present as a privilege, then being trans is always being aware that you are in danger. As Alexis Ruiseco-Lombera explains in their essay, 'El Silencio De Les Cubane:'

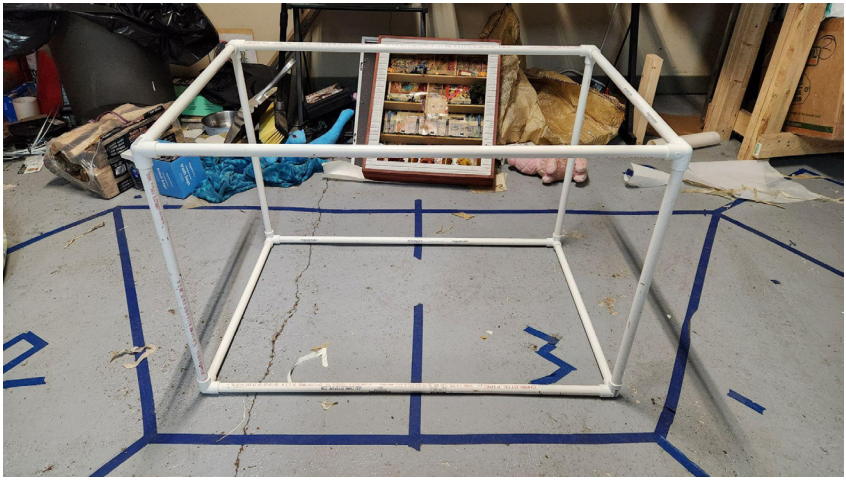
Falling no longer terrifies me the same way. I know that if I am falling and failing then I am trying, which is a testament to my efforts in learning, and my transformation. It takes courage to fall, fail, and to fear. More courage than it takes to have strength, front, and be hard. In a peaking moment of queer and trans cultural production and hyper-visibility, to be independent and upright is rare when most of us are moving from damage. [45]

In other words, Ruiseco-Lombera is saying that failure is evidence of their effort, their drive for knowledge in the first place. To know that you might fail and persevere anyway, is that true failure? If my structure teaches me something, did it fail? I find strength and wisdom in the theory of queer failure, but find the application murky at best. Who decides what failure is? Is my discomfort with the word reminiscent of heteronormative schooling or are there holes here?

But even though I embraced the idea of failure, something still nagged at me about the word 'failure.' Failure was still a binary, a clear yes or no. My ship was standing, but only just so. In a way, I was preventing failure. Only alluding to the possibility, the ever-alluding threat. Failure was too final a word for the experience I was beginning to understand. This limbo I felt stuck in was not in a state of having "failed.".

44 Malatino, Hil. "Future Fatigue," 647.

45 Oakely, Be. Radical Softness as a Boundless Form of Resistance. 6th ed. Printed Matter, 2020. https://www.printedmatter.org/catalog/54018/, 110.



A white box of PVC pipes, serving as supports, sit on top of an outline of the ship.

I struggled with how much to fail, how much to let my ship sink. Ever the perfectionist, I wanted to control it. I added supports under the paper structures, smaller and less supportive as the levels went up. The collapse would be slow, suspended, but never fail. In the same way that Baxter's floppy guns critique masculinity, I used the softness of my ship to emphasize the flaccid nature of the bow, referencing male genitalia. As a trans man, the refusal to make the bow stiff is a refusal to adhere to the strict, patriarchal definition of how to be a man.

This personal 'failure' of queer failure led me to search for a philosophy interested in flaws and imperfection. The pursuit of wabi sabi principles was something that I pursued instinctually before I found a term for it. Being queer has made me naturally inclined towards the imperfect, the ugly, the rough, and the ephemeral. Growing up, I leaned towards queer-coded villains, dirty folk punk bands, and graffiti artists. I find my progression towards the wabi sabi philosophy and aesthetic to be quite natural. Andrew Juniper writes about the difficulty of finding an English equivalent for the term wabi-sabi as the term has complexity and ambiguity that has changed over time.[46]

46 *Juniper, Andrew. Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence. Tokyo, Japan: Tuttle Publishing, 2009, 47.*

The etymology of wabi sabi reminds me of the etymology of queer. Like the word 'queer', wabi and sabi have been used to express different ideas and emotions, with their meanings now being more open to personal interpretation.[47]



The flaccid bow is held up by the utilitarian white box.
Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

47 Juniper, Andrew. Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence, 47.

Leonard Koren talks about the original meanings of the words in his book, Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers. He explains that while wabi and sabi are interchangeable now, they once had different meanings. Sabi meant chill, lean or withered, while wabi described the misery of living alone in nature.[48] By the 14th century, the meaning of both words began to take on more positive aesthetic values[49]. For the poetic, this simplistic kind of life fostered an appreciation for the minute details in life. As Koren notes, the initial inspiration for the wabi-sabi principles comes from ideas of simplicity and nature found in Taoism and Chinese Zen Buddhism.[50]

In medieval Japan, Sen no Rikyū, a prominent tea master, positioned rough and unrefined pots on par with or even above the prestigious wares owned by the nobility.[51] Ornate ceramics from China such as elegant pieces of Ming porcelain was the prevailing preference of the ruling class of the time. Rikyū, with his position as tea master to a powerful military man, was able to shift the national opinion toward simplicity and humility, ultimately introducing the principles of wabi-sabi to the Japanese people.

Rikyū believed that if a bowl is perfect in its form and glaze, there is less to hold the viewer's attention.[52] When the artist makes a piece symmetrical, they don't allow the viewer to add anything to the piece, since it is already complete. On the other hand, an asymmetrical or imperfect piece offers the viewer an opportunity to get involved and help complete the picture.[53] While perfection might seem virtuous or ambitious, it has always been quite boring. A viewer will spend more time trying to understand asymmetrical, imperfect

48 *Koren, Leonard. Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers. Berkeley, Calif: Stone Bridge Press, 1994, 21-22.*

49 *Koren, Leonard. Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers. 22.*

50 *Koren, Leonard. Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers. 31.*

51 *Juniper, Andrew. Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence, 80.*

52 *Juniper, Andrew. Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence, 81.*

53 *Juniper, Andrew. Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence, 81.*

objects. Our minds automatically look for mistakes, for differences, in order to understand them. It is no surprise that we are drawn to objects that stand out from the bunch, from the norm. Juniper notes with some humor that some of the most prized bowls in history are those that initially were discarded by potters that made them, presumably for their flaws.[54]

Who can say what beauty is? Why do we save the potters' "mistakes"? There is a thin line between beauty and ugliness. Juniper points out that some might find a knot in a piece of wood an unattractive flaw to be cut out, while others would find it more appealing than the rest of the wood.[55] If we view flaws as something to cut out, what do we have left? If we only have room for perfection, who does that leave? What does that world look like?

The texture of wabi sabi designs differ from many modern pieces that offer smooth and sleek experiences. Wabi sabi relies on organic, natural materials that leave the object with a rough, uneven surface.[56] The Okawara paper I chose is fragile and thin. When coupled with the dress patterns and nori paste, the surface took on its own character with its own direction and depth. The paper seems to move and settle, crushed under the weight of itself. Every time I view the ship; it seems to have moved slightly.

The paper I chose is especially vulnerable to the effects of weathering and human handling. The nicks, bruises, scars, and dents tell the history of the object.[57] Similar to how scars tell the history of a body, the rips and tears tell the history of the sculpture. Rather than hiding these unattractive abrasions, I choose to keep this record visible. There is nothing without imperfection. The closer you look, the more flaws appear.

54 *Juniper, Andrew. Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence, 81.*

55 *Juniper, Andrew. Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence, 111.*

56 *Juniper, Andrew. Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence, 109.*

57 *Koren, Leonard. Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers. 62.*

Material is so key to my practice and to wabi sabi as a whole. The idea is to use materials that occur naturally and will physically change with the passage of time.[58] The delicacy of paper was perfect for my purposes. Even as I fold it, move it, pin it, the paper changes. It never lays the same way it did the first time. I know that every time I show this piece, it will be a little more sunken, a little more dilapidated. Until it falls apart and I can't show it anymore. Then I will make something else. It was not built to last.

Koren asserts that "Often, we arbitrarily designate moments, points along the way, as "finished" or "complete." But when does something's destiny finally come to fruition? Is the plant complete when it flowers? When it goes to seed? When the seeds sprout? When everything turns to compost? The notion of completion has no basis in wabi-sabi."[59] Until the materials actually disintegrate, the boat is suspended in a state of both sinking and floating. It will never actually finish sinking because I don't allow it to. Wabi-sabi makes us contemplate our own mortality, evoking existential grief since we know all existence shares the same fate.[60]

Koren mentions that his interest in beauty is directly tied to his father's death. After questioning the purpose of life, he decided that, "Of all the possibilities considered, the capacity to experience beauty seemed like one of the best reasons for living."[61] Similarly, the recent death of my service dog has made me search out for beauty in small places, trying to find enlightenment of some kind.

Wabi sabi is often characterized by entropic processes of nature. Entropy is the process of degradation or running down, which triggers chaos and produces variety. Irregular and imperfect objects can

58 *Juniper, Andrew. Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence, 123.*

59 *Koren, Leonard. Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers. 49-50.*

60 *Koren, Leonard. Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers. 54.*

61 *Koren, Leonard. Wabi-Sabi: Further Thoughts. Imperfect Publishing, 2015, 38.*



Two sections of the ship come together imperfectly.
Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

arouse a sense of empathy. It was the empathetic bond between objects and beholders that the tea masters idealized.[62] As I started to mold the sculpture, it became a creature to me and I came to care for it. As it began to rise, I took pride in its form.

Even though wabi sabi helped me approach the physicality of my sculpture, I still struggled to find language that fit the complex experience of designing and making the boat. In a way, I had to let the boat figure out who it was. I had to let it fail to be a boat. This was essential. I had to give it the room to fail, but not too much. I couldn't bear to let it fail all the way. In a way, I had started to see it as an extension of me.

While preparing to install my thesis show, it was really tempting to add theatrical lights and sound to the installation. I wrestled with whether the sculpture needed these additions or if it would be a distraction from the poetry of the piece. Would it turn something rustic, a struggle with and against the materials into something too modern, too flashy? Juniper notes that "The paring down to the very minimum while still retaining the poetry was the tea masters' maxim for design."[63] I continued to pare down my installation until the day before the opening, until there was only a ship, a pink hat, and challenge coins. Editing was the best lesson time, school, and the wabi sabi philosophy has taught me. Letting something stand alone for everyone to see is the hardest thing.

It's hard to say when the ship was complete or if it even is. In many ways, the project will never end, as the ship moves from port to port, gallery to gallery, changing drastically. It is impossible to predict what stage of being will be its final state of being. As it breaks down, I will continue to repair as I would tenderly care for my own body.

62 *Koren, Leonard. Wabi-Sabi: Further Thoughts, 50.*

63 *Juniper, Andrew. Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence, 113.*



MAKING WAY

When you approach Dress Blues in the back of the gallery, the ship has its back to you.

The soft sculpture's form is massive and elusive, hiding from your view. The vulnerable creature's delicate shape turns toward the corner, asking you to move around it before it opens up to you.

I'VE HAD BIG FEET FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER. AS A KID, I RECALL SLIPPING MY FATHER'S SHOES ON TO TAKE OUT THE TRASH AND BEING SHOCKED THEY FIT. I SOON SURPASSED HIM.

MY LARGE SIZE SERVED ME WELL ON THE SHIP WHERE IN THE DARKNESS OF BERTHING, BOOTS OFTEN DISAPPEARED FROM THE MESSY JUMBLE OF LEATHER AT THE END OF THE AISLE. NEW BOOTS WERE EXPENSIVE AND NO ONE WANTED TO DEAL WITH THE LITERAL PAIN OF BREAKING THEM IN. STILL, MY CLOWN SHOES STAY HANGING PROUDLY NEXT TO MY RACK, UNTOUCHED AND UNBOTHERED.



A large sculpture is seen from the back. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

As you round the corner, the shape unfolds. The shape is reminiscent of a USS guided-missile Destroyer, but softer, weaker, more damaged. The lifeform struggles to stay upright, balking at its own weight.



A large circular sculpture appears in the shape of a ship, the sides made up of dress patterns. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie



The bow of the ship and the turret rest on a white apparatus. The bow is limp and folds over the structure. The gun is bent and rests on top of the white box. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

The front section of the boat is propped up by a white apparatus. The white box works as a crutch, supporting the flaccid bow. The failure of the ship the stand erect is emphasized by the utilitarian prop. The broken gun sits on top of the aid, delicately balanced.



The end of the bent gun has a bouquet of patterns coming out of it, simulating gunfire. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

The gun points at the back of the boat, targeting itself. The muzzle flash, made out of dress patterns, shows the cycle of violence in motion.



A closeup of the shaft of the gun, made up of dress patterns. Under the dress patterns hides illustrated women taken from the front of dress pattern packages. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

Along the shaft of the gun that sits on the bow of the ship, hides women. Taken from the covers of dress patterns, the delicate illustrated pictures of women are woven between layers of dress patterns, visible only to careful viewers. The images of these women fascinated me, inspired me, and intimidated me as a child. A vision of the ideal woman I could never be.



The circular ship bends in an impossible direction. The bow of the ship and the turret are propped up by a utilitarian structure. The mast comes into view. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

As we come around the structure, the mast comes into view. Towering over the bridge, the mast extends out over the ship, bent and looming. The boat snakes around, turning and bending in an impossible direction.



The mast is fully raised. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

Days before the opening, the mast was broken, supported by the middle of the ship. As the politics of the real world changed, I struggled with the shape of the ship. Should the mast be raised or broken? Was it too depressing for it to be down? On March 14th, the Navy announced that trans sailors and marines have until March 28th to voluntarily separate before they get kicked out.[64] At that moment, I felt inspired to raise the mast so that the queer people and veterans who might see it could feel hope.

64 *Toropin, Rebecca Kheel, Konstantin. "Transgender Sailors and Marines Must Decide by March 28 to Leave Voluntarily, New Policy Says." Military.com, March 14, 2025. https://www.military.com/daily-news/2025/03/14/new-navy-marine-corps-policy-gives-transgender-troops-until-march-28-voluntarily-leave-service.html.*



Part of the mast is shown. A woman is barely visible under the dress patterns that make up the mast. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

The dress pattern women appear in the mast as well. I struggled with the mast the whole time. As a sailor, going aloft on the mast to fix antennas was a big part of my job. The frustration of the women tangled with my frustrations of the job, pierced with T-pins.



Part of the mast is shown, with light shining through the paper. The light illuminates the illustrated women hidden in the paper. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

The light shines through the thin paper, illuminating the illustrated women. The women hold and embrace each other, gazing lovingly in an ambiguously queer fashion. The layers and layers of dress patterns hide their indiscretion.



Two sections of the ship come together imperfectly, leaving a hole. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

The five sections of the ship are pieced together in an imperfect nature. The pins hold it together, but holes emerge as the paper bends and buckles, letting you peer into the structure. The edges are ruffled and frayed, the paper damaged. Thin pieces of black thread dangle over the corner where the two sections come together.



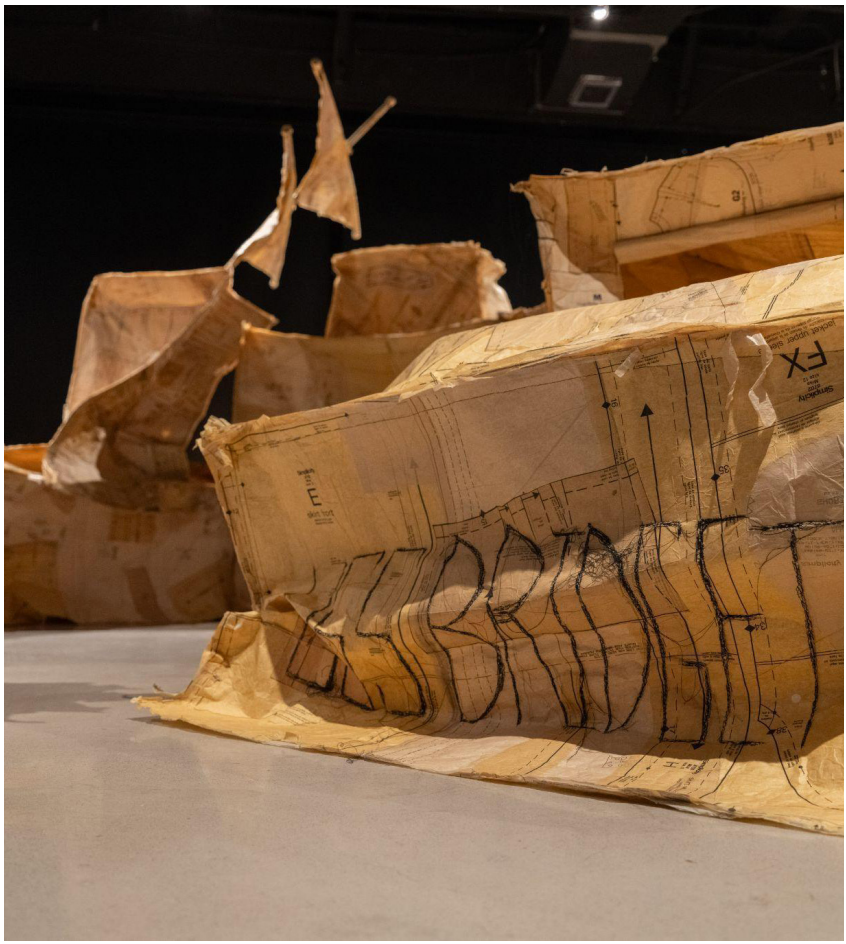
Dress patterns overlap, making up the sides of the ship. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

The dress patterns overlap each other, presenting like blueprints, as they make up the sides of the ship. They are pasted onto Okawara paper with nori paste. The most important ingredient of the ship was the water used to mix the nori paste. Taken during Fleet Week, I used three gallons of water from the New York City harbor. I wanted to use the same water that these Navy vessels had sailed through to integrate into my boat.



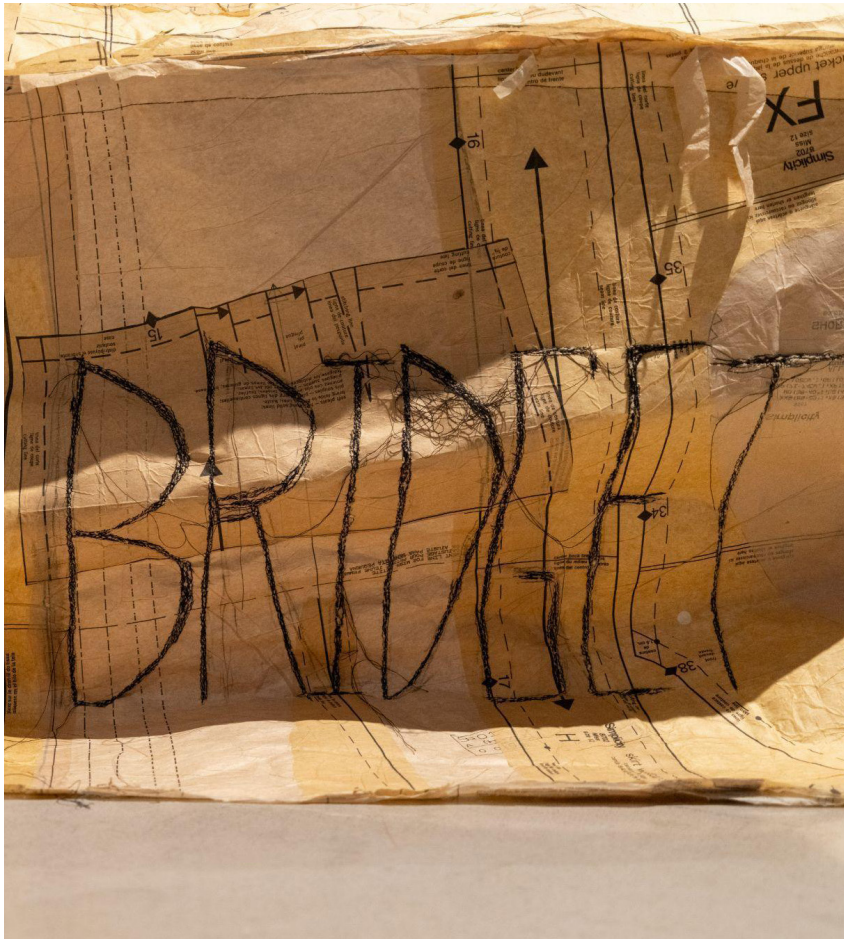
A close-up shot of the ship shows t-pins facing the same way in a line, holding two sections of the boat together. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

The T-pins ultimately hold together the sculpture, being both a sewing tool and a symbol of testosterone. The T-pins all point towards the center and while they all hold everything together, the pin leaves lasting marks even when it is taken away. The holes will always be there. This is not necessarily a bad thing. It is an instrument of change.



The whole ship is shown from the stern of the ship, with the name USS BRIDGET shown. The helo bay and mast can be seen. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

As we reach the stern of the ship, the helicopter bay towers over us. The final section melts into the floor, the paper flattening out and giving the ship a sinking appearance. The door of the helicopter bay is up and it invites us to peer inside. There is a sense of danger in there, of being trapped. The structure fights itself to stay upright, wanting to collapse.



The stern of the ship is shown, sunken into the floor. USS BRIDGET is the name of the ship. Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

So sunken, the ship name sits on the floor, crumbled. USS BRIDGET is the name of another boat, another girl, another person, another time. The thread is so thick in some areas, the paper tears and rips. Only the thread holds it together.



A pink sailor hat sits upside down, with a wooden challenge coin leaning against it. The challenge coin has the bootcamp picture of a woman on it.
Photo by Andy Maticorena Kajie

As you go to leave, there is a pink sailor hat with 111 wooden challenge coins. It is a nod to being a plankowner for my ship, DDG 111. Plankowners are a member of a crew when the ship is commissioned. As part of this ship's "commissioning," I created my own plankowner challenge coins. Every ship has a challenge coin designed for it and it's part of a military tradition. The coin has a bootcamp picture in the center with USS BRIDGET at the top and DRESS BLUES below.



FAIR WINDS AND FOLLOWING SEAS

Although I waded in the water of queer failure, I ultimately found the theory too cold, too rigid, too final. While I took pride in "getting lost," I still felt stuck in a binary.

Fail or don't fail. Instead, I found more purchase in the idea of uncertainty. Much to my surprise, it was a book about Cardinals picking a new Pope that finally gave me the language I was looking for. Conclave by Robert Harris sees the main character, Jacopo Lomeli, as the Dean of the College of Cardinals, whose responsibility it is to oversee the next papal conclave. The Dean makes a homily to the conclave about the importance of doubt:

THICK BROWN GLASSES, STANDARD ISSUE. NICKNAMED BIRTH CONTROL GLASSES FOR OBVIOUS REASONS, BUT THERE'S NO ONE TO IMPRESS HERE. WITH THE BOOT CAMP HAIRCUT AND BCG'S, YOU MIGHT BE MISTAKEN FOR ANY NUMBER OF GIRLS. WHICH MEANT THAT NOW YOU MUST ANSWER TO THE NAMES VICKERY, GOLDIE, WHITNEY, AND WARREN IF YOU ARE MISTAKEN FOR THEM. DON'T EVER CORRECT A CHIEF ON YOUR NAME JUST ANSWER IF THEY LOOK AT YOU.

YOU FIND THE RULES OF BOOT CAMP FAIRLY STRAIGHTFORWARD. DO WHAT YOU'RE TOLD RIGHT AWAY, QUICKLY. WEAR THE SAME THING. EAT, QUICKLY. MOVE, QUICKLY.

YOU HEAR PEOPLE CRY AT NIGHT, FOR HOME. BUT YOU DON'T HAVE A HOME TO GO BACK TO. WHEN YOU RUN, YOU RUN AS FAST AS YOU CAN.

My brothers and sisters, in the course of a long life in the service of our Mother the Church, let me tell you that the one sin I have come to fear more than any other is certainty. Certainty is the great enemy of unity. Certainty is the deadly enemy of tolerance. Even Christ was not certain at the end. 'Eli Eli, lama sabachtani?' He cried out in His agony at the ninth hour on the cross. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Our faith is a living thing precisely because it walks hand in hand with doubt. If there was only certainty, and if there was no doubt, there would be no mystery, and therefore no need for faith.

Lomeli urges his fellow Cardinals to beware 'certain' men. In the text, he is talking about Tedesco, but it isn't hard to apply this lesson to men like Trump, Musk, or Putin. The lesson here is that uncertainty is an asset and doubt is what drives people forward towards new information. A 'certain' man is dangerous because he does not doubt himself or his intentions. It's not surprising that the book ends with the election of an intersex pope, with Lomeli constantly going back and forth about whether or not he should alert the other cardinals about Cardinal Benitez's unique situation. Lomeli trusts the church to this uncertain future in hopes of a better path. It takes bravery to step from tradition and embrace the unknown.

I've spent much of my life uncertain, of my past, of my memories, my gender, my military service. But people that are certain of themselves and the world around them can be dangerous as they never search outside themselves. Uncertainty has driven me to pursue knowledge and perspectives I wouldn't have otherwise.

What I have come to discover is that radical softness can be a form of resistance. By making masculine, aggressive weapons of war soft and fragile, I not only critique the institution of power, but take some power back for myself. "Trans-ing" the boat became a way to not only reexamine my past as a veteran, but also my present as a trans

person. In an ever changing political landscape, it is clear that nothing is ever truly gained, but must continually be fought for.

Being transgender is living in uncertainty, in perpetual limbo. Am I a man or a woman? Is my ship sinking or floating? You don't just come out once, but multiple times. The ship's imperfect, unsettled ambiguity speaks to the precarious social water "trans" swims in. The past is messy. Some days I look back fondly on the memories I made. The places I went. The people I met. Other times, I feel deep sorrow for things I participated in as part of the military industrial complex. But all of those parts make up who I am, even the uncertainty. I can't excuse the past, I can only show you what happened.

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