

In(queer)ies: Pedagogical Praxis and Ceramics Handbuilding towards
Fluidity

By

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Introduction

It seems probable that, within the warm saltiness of the primeval sea, certain organic substances were fashioned from carbon dioxide, sulphur, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, and calcium. Perhaps these were transition steps from which the complex molecules of protoplasm arose-- molecules that somehow acquired the ability to reproduce themselves and begin the endless stream of life.

Rachel Carson
(The Sea Around Us, 2018)



Fig. 1. Tidepools at Kaloko Beach, O'ahu, Hawai'i, 2022

The Pacific Ocean is never far away. Even from the mountains, it continues circulation across global landscapes and effortlessly flows through time. The three ceramic sculptures handbuilt during these past two years of MFA research are all in relation to one another

much like kin. They are influenced by two primary sources of study. First, my personal understanding of fluidity is nurtured by my relationship to both fresh and salt water sites on the island of O‘ahu (Fig. 1). Secondly, my research also explores how embodied experience with water informs and supplements my pedagogical practice in teaching about the body (and gender) for middle school art. The past two years began with the COVID-19 pandemic shutting down the island in a statewide lockdown and adapting to online, distance learning. The solitude resulted in my explorations outdoors and offered students new pathways to discover their identity when isolated at home.

The culmination of these events has led to my exploration of the expansiveness of gender in relation to my work. The videos and drawings that constitute my thesis project evolved through journaling and personal reflections. As discussions on the body and gender unfolded in the classroom, I found myself reflecting back on my adolescent awareness of gender. This cyclical repetition is visually depicted in the works exploring fluidity in expansive definitions such as water materiality and the conceptual transmutation we possess to flow through genders as beings of water.

Positionality, Teaching and Journaling

I live on the island of O‘ahu. It is one of eight Hawaiian islands surrounded by the Pacific Ocean and geographically grounds me to the Earth. The ocean is a vast mystery of abundance, co-creating alongside the land, and a backdrop to our tourist driven economy.

The ocean in “paradise” is a resource generally commodified and advertised for capitalist, tourist consumption. In my youth, I disregarded ocean associations because most media imagery played to the tourists’ imagination, a clear disconnection to our livelihood in Hawai‘i. The historical marketing of the island affected my gaze since childhood.

My family’s determination to leave China propelled them to O‘ahu. Hawai‘i and its natural elements shaped my identity. As a second generation Chinese-American immigrant, I recognize that I am a settler on the Kānaka Maoli’s familial ‘āina and wai (land and water in Hawaiian). However, this realization has not always been the case.

My childhood is a testament in observing my popo and gung gung’s (grandma and grandpa in Cantonese) resilience in adaptation and continued cultivation of Chinese language, philosophies, culture, and Buddhist practice in a foreign land. The dedicated duty and protection of my grandparents over three granddaughters navigating American culture meant visits to our local Chinatown, and subsequently, its influences left a deep impression on me. The lingering aromatic incense smoke, loud pops of garlic and ginger on a roaring wok, and elongated tones from distant Beijing opera recordings echo in the protective walls of my memory. This is evident in early sketches for the MFA research where Chinese characters are integrated with my emergent thematic interests and in(queer)ies. (Fig. 2). In(queer)ies is a play on the word *inquiry* with curiosity. Queer is interjected as LGBTQIA+ youths have a tendency to inspect their surroundings for danger, safety, and seek out similar individuals in their community.

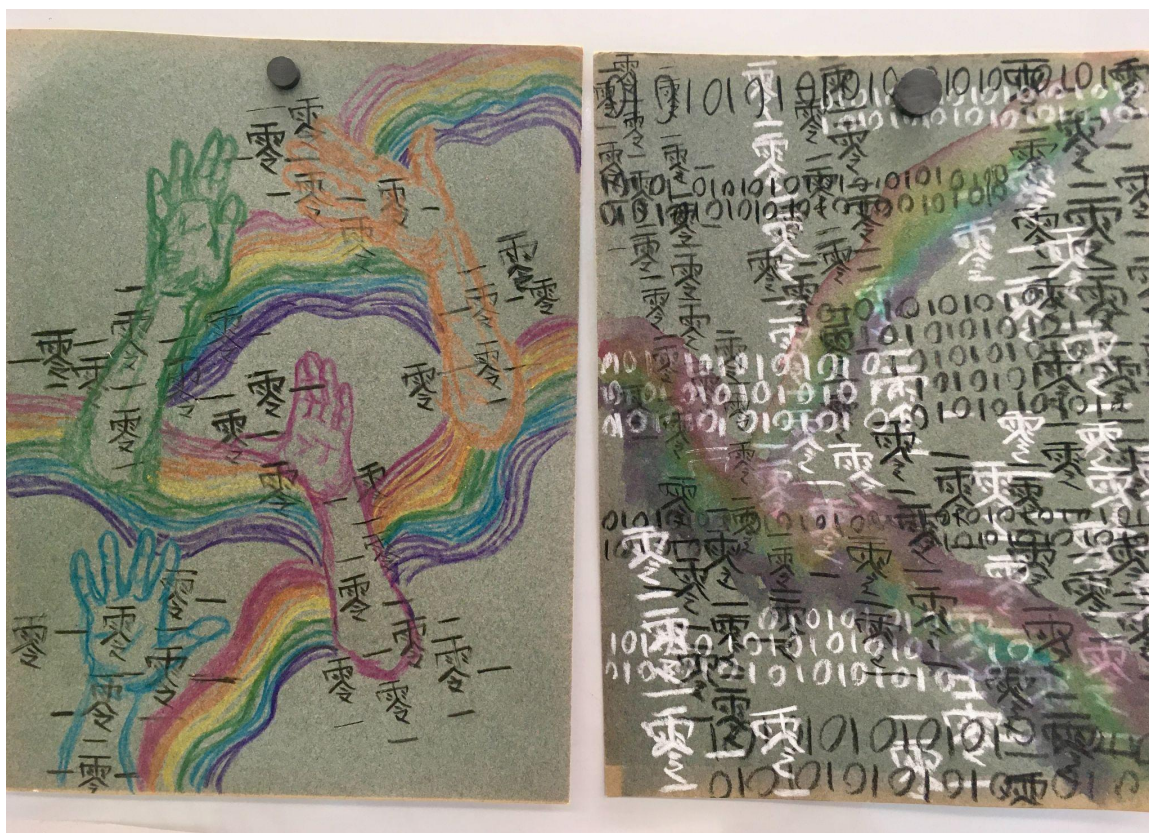


Fig. 2. Early sketches for MFA research, 2020

When I learned the words in my adolescence to name my natural tendencies, I wondered if there was room for a lesbian granddaughter in the loving slices of apple and perfectly peeled oranges after dinner. Middle school is where I affirmed my queer self without my family's knowledge and forged forward in a household respecting familial collectivism. Chinese collectivism implies family over self. Respectfully, I now reflect on these emotions alongside my mother's encouragement to exist without Western, individualistic action.

I revisit these youthful in(queer)ies from the perspective of an art educator teaching middle school. The classroom informs my studio art practice where I approach clay through coiling and pinching. The sculptures materialize in response to interactions and conversations with

students, revolving around Western, hegemonic ideas of gender. The influence of teaching on my practice is also informed by journaling whereby I bring reflections from the day's teaching into writing. The journal entries open a portal for a circulation of ideas and experiences both past and present. Cultural critic bell hooks associates writing with a "monastic spiritual practice" in *Remembered Rapture: Dancing with Words (2000)*. She quotes Joan Cock on writing as an act "to find secrets in experience that are obscured from ordinary sight: to uncover hidden coherences in what seems to be a mere jumble of unrelated events and details, and incoherences in what appears to be strictly ordered; to make transparent what is opaque, and to expose opacity in what seems transparent"(5). I employ the journal entries presented in this thesis as a source of hidden nutrients, similar to fresh water streams feeding ocean ecosystems. The intimate voice reflects thoughts I've encountered throughout my research, usually derived from classroom experiences and developments in my art practice. The journaling voice is in italics to offset the more academic tone of this thesis. In this way, journal entries are dispersed throughout the thesis to articulate the subtleties between the overlapping oceanic discoveries, teaching, and making.

Teaching is the vena cava of my research methodology: the vena cava is the largest vein in the body. My teaching process involves wit(h)nessing, a term coined by Israeli psychoanalyst and artist Bracha Ettinger. I interpret it to suggests being with, and exploring queer concepts through art curricula focused on anatomy that encourages open class discussions. Students' curiosities leave profound impressions on me as a queer educator

informing a reexamination of my own lived experiences within educational institutions. I have chosen to address gender as a means to challenge the heteronormative, binary education system and familial expectations on our bodies. A surprising phenomenon I am intimately familiar with, and now find myself reliving on the other side of this cycle.

I have discovered three components to my research methodology. The first is the cyclical nature in revisiting my past awareness of gender while teaching middle school students a sense of body fluidity through anatomy lessons. This is also reflected in oceanic movements as well as the presence of circulation in the human form. The second is the importance of sketching in the iteration of work and thinking through classroom, studio and ocean encounters. And finally, immersion into water for my research practice.

In my teaching observations, sixth graders begin to explore conversations on developing bodies, while seventh to eighth graders tend to move into conversations on social relationships involving discussion on each others' bodies in the classroom. The coronavirus pushed everyone into a pandemic lockdown and offered students secluded time, access to digital communities, and our online classroom space to experiment with their gender expression to meet themselves anew. A traditional Western institution is historically constructed in binary architecture, a contrived infrastructure which grants safe passage to exist in education without shame or ridicule if one upholds and abides to the fantasy of heteronormative roles.



Fig. 3. Classroom Eye Practice, 2021

Distance learning has offered an opportunity to open radical dialogue with students at home without physical, classroom pressure (Fig 3.). I use radical as the only word to contain fundamental root change. Seven and eighth graders exhibit a pull for personal independence from their family with headphones to separate their private, online school life and forge their own way. Cultural critic and educator bell hooks influences my teaching pedagogy with her striking points on lovelessness. She writes how children learn to lie from childhood and how love can stem from a lie to “avoid disappointing or hurting an adult” (hooks 34). Queer youth understand their truth can cause community pain in a heteronormative society leading to personal negotiations and betrayal in their own personhood. When are individuals granted personhood and sovereignty over themselves including their bodies?

Author Gabrielle Owens investigates the social evolution of adolescence, remarking how we perceive childhood as a youthful “fantasy of directing all human potential into the evolutionary future” (72). Elementary youths are given positive support towards their aspirations, even within the institution. However, adolescence is a step closer to adulthood, signaling a closure to possibilities from youthful potential to a fixation towards “failures” (Owens 72). These concrete anchors begin to weight down students. I see bodies as fluid representations, a totality of “bodymindspirit” in the same way a patient would be seen in Traditional Chinese Medicine (Pachuta 43). An individual’s health includes the interconnection of all these elements. The developmental stage encompasses the whole individual who is influenced by their intimate, domestic, and community surroundings. I enter the classroom understanding we are in an experimental pocket of time, where I am given the opportunity to engage with students to move beyond cisheternomative legacies and activate curious inquiry through art. In this way, my teaching pedagogy is in constant dialogue with my own art praxis.

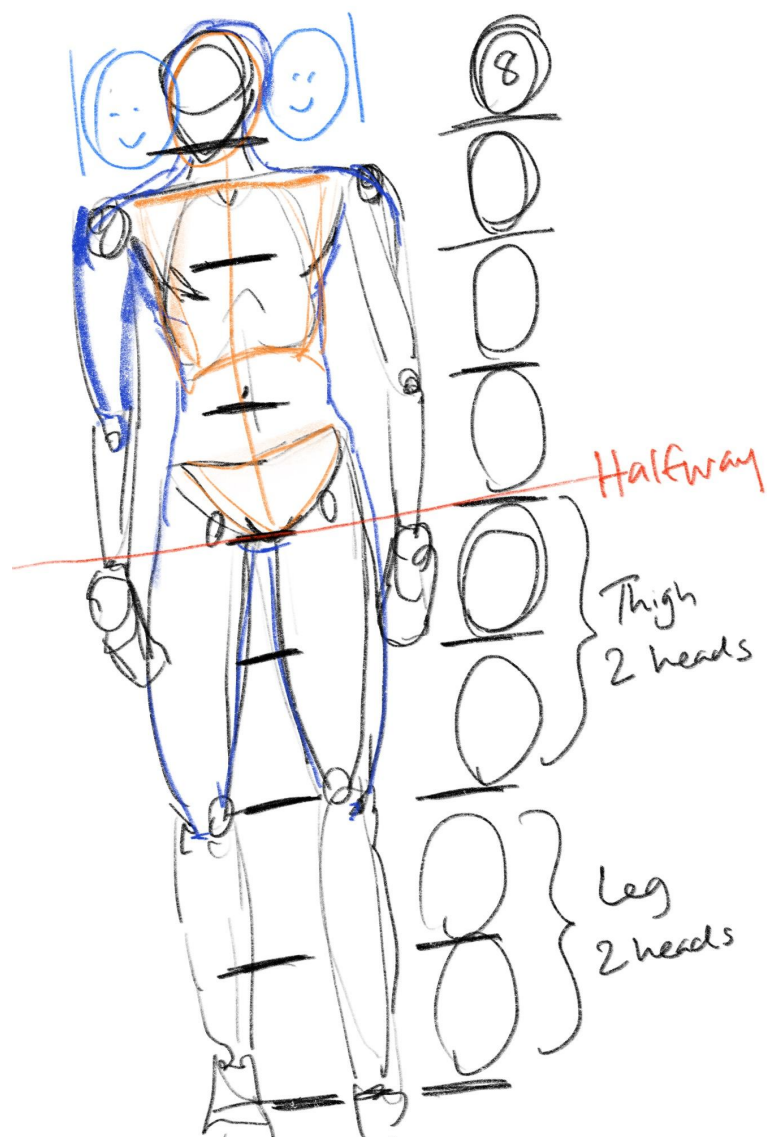


Fig. 4. Eight head proportion practice, 2020

Students set up their paper and pencils. They are attune to our warm-up routine. I wait at the white board listening to their shuffling, and start measuring out my lines. Eight equally spaced dashes appear down a vertical column with a circle drawn in the first space. We are weeks into the quarter and class begins with human proportions (Fig. 4). "Like shaved ice," I remind them, a circular scoop appears in a paper-cone cup. "Easy, not perfect." Working our way down the spine and clavicle, the rib is sketched like an upside down taro leaf. Pencils scribble away on tabletops, but I continue lecturing. A simplified, butterfly outline appears for the pelvis as we travel down towards the knees setting the main pillars for a human form on paper: the skull, spine, rib, and pelvis. Flesh and gravity come after these four foundational components.

I composed myself right before finishing the hands. Today, I will present on gender to the class. It has been on my mind for months. Our anatomy explorations through various cultures and body types unlocked visual evidence to discuss sex and gender through drawing. These recurring moments, layered with students experimenting with their own pandemic gender expression online (from a safe distance) offered an opportunity I had to take.

The powerpoint queues up on screen and I begin with language. I speak with confidence. New terms appear from different corners of the world with various queer, non-binary, and intersex ways of being. It is quiet. I only hear my voice, and mindfully remind myself to look up at the students. Make eye contact. A swell of comfort returns when a skeleton appears on screen, anchoring these expansive concepts to our physical sketches. I explain assigned sex at birth and how our designated exteriors may not align with our internal identity, or gender. Sex does not equal gender.

*This is not new information for the Hawaiian 'āina of O'ahu, which has long seen humans exist in this manner. I share a segment from the documentary short film *A Place in the Middle* produced by Kumu Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, a proud Hawaiian Māhū. The term Māhū encompasses both feminine and masculine traits, and in holding these dualities are destined to be mystical shamans respected by the community. Missionary arrival to the Hawaiian islands forged negative connotations of individuals beyond binaries and severed stable livelihoods for a Māhū's revered existence in Hawaiian life. Granting this return in contemporary Hawai'i requires decolonization. I am surprised when a student mentions they know the term. I mention this island has witnessed humans living in this way, this is not new to the land.*

I ask the class if there are any questions or reactions. They are silent and seem in agreement with the slides as a curricular lecture. A small mocking "support gay pride!" squeezes into the air, to which I quickly respond by emphasizing his loving and unyielding support toward his fellow humans. I conclude, and the students nod, leaving without much reaction to the content. I return to close my powerpoint.

My hand hovers over the keyboard, and I catch my fingers trembling. My pointer finger quickly shifts left to right. I stop and observe my outstretched fingers. My right hand is undergoing a subtle seismic quake. I sit, steadying myself, and notice my heart pacing. An adrenaline rush tightens my body. I suddenly feel flushed with embarrassment in an empty room. I exhale deep breaths to expel the tremors, realizing these reverberations are responding to the presentation moments ago. I publicly shared queer knowledge in my

middle school curriculum. In witnessing my body, I recognize the undercurrents of fear bubbling out. My body has been holding onto knowledge, reckoning from my own middle school self.



Fig. 5. *Tracing Fears*, 2020

This experience shocked me. I realized I could catch this embodied moment, and quickly moved to the nearest materials to trace out my body's reverberations (Fig. 5). I understood the challenges I internally felt was teaching myself and others an education I wish I had known and realizing the work was exposing new pathways out of an old system. (November 2020)

The drawn body becomes a subject for dialogue. Its creation belongs to the student, and we begin to define its form. The four structural foundations: skull, spine, ribcage, and pelvis are seen as unquestionable, human anchors (Fig. 4). Students learn about proportions through the eight-head scale technique and we scrutinize its Western textbook origins. We draw a gender-neutral figure and discover body similarities in conversation. Judith Butler mentions “intelligibility by which the human emerges” in *Undoing Gender*, where conversations during our class mark-making opens a curiosity space beyond male and female anatomy as they fumble through perfect proportions (57). As mentioned in the journal entry, I facilitate the Hawaiian Māhū as an indigenous precursor to the island’s colonial imposed binary implying a natural ecology in queerness. Their honest lines create beyond binary humans. I am attracted to the students’ discovery of human genesis and how far they will allow their own previous knowledge to expand beyond received, hegemonic notions.

With the return to in-person teaching, I felt a need to address the students’ transformations and validate their digital in(queer)ies upon their return. I shifted my curriculum to address bodies with the goal to articulate fluidity beyond assigned sex. Unbeknownst to me, was the emotional and sensorial experience that would inform my own art practice, evident in the theme of the cyclical in my artistic methodology. The relationship between teaching youth becomes a ballast to my own simultaneous creation in the studio. This awareness and continuous dialogue between teaching and making informs a desire to move towards fluidity.

Sketching and Drawing

The ceramics sculptures that are part of my MFA thesis work were first conceived through a series of drawings. As depicted in *Tracing Fears*, sketches are how I visualize classroom conversations, artistic influences, and oceanic properties. During my independent studies, I invested more time with each individual sketch ranging from thirty minutes to an hour to allow space for slow digestion and ongoing evolutions. Drawing on paper is a place for ideas, the shore before the sea. It allows for contemplation and a reverie from ocean landscapes.

French Philosopher Gaston Bachelard's *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement* deciphers literary imagination through the air element, noting poets' inclination towards terrestrial surroundings as inspirations. Bachelard addresses how our imagination conjures representation in our consciousness only after personal wonderment subsides.

Contemplation brings together more memories than sensations. It is history more than spectacle. When one thinks that he is looking at an amazingly rich spectacle, he is actually enriching it with memories of all different kinds. Finally, representation. This is where the functions of formal imagination come into play: with reflection and recognized forms, with memory, accurate and well-defined this time, recalling forms we have cherished (167).

Bachelard writes about reverie in terms of our imagination first creating our own personal understanding before concrete representation is introduced via research. I carry this contemplative mindset into my sketches, where the human body is explored, dissected, and reimagined with colors of the rainbow. In this way, my thesis work began with anatomy knowledge from online classes and research, then shifted into expansive, beyond binary, ways of being acknowledged in my sketches (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Beyond body sketch, 2021

The negotiation of pedagogy has led to my own experimentation and shifts in materiality from material to immaterial. Although I am a ceramicist, I became frustrated with the

stagnant quality in clay sculptures that do not move in relation to the fluid engagement in the classroom. Moving images opened an alternative path allowing clay's inert dynamism to be experienced in real-time. New materiality in video and sound has offered more dimensions to the clay object, visible relationships to water, and an emergent trajectory aligning with my emergent artistic aspirations.

Water



Fig. 7. Watercolor Sketch, 2021

I come to water not as a swimmer, but to be in touch with the element. It is not exercise, not a means for fitness, or achievement through distance. We are meeting. The practice of immersion has become an extension of my artistic method and has developed into a sensory component with aspects that feed back into my process. In *The Ocean in Us*, Oceanian writer Epeli Hau'ofa writes that once humans are "conscious[ly] aware" of the ocean, its future potentiality becomes enormous for Oceania and I believe for those with a reverence for water as well (405). Awareness in one's personal awakening to the ocean existing as a kindred extension of oneself rather than an external fitness destination or tropical escapism. Hau'ofa speaks to the deep interconnective familial ties to our historical sea origins. For me, the act of being in water is both communion and research, as we are beings composed of water. It is in our lineage. When I am searching the ocean's literal and metaphorical depths, I delve into the primordial parts of our cellular connection to oceanic divinity. I am inspired by artist Hilma af Klint, whose art is engaged with the Divine, where I in a similar fashion follow intuitive feelings to return to the ocean. In my exploration, I realize I cannot be a stranger to locations I frequently visit and understand I must offer myself to enter its body. Some may call it a cleanse, a purification, but it is also a surrender to immersion.

Immersion here is an intentional bodily surrender to water. I give my whole body. This offering is tactile where I am submerged in water. The head must slip beneath the surface joining the water in complete bodymindspirit or oneness. When my body enters, physical attributes float away and I find that there is no longer any significant reason for

identification to assigned sex. No preconceived notion of flesh or sense of duality enters my body once submerged.



Fig. 8. Waterproof Video Equipment, 2022

After swimming and filming test footage in the freshwater stream and drying off on the ledge, I watched the water in contemplation.

"I have to go back in."

Shivering in his towel my friend responded, "you're going to go back in?"

"Yeah, I have to dip my head in too."

(January 2022)

New to this embodied practice, I am training my awareness and sensitivity to my body when it desires water. For instance, my arms become hot and warm if they want to be submerged in fresh water, and my whole body will desire full immersion for the ocean when

away for too long. In drawing from these experiences, I am realizing I must honor the connection between flesh and water. I recognize there is a spiritual force I cannot deny.

A sensitivity towards the ocean deepens after learning of a student passing away near one of the sites I frequently record ocean footage for my research. I realized despite all this time, I do not know the ocean at all.

I swam out to talk to the Ocean on a Sunday. I understand this requires patience for a small body to approach a vast ocean looking for reasons. I quickly walked through the morning sand, dropping my belongings in a pile, and steered towards the water without hesitation. The water had to know my intention. Without flinching against the cold waves, I trudged until buoyancy lifted me, I swam towards the edges of the rock walls, moving away from tourists and their prying eyes. Clouds moved overhead as I swam towards the deep center. I asked my questions half submerged so it could be digested by the water itself. I floated in the quiet. In waiting for a response both above and below, I realized I had been observed by this vastness.

The tides moved in synchronized unison. Small wave crests bobbed past me and in staring at their reflections noticed wide eyes lining a cornea and pupil embedded in each shifting wave. Sudden awareness washed over my body as I found myself surrounded by the gaze I had been seeking. We kept eye contact as I treaded water, shifting our gazes every now and then, and a sadness smothered my anger. One had to witness suffering with countless eyes. Staring with remorse, I realized the ocean had to witness it all and could only hope it held my student gently in its currents and caresses.

(August 2021)

After contemplating my communion with the ocean (Fig. 9), I spent an evening visualizing the experience and responded through pencil, pen, and watercolor (Fig. 7). The embodied experience with the ocean offered a glimpse into death.

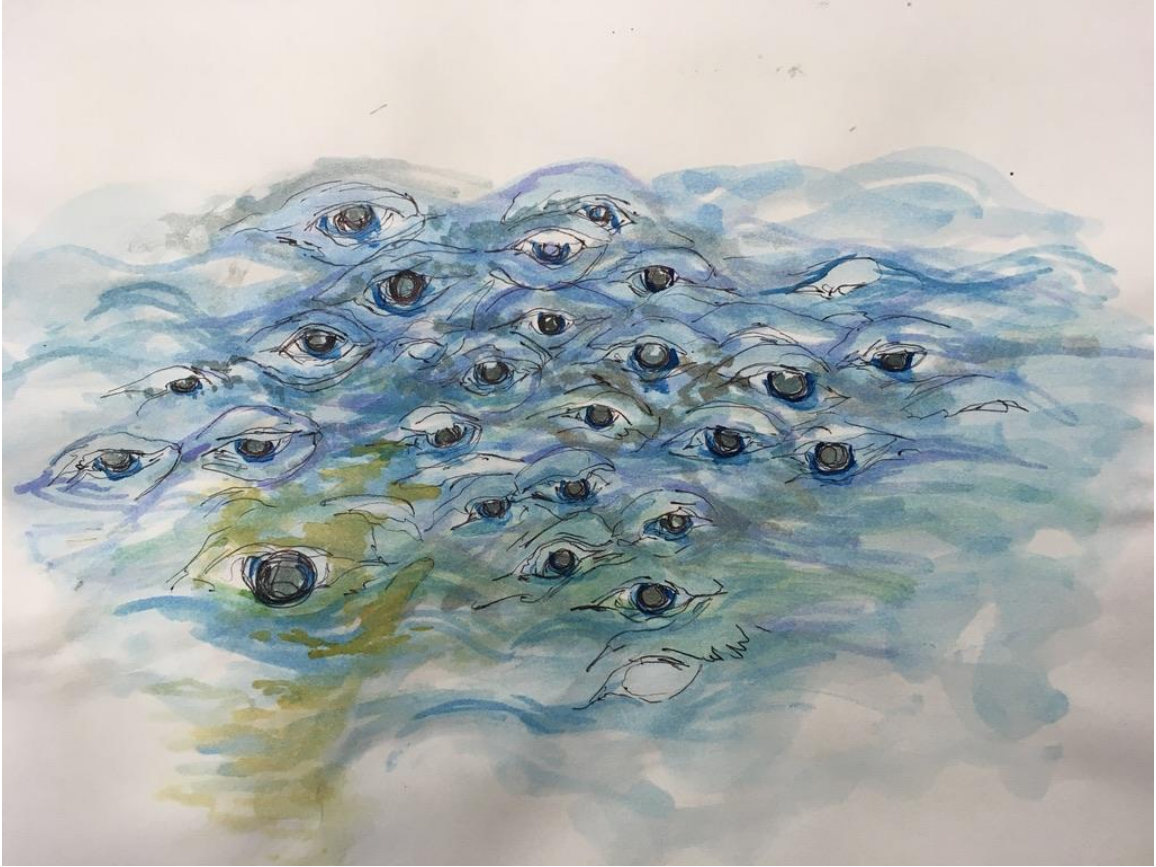


Fig. 9. Watercolor of Ocean Experience, 2021

It's continuous, a continuum for the ocean whose body moves through various cultural landscapes of grief and witnesses constant suffering. Vietnamese American Poet Ocean Vuong shares these words on his mother's passing:

And so for me, I think death was such an incredible thing to witness, because it was the closest thing I saw to truth. It's not even honest, because honesty is a vehicle for truth, but death is truth without a medium. It's truth as is. You don't get a say. You don't get to say when or how you get to experience it, whether you're ready or not.

(Doyle, 2022, 00:17:20)

Vuong words provide a lens to reevaluate death as truth. There is a movement of energy beyond one's control, outside the framework of Western reason. Vuong offers a space for contemplation in reviewing my meeting. I realized the Ocean experiences truths as Vuong witnessed his mother. It is truth into itself. I wanted to remember the moment in clay.

Thesis Project: *I spoke to you directly*, *Inherent Passage*, and *Immersion*

I spoke to you directly

In all of my thesis work clay is at the center. It is a way of thinking and responding to experiences whether in the classroom or the ocean. In fall 2021 after the passing of my student, I found myself sculpting various whale eyes into clay. I detail the making here in order to highlight the ceramic focus and process of my research. I press a recess into a mound of clay, insert a clay sphere, and add clay slabs to set the eye in place. A pencil is used to carve deep lines, then a damp paintbrush to soften rough edges. These pieces are fired in a kiln, then pressed against clay slabs to create a negative mold, which becomes a stamp. They are fired in a kiln, around 1830 degrees, turning into bisqueware for durability.

The sculpture *I spoke to you directly* (Fig. 10.) begins with the foundation. A clay coil is rolled out between outstretched hands and table until a finger thickness is achieved. The clay rope is divided into four equal parts: two legs and two thighs.



Fig. 10. *I spoke to you directly*, Earthenware 2021

Clay is added to the thighs forming a plump, carrot shape. I insert a pencil, delicately rolling and expanding the clay to create a hollow cone. I shape the lower leg, contouring the calves, and begin to form the feet with additional clay. I slip and score the feet to the ankles and sculpt protruding bone structures. Thighs are attached onto the legs, and both legs are slipped and scored together forming the lower half of the body. The foundation is ready to support the structure.

I roll out coils to the width of my thumb and pat them flat to a quarter inch. They are stacked vertically atop the thighs, echoing the contour beneath. My thumb pulls downward evenly compressing the clay against previous layers for full adhesion. Coils are placed over existing curves and whale eyes slabs (from the molds) are inserted at various locations. I tap with a rice paddle for extra compression to tighten clay particles over large surfaces and shape soft curves as the piece grows in various, sweeping directions. Coil construction transforms the shapes encompassing the figure within while pushing the balance of weight on two legs. Care is taken to embrace large bends and sharp turns, and worked until I close off the overall form.

I dip a plastic rib into a bowl of water before dragging it over large planes. The rib slicks over the surface with added pressure to smooth and further compress the bulbous, water forms. Water trails quickly vanish into the dry clay after every movement. Tightening of the clay particles allows the clay body to stay together during thermal expansion and shrinkage during firing. After the firing has cooled below 200 degrees, the piece is ready for glaze

application. Aside from underglazing the whale's eyes, I have not glazed the piece, unsure as to the colors to encompass the ocean.

Inherent Passage

Inherent Passage, 2021 is video work that includes a ceramic sculpture installed beneath the ocean's surface on the south east beaches of O'ahu (Fig. 11 and 12). The piece is a response to class discussions on the pelvis and a student's exploration of their own gender in conversation. Additionally, there is a personal tie to the physical site where my consistent visits established my deep relationship with the water and immersion. I do not have an answer for why this particular area presents a strong resonance for my continued return. Through thesis research and familial engagements with Buddhism, I have realized a renewed interest in the spiritual aspects of anatomy, and oceanic depths. *Inherent Passage* is in direct conversation with these interests and Swedish artist and mystic Hilma af Klint's paintings. This reflects my own internal search for what I can only describe as the bodymindspirit with the ocean.



Fig. 11 and 12. *Inherent Passage* (video stills), 2021

As noted earlier when discussing my anatomy curriculum, the four structural foundations of the human body are the skull, spine, ribcage, and pelvis. Immersed in this information, I bring the classroom into the work. The *Inherent Passage* video focuses on the pelvis. The

shape opens up from the pelvis's iliac crest and folds over into itself. The form reflects its carrying function as a container in the body as it expands and lifts a large circular shape. The pelvic region is a source of constant student debates in the classroom weaponized by students as "biological evidence" supporting a controlled cis hetero-destiny. The internal structure of the pelvis is the same, regardless of sex. I am attracted to our oneness in the skeletal structures we all share. Mark Taylor, author of *Mystic Bones*, states bones themselves present anonymity, and does not lead to personal recollections on the object or identification of specific sex; Rather, focused on the reminder that "bones are what remains" in our oblivion (31). Taylor's remarks support the importance of bones in the entirety of our being including death, which is not the end of life but a part of the process.

In the video still (Fig. 11) a silhouette of a hand rises up from the pelvis. The region of the body that turns into a debate in the classroom with students. It is difficult for me to separate myself from my teaching practice as it often finds itself in the artwork. I respond to classroom discussions through contact with clay and find I can authentically answer back through making after contemplation. The integration of the hand in the work represents personal agency and the desire to find new pathways. This was inspired by a student's response in discussion on gender which he shared online with our group forum.

He wrote "I really don't want to be a woman."

I responded in the forum that his boyhood looks different from others. Later, feeling ashamed I continued within the binary constraints myself, and that I needed to expand beyond the framework. I was astonished at his confidence, how he knew this could not be his destiny.

(March, 2021)

The hand is bathed in a kaleidoscope of colors from the acrylic panel as it reaches into the circular rainbow of possibilities glazed with bright underglazes. This is influenced by af Klint's *Series VIII. Picture of the Starting Point, 1920* (Fig. 13). In the video, a colorful sphere nestles over the pelvis and expands, leaving the constraints of the human form. It is beaming possibilities beyond binaries as vertebrae travel up the sphere, departing flesh.



Fig. 13. Hilma af Klint, *Series VIII. Picture of The Starting Point, 1920*
Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The information removed is an image of af Klint's painting depicting rainbow circular rings.

Inherent Passage is realized as a video depicting the sculpture's relationship to water. The figure is kneeling, offering itself to the ocean. The form fully reveals its dimensionality and refractions when the viewer experiences the passing of rainbow light. The video begins underwater and emerges to locate the sculpture in its coastal surroundings. There are glimpses of colors reflecting back from tidepool pockets and more is revealed with incoming waves brushing past its ceramic legs.

The video piece includes both the sculptural form and its watery context. These distortions to light on the water's surface are echoed through the audio track consisting of low humpback whale vocalizations. When night falls the viewer experiences the piece differently. An LED light creates refractions from the sculptural form and appears in the water to reveal the oceanic fluidity that is always present (Fig. 12).

In the article *Submerged Bodies*, Elizabeth Deloughrey and Tatiana Flores explore oceanic ontologies and tidalectic relationships with contemporary artists revolving around the Caribbean Sea. The writing explores oceanic imaginations, knowledge, and futures through visual media reflecting water's properties. In their coastal investigation of surface intimacy they cite Donna Haraway who highlights "diffraction, the production of difference patterns, might be a more useful metaphor" (138). Unlike reflections, which are mirrored duplicates, a refraction bends light into various angled wavelengths creating rainbows. Beneath the surface, *Inherent Passage* illuminates a transition to oceanic visions full of distorted refractions. A spectrum of color travels through the sculpture, filters down below, and opens spatial and luminous possibilities.

The allure in the rainbow's ephemeral nature and colors guided me to af Klint. I am entranced by her spiritual devotion to truth, intuitive guidance, and most of all the complete surrender to mindful presence while traversing the unknown. Exploring af Klint's practice to understand her work led me to The Theosophical Society, the study of alchemy and Buddhism in pursuit of truth. I do not practice any official religion. However, my

grandparents raised me in a Buddhist household and offerings to past relatives such as the Chinese Qingming festival (Tomb-Sweeping Day) were often practiced. My colleague (also from a Buddhist background) who knew the student as well joined me at the shore.

We walked towards the edge of the tidepools. He said there had to be odd numbers of incense we had to present.

"But isn't that two?" I asked puzzled.

"No, it's one from me and one from you."

"Oh I see, I brought starfruit from my tree to gift."

On our walk back to the car, we stopped at the sight of surreal blue and white lights in the crashing waves - bioluminescence.

(August 2021)

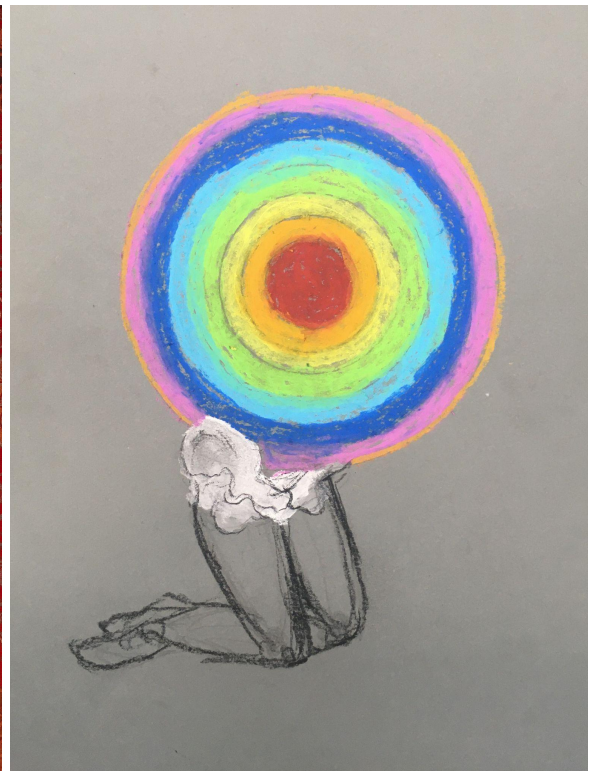


Fig. 14. Wheel of Existence, Pigments on cloth, 65 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 39 $\frac{3}{4}$." Used by permission of the Rubin Museum of Art

Fig. 15. *Inherent Passage* preliminary sketch, 2021

Immersion

In 1889 Hilma af Klint joined the Theosophical Society. The mission of this association is the pursuit of truth across cultures with an open mind ("The Theosophical Society of America"). Af Klint exhibited curiosity for truth through spiritual investigations, including new scientific discoveries of her time such as atoms as recorded in her sketches (Burgin 7). Her dedication to mediumship and evolutions in her work are meticulously recorded, annotated, and catalogued in her many sketchbooks (Bonnier 30). I felt comfortable in following af Klint's journey into Theosophy and these Western teachings, only to discover the society's co-founder Helena Blavatsky was heavily influenced by Tibetan Buddhism. In desiring a direct path towards Theosophy, I shifted my attention towards Buddhism. My grandparents acquainted me with the senses of Chinese Buddhist temples and rituals, but their influence never garnered my personal investment. My pursuit of af Klint's work led me to Tibetan Buddhism and the Wheel of Life.

I discovered the term Dalai Lama translates into "teacher who is like a great ocean" (Sangharakshita 52). The religion's ideas resonate well with me as a person raised on an island surrounded by water. Despite their geographically landlocked location, I felt Tibetan Buddhists must have been influenced by the ocean itself. Historically, an ocean once existed between India and Asia (Cooper). I wonder if Tibetans have access to their land's ancestral knowledge. Meanwhile, my sketches continued to reference anatomy, circular shapes, swimming, and the continuation of life in death; there is a natural fascination towards samsāra (cyclicity of all life) in Tibetan Buddhism (Fig. 14). Author Stephen Teiser,

notes samsāra means “flowing together with,” often depicted with a circle representing the Wheel of Life which illustrates the repetition of human life and death through one’s actions (140). All sentient beings undergo suffering in samsāra, and through moral actions may leave the cycle (Teiser, 141). In reading about its cyclical nature, I realized it paralleled the repetition I experience as a queer educator now witnessing a classroom of queer youths (Fig. 15). There is a feeling of rebirth and a fluid transition to provide nurturing and equitable experiences during this adolescence period. I recognized the cyclical thematic in my research, progressing from the circular rainbow sculpture in *Inherent Passage* to the next work, *Immersion*. As the hands move and rotate it also represents a wheel. This transformation is further informed by the wheel of life central to Tibetan Buddhism.



Fig. 16. *Immersion* (video still), 2022

Immersion is a video work of a kinetic, ceramic sculpture (Fig. 16) installed in a freshwater stream. It's a wheel made of multiple hands that spin in response to the water's

movements. The water propels a set of hands rotating the wheel, which moves on top of a skeletal vertebrate base nestled between rocks. I continue to return to the spinal vertebrate as a connector to all relationships in the body. It is the foundation echoing the first mark students draw to define the human figure. Isolating the vertebrate, obscures any personal identifications, and opens up one's appreciation for the bone form.

On a panel discussion on *Grief, Sacred Rage and Revolutionary Love*, American writer Terry Tempest Williams shared a memory of her brother Hank responding to her question as they stood before their brother's bones after cremation: "I'm thinking the same thing you're thinking; Are they coyote? Are they rabbit? Are they raven" (Bioneers, 00:27:00 -00:27:25)? The Tibetan wheel of life moves sentient beings through reincarnation depending on one's actions, and in that rotation our bones continue to carry the same foundational composition we all share with the earth. William's story speaks to the acknowledgement of our physical decay in relation to earth's ecology. How our bodies, heightened by our society's heteronormative gaze, return to skeletal anonymity as creatures on the land. I parallel this cycle with my own relational findings to water.



Fig. 17. *Immersion* sculpture, Earthenware, 2022

The sculpted vertebrates in *Immersion* are based on human and whale models including hybrids of the two shapes. Kealoha Pisciotto, founder of Kai Palaoa (a Hawaiian association that supports the ocean and marine life), states the *Kumulipo* or Hawaiian Creation Chant discusses the palaoa's (sperm whale) appearance early in the text, suggesting that the whale's existence is "both a physical and divine consciousness" (Fujikane 2007). Whales can travel between realms, accessing ancestral knowledge from the depth of oceanic creation and lifting them into our world when they breach the surface (2007). I became fascinated with whales when I heard their vocalizations while swimming along Kahe Point Beach on the westside of O'ahu. Swimming in the ocean during their vocalizations offered a spiritual connection through sound which informed the audio track for the *Immersion* video. The whale continues to return as a physical representation of the ocean throughout my work.

As I conceived and designed *Immersion*, I envisioned water to be an active element to awakening the dynamic rotation in the hand wheel. The hands are sculpted in clay, fired to bisque, and a press mold is made to reproduce multiple versions. Each hand is then given individual attention, carving angular knuckles and joint lines with an exacto knife. Six hands are slipped and scored onto a circular clay slab. The ceramic hands reaching into water echo my own hands swimming through the ocean tides. As water slips through the ceramic fingers, the cycles of time echo in its rotations in the stream.



Fig.18. Glaze test ingredients

Fig. 19. Test tiles outcomes for cone 06 glazes

Multiple glaze formulas and variations were tested to recreate earthy glazes fluxing at cone 06 (1880 degrees), the same temperature as the commercial glazes students use in the classroom (Fig. 17). The gritty grey, muddled browns, and wood ash greens were intentional choices to encourage a seamless relationship to the freshwater landscape of large stones covered in moss as well the smoothness of whale skin (Fig. 19). The mottled glaze surface of the clay vertebrates mimic human and marine life as well as the time worn effects of algae growth over materials. Environmentalist Rachel Carson writes how the primordial sea leaves traces of itself inland, that even if you find yourself miles away, there exists mineral reminders “of its ghostly waves and the roar of its surf, far back in time” (99). In emphasizing the ocean’s prevailing presence on our island, the whale-inspired vertebrates are a physical reminder of our collective connection to the ancient seas.

I am sensitive to respecting the geographical location where I have been privileged to swim. Once I completed the video recording of the piece, I intentionally left the work as an offering to the site, recognizing it would naturally decompose over time without harm to the environment. The kinetic sculpture required particular assembly to ensure there were no external plastic polymers or epoxy for the working mechanisms. For instance, the piece was underglazed on greenware before firing, and the axle was left as bare clay without a slick glaze coating as the wheel was fired on the axle. This intention is part of my practice of personal care in sustaining a natural ecology and honoring the water in Nu'uuanu Valley, where the stream is located.

Immersion is in conversation with the work of Fred Roster. Roster was my undergraduate professor at the University of Hawai'i Mānoa. A Californian, he traveled to Hawai'i for his honeymoon in 1969 and stayed, remarking "Hawai'i seemed like the future" (Morse 4). His retrospective exhibition, *It Seemed Like the Future*, touches on three components: the passage of time, material presence, and connectedness (Morse 4). As I developed my own personal, embodied practice with water, the voice of his work spoke to me, in ways they had not previously. I wondered too how he arrived at the wheel form?



Fig. 20. Fred Roster, *More Attached than You Think*, Bronze, stone, steel, and wood, 2021

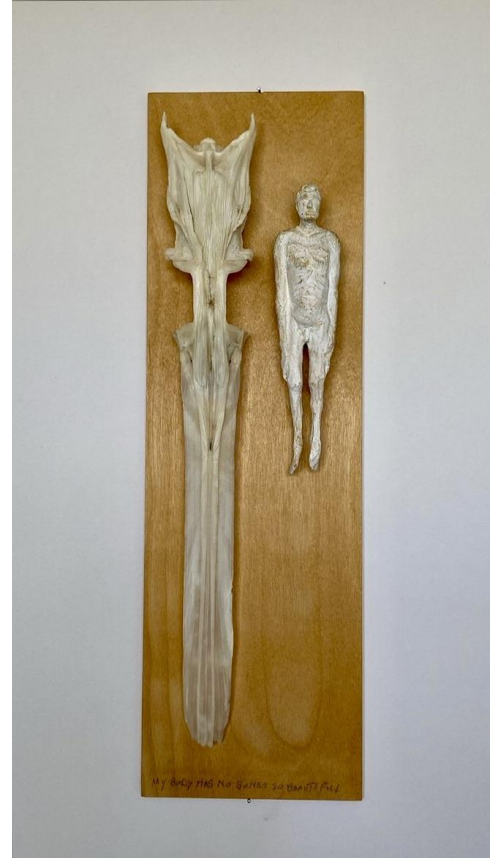


Fig. 21. Fred Roster, *My Body has no bones so beautiful*, Trumpet fish skull, and wood, No date.

Used by permission of Lynette Roster.

Roster articulates the intrinsic relationship between humans and nature by utilizing mixed media materials, and object making in his practice. His thoughtful approach in composing narrative sculptures from materials such as bronze, stone, and wood explicitly communicates a high regard for their natural cycles as he assembles his pieces with the materials' relationships in mind. *More Attached Than You Think* (Fig. 20) illustrates his observations of the human condition through bronze casted male and female figures grasping a branch swirling at the center of a wheel. Roster's observations continue to inspire me when he states,

When I'm working with stone, I'm working with the planet. I'm working with where we live, and the only thing that allows us to live here are...wood or plants, and that's the only thing that keeps us on this planet is the vegetation. It provides the oxygen, filters the water, and gives us hope (HIDOE, 2017, 00:3:04).

He is aware of his materials, often collecting natural forms from his immediate surroundings. His material engagement reflects his connection with the natural world as well as his own daily activities of biking, hiking, etc. Roster's process reflects how he sees himself as a part of the larger cycles of time as represented in his use of the wheel motif.

The wheel metaphor is also evident in Roster's *My Body has no Bones so Beautiful* (Fig. 21), which informs my own spiritual reverence with oceanic ontologies and the transformational energy within bones. Unlike my own pieces that closely replicates bones through clay, Roster's use of bone itself calls on the ocean histories within. His use of the trumpet fish skull beside a small, wooden man offers an intriguing scale comparison and challenges contemporary ideas of human significance in a time of technological advancement. For me, the choice of presenting a fish head bone removed from its body makes the work difficult to decipher and creates an abstraction that activates my imagination towards the mystical. This piece continues to inform the oceanic reverence that I feel towards whales and the space they inhabit.

Whales are marine mammals that are never far away. They enter my work as representations of the ocean and the intimacy I experience while swimming amongst them. The multiple eyes in *I spoke to you directly* highlights the experience of being watched within the watery depths, while *Inherent Passage* utilizes distorted, low-pitched vocalizations from marine recordings, and lastly *Immersion*, utilizes a composite vertebrate of whales and humans alluding to our shared bone composition. When observing whale skeletal models online, I was intrigued to find elongated human phalanges contained within their pectoral fins. Bones we internally share hidden under their flesh. In each of these works, the whale reappears as a metaphor for the water and spiritual fluidity that accompanies human forms. The resurfacing of this metaphor speaks to my embodied practice of immersion and recording in the oceanic depths, the spiritual reverence it awakens, and the connection it engenders with all sentient beings. For me, the whale metaphor allows for an intimate connection with the ocean, which is present in all of us.

Conclusion

The ceramic research that I originally hoped to expand through craftsmanship in my MFA thesis slowly evolved into an encounter with the spiritual. This was deeply informed by a regular swimming practice that allowed me to trust my intuition both in the classroom and the studio. Another surprise was the reawakening of Buddhist knowledge that had laid dormant since childhood. In particular, artist af Klint's journey influenced my introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, the wheel of life and its relationship to death as a part of life. Death is not the end as Western society often frames it, but a continuum. Vuong's observation that death is closest to truth is echoed in my own awareness of the proximity of truth and death with the ocean. The personal rituals I have developed with both fresh and salt water bodies are the same intuitive orientations that guided me in my thesis work towards immersive sounds. In truth, I would not have pursued audio to accompany the video if the works did not ask for it.



Fig. 22. *Immersion*, Unfired clay, video, and sound, 2022. Installation at Emily Carr University.

Somewhere between body and mind, method and methodology is a space for spirit (Fig. 22). This is the same spirit that I have pursued through kinetic interactions with water and what I have come to describe as spiritual fluidity ever present with nature. While a discussion of spiritual fluidity in the classroom would be awkward, it has informed how I explore the body and the expansiveness in gender with my students. And I anticipate that it will continue to manifest in my ongoing in(queer)ies with clay, the ocean, and the youth of O‘ahu.

My supervisor Randy Lee Cutler asked if I would have ever imagined where I would be at the end of my thesis. At this point, I find myself heading for the water during the day and on full moon nights. It is much like an imagined queer future for my middle school self. No, not at all, but something in the depths propels me forward.

Refraction

A refraction is the change of lightwaves when passing through a medium as opposed to a reflection. This is the metaphor I choose for the transformative conversations held in my defence with Randy Lee Cutler, Rachelle Sawatsy, Laurie White and chaired by Lauren Marsden.

The presentation began situating myself to O'ahu, Hawai'i. Site specificity in my practice was questioned in terms of the materiality and history in relationship to a place. The nature of the low residency program, especially during the pandemic, encouraged relational connection to the island and water. I could not foresee myself forging a deep-rooted relationship with Turtle Island in two months time or for the allotted in-person summers. The ocean felt foreign, we were strangers again. It is clear in the discussion that my knowledge is based on O'ahu (I attribute it to Hawaiian shared knowledge in our education system), and sensitivities towards island culture and ecology. I felt most comfortable referring to ecological systems at home, realizing through conversation the need to explain these relationships such as the Ahupua'a (a traditional subdivision of land where Hawaiians work together from the mountain to the ocean) and how I perceive water in relation flowing from freshwater streams to ocean.

The question of gendered water and the perception of the colonized, gaze on the sea surfaced. I *am* working from a genderfluid space within the ocean because water suspends flesh and all ties to cishetronormative structures anchored to land. In water, the gravity of

how the world works suddenly floats. The ocean holds all our collective imaginations in masculine, feminine, and indescribable traits - more lies undiscovered. Any misogynistic burden on the ocean can only be done from a distant, shore perspective, where the viewer can only begin to fathom its vastness through control. I understand as a queer individual, humans' fear of the unknown can create negative narratives such as for the ocean, as another space to be colonized. These harmful, inherited narratives dissipate the farther you swim out. Humans become miniscule - concepts are now buoyant and drift away. Floating in the ocean places me like a cell returning to a body. For me, the experience only further immerses one into their own nature.

Queer ecology began to percolate throughout the discussion. In weaving together art pedagogy, my practice, and a clear spirituality with nature through Buddhism, my presentation touches on water's fluidity and the recognition for that attribute within humans. Rainbows are proud symbols of island life and also hold optics for queer safety. Returning to nature and becoming in touch with nature is a means to orient ourselves to adaptability and expansiveness for the future. I am aware of America's education system beginning to constraint queer youth within the institution as we watched Florida's Parental Right in Education Bill (Don't Say Gay Bill) pass. This means an educator is required to inform parents of their child's conversation if it touches upon sexual orientation or out them. In the midst of cultivating a pathway for my pieces, this conversation left me resolute in my convictions, and where my practice needs to go next. In searching for truth and engaging the cycle of lovelessness within the institution, this is the starting point for me towards a liberatory, fluid future.

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