

SELF

featuring Erika Diamond

APRIL 14 -
AUGUST 19
2023



FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The exhibition *Self* explores ideas related to societal expectations of gender, identity, and sexuality; and what type of interactions commence in our lives due to these integral components of our individuality. From the most mundane elements of ourselves to the defining moments that make up our lives – each is intertwined with and cannot be separated from who we are at our core.

My curatorial interest has been immersed in the **investigation of adornment and how objects on the body provide an outward manifestation of our innermost being;** with work focused specifically on gender, the female archetype, and surveying facets of manhood and toxic masculinity. These inquiries have been a daily ritual for me, and I appreciate that art has offered a lens to characterize such an inquisition.

Wanting to provide viewers with an opportunity to also question these constructs all at once and in relation to positionality – the idea for the exhibition *Self* was born.

I have been humbled and honored by the opportunity to work with Erika Diamond and Matt Lambert, as each of their artist practices challenges these notions with breadth and sophistication. Additional gratitude goes to the Contemporary Craft exhibitions team of Yu-San Cheng, Associate Director, and Kate Dockery, Exhibitions Manager, for their earnest partnership in bringing this work to life.

Rachel Saul Rearick
Executive Director, Contemporary Craft

Featured Artist

Erika Diamond

BIOGRAPHY

Erika Diamond is a textile-focused artist, curator, and educator based in Asheville, NC. She received a BFA from Rhode Island School of Design and an MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University. She has exhibited nationally and abroad, and her costumes have been commissioned by Charlotte Ballet. Exhibition venues include Dinner Gallery, Form & Concept Gallery, Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, and International Museum of Art & Science. Her work is included in the collections of San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles and Ally Bank among other private collections. Residencies include McColl Center for Visual Art, STARworks, ABK Weaving Center, Platte Forum, and UNC Asheville STEAM Studio. Diamond has taught at Virginia Commonwealth University, Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design, Appalachian Center for Craft, and Penland School of Crafts. She was recently a juror for New Glass Review 42. Diamond is Assistant Director of Galleries at Chautauqua Institution (NY).

ARTIST STATEMENT

My work questions the fragility and resilience of both the human body and our connections to each other. Exploring the potential for textiles to record and preserve, I leverage their historical functions as protective shields, storytelling artifacts, and signifiers of identity, belonging, and value. I use materials and objects that imitate skin, acting as protective yet permeable membranes that can absorb our experiences and bear the scars of our encounters.

With a focus on the paradox of queer safety and visibility, I make textile objects that address the vulnerability and self-preservation negotiated during human interaction. Often those offered the most protection are not the most vulnerable. *Imminent Peril - Queer Collection* is an ongoing series of fashionable safety vests created with bullet-proof Kevlar material, initially created in response to the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting. They are specifically tailored and designed to protect and uplift my own queer community, reflecting their individual ideas around personal safety and style.

New mirrored vinyl works reference the disproportionate challenges faced by queer youth today, despite the rise in queer representation and commercialization of Pride. The mirror acts as camouflage, allowing the wearer to blend in as a reflection of their surroundings. These textiles – rigid and reflective on one side, soft and celebratory on the other – embody the contemporary contradictions of queer existence. They seek to provide a portable space of safety and solidarity.

QUEER AND TRANS JOY/ WORLDING

ESSAY BY ALPESH KANTILAL PATEL

Haute Couture, French for “high dressmaking,” refers to clothing sewn with extreme attention to detail and finish and is made to order for a specific person. It is typically made of expensive, high-quality fabric and done by hand, and is therefore, time-consuming. According to these criteria, Erika

Diamond’s exquisitely crafted clothing on display is Haute Couture. Diamond, though, is not making these for the privileged and, thereby, undoes the elitism typically associated with such clothing. Her collection is made for members of her community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) friends. Moreover, while the vests and hoodies are made of expensive fabric, it is the unlikeliest of materials for couture: poly-para phenylene terephthalamide (PPT or K29), also known by the brand name Kevlar, a component of personal armor such as combat hats, ballistic face masks, and bulletproof vests. Kevlar, not surprisingly, is tough and, therefore, not easy to work with.

Of course, the unusual material and the skills required to work with it only serve to reinscribe the collection as high fashion. Indeed, more to the point, Diamond’s clothing on display is meant to glamorize any outfit worn out on the town, specifically at LGBTQ+ dance clubs that have increasingly and literally come under fire. On June 12, 2016, Pulse, an Orlando, Florida nightclub, became (at the time) the site of the worst mass shooting in the United States. More recently, on November 19, 2022, there was an attack at Club Q in Boulder, Colorado. The title of the collection in this exhibition, “Imminent Peril - Queer Collection series,” references the sobering danger LGBTQ+ clubgoers now must face.

Maison de Haute Couture Erika Diamant (as I like to refer to the clothing) is an expression of her love and desire to celebrate the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals in the present as a foil for the narrative portraits we hear and read about in media only after LGBTQ+ subjects are killed or hurt. Be sure to read the short text accompanying each piece of clothing that shares a few facts about the people for whom the garments are made as well as Diamond’s relationship to them. In this way, I would argue that though the past and LGBTQ+ death haunt Diamond’s clothing, it is just as much about the present and celebrating life: both now and then and here and there.

Also included are two works—*In(Visibility) hoodie* and *#Saygay*, a backpack. These works are in response to the increasing number of bills proposed in state legislatures, where public schools have become the front-line for anti-LGBTQ+ and, specifically, anti-trans bills. In the last two years, 306 bills targeting trans youth have been introduced across the United States with roughly 15% of them having passed. The hoodie and backpack play with the heightened visibility of trans youth that such bills have engendered in schools. The hoodie is cleverly lined with what Jo-Ann Fabrics describe as “ombre rainbow pride celebration fabric.” The wearer privately can enjoy being protectively wrapped up in the warmth of LGBTQ+ pride colors. Banned books can be placed in the book bag—even “queer secrets,” which Diamond indicates is one of the materials of the work.

Both items are made from reflective vinyl fabric and provide a measure of safety—or at least privacy. Looking intently at either will only result in one looking back at oneself. At the same time, the reflectivity can also be seen as making wearers a *part of*—rather than apart from—the world surrounding them. While the jacket and backpack (literally) reflect the world, they do not represent it as such. I argue they instantiate a being-with (others). The clothing of the *Imminent Peril* series could be said to do this, too. Though the clothes were not made for me, I still wanted to wear some (even if they clearly would not fit me). Effectively, my subjectivity becomes blurred with those for whom the clothes were made and even Diamond, herself, given her hands were so intimately involved in their creation (as would be the case for any couturier).

This reconception of the subject challenges the idea that one comes into being as “singular” selves through a rejection of other(nes)s. The subject is not founded in originary violence or as a rejection of a generalized “other,” but in interconnection with particular others in the world. Diamond’s work has the potential to do the vital work of what I refer to as “queer and trans worlding”: creating the material conditions through which we, as viewing subjects, could become response-able for, and thereby agents of, making a more ethical world.

An expression of
her love and desire
to celebrate the
lives of LGBTQ+
individuals

Looking
intently at
either will
only result in
one looking
back at
oneself

SELF

featuring matt lambert

APRIL 14 –
AUGUST 19
2023

Featured Artist

matt lambert

BIOGRAPHY

matt lambert is a non-binary, trans multidisciplinary collaborator and co-conspirator working towards equity, inclusion, and reparation. Their research focuses on mapping collaborative movements with craft through a developed methodology of cruising. lambert is currently a PhD candidate in philosophy in artistic practice in visual, applied and spatial arts, focusing on craft at Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design in Sweden. They hold a MA in Critical Craft Theory from Warren Wilson College and an MFA in Metalsmithing from Cranbrook Academy of Art.

ARTIST STATEMENT

My work presents body and body related objects approached through the vernacular of jewelry to create space for the viewer to question positionality, fixedness, and chimerism that goes beyond binary thinking. It is in the inhabited of these queer [and/or] liminal spaces that these interactions gain their strength as a force that is yet to be fully explored for its potential as a terroristic act to westernized and colonial institutions.

I collaborate with multi-media artists of a vast array of disciplines to reconfigure the current cultural systems of queerness and body politic while challenging the boundaries of craft. By unpacking the witnessing of toxic intimacies and the embedded systems of oppression rooted into the geological strata of culture and land, I am interested in ways to disrupt and subvert these mechanisms through a chimerical practice of making, collaborating, writing and curating to create systems for platform building and methodologies to talk with and not at in regards to the othered body.

DIS-ORDERLY ENCOUNTERS & IRREGULAR CONNECTIONS: TOWARDS CRUISING

ESSAY BY ALPESH KANTILAL PATEL

When meeting with matt to discuss the present exhibition, they explained there are no traditional object labels that visitors might otherwise expect in a white cube. They also noted that the layout of the objects in space would not be predetermined: they would bring suitcases with various works and would decide what makes sense to include in the exhibition when physically in the space. In other words, a performative quality is embedded in “the doing” of the spatial arrangement.

There is something quite liberating about the artist relinquishing written language from the viewing experience. I am freed from the responsibility typically associated with such writings, to a certain degree. While I never try to explain what an artwork means, inevitably, whatever I, as someone who has the privilege to spend time thinking about and looking at artworks, do write inflects a specific “informed” meaning for viewers. At worst, I masquerade as an expert. In this sense, I am unburdened from even attempting meaning-making. At the same time, I do not mean to suggest that the written word is supplemental. Indeed, writing in various forms is increasingly becoming a part of matt’s artistic practice. I would encourage you to consider the exhibition alongside some of their recent writing for *Art Jewelry Forum*.¹

Something quite liberating about the artist relinquishing written language from the viewing experience

So, what is this essay’s function for such an exhibition? It will be to suggest how I believe matt would like you to walk through their work at Contemporary Craft. More specifically, they want you to cruise, a topic we have discussed on and off for several years.² In my case, these conversations and a more recent one about this exhibition have compelled me to cruise the exhibition through writing. This more polished (yet still in process) essay you are reading results from my writing as a mode of thinking.

Cruising is often conflated with gay white males’ search for anonymous sex. However, as I was reminded recently, the right to cruise is seemingly unavailable to women, people of color, those who identify as lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, as well as other marginalized sexualities.

matt is nonbinary and transgender-identified, and I am nonbinary and queer-identified. Neither matt nor I are interested in reinscribing the disabling qualities embedded in cruising; indeed, I have found it a profound metaphor for researching and thinking otherwise. Cruising is the kernel of my book *Productive Failure: Writing Queer Transnational South Asian Art Histories* (University of Manchester Press, 2017). In short, cruising, as matt and I mobilize it, is not about finding a sexual partner or finding anything for that matter. Instead, it refers to not finding what you are looking for and being open to “something you never knew you wanted or even knew existed.”³ Drawing on Roland Barthes’ writing on cruising, art historian Simon Ofield-Kerr writes that it is a “productive not reductive process” and that it “has an in-built potential for diversion, irregular connections and disorderly encounters.”⁴ What might it mean for viewers to inhabit such a space? In this exhibition, matt invites you to embrace diversion, irregularity, and disorder to find your own path or, more likely, paths toward meaning-making rather than offering pearls of wisdom.

In this way, the black tape through which they have created an orderly spatial grid in the exhibition is a red herring. Rather than act as fixed coordinates, the grid creates a vertiginous experience: signifiers slip out of our grasp endlessly. It is what American philosopher Daniel Dennett refers to as “Cartesian theater,” that produces a fallacious mythical center at which supposedly, all things come together and consciousness occurs. By enabling us to cruise, matt undoes the Cartesian exceptionalism that cleaves mind from body and man from animal. There are other binaries blasted apart by matt, such as craft and art. Through the act of cruising the exhibition, you will “unfit” yourself rather than fit into and reinforce boundaries and disciplinary fealty. You will be undone to imagine otherwise.⁵

Writing this essay has been my own personal act of cruising—based not on experiencing the exhibition but on ideas connected to it that matt and I have discussed. In other words, I offer these words as humbly as I believe matt has positioned objects in the gallery space.

¹ A few of matt lambert’s essays can be found on the Art Jewelry Forum’s website: <https://artjewelryforum.org/author/matt-lambert/>.

² Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz mobilizes cruising in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) to push against the narrow LGBTQ political agenda focused on the present. My use of cruising here is distinct from his, though, in that I am defining it here as more of a methodology rather than a concept.

³ Simon Ofield-Kerr, “Cruising the archive,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, no. 3 (1 December 2005): 357, doi:10.1177/1470412905058353.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ I borrow these terms of being undone and unfitting from Irit Rogoff, “What Is a Theorist?” in *The State of Art Criticism*, ed. James Elkins and Michael Newman (New York: Routledge, 2007), 97-109.

ABOUT THE ESSAYIST

Alpesh Kantilal Patel is associate professor of art history at Tyler School of Art and Architecture, Temple University, and the 2023 Curator at Large at UrbanGlass, Brooklyn, where he is organizing a series of exhibitions under the theme “Forever Becoming: Decolonization, Materiality, and Trans Subjectivity.” His art historical scholarship, curating, and criticism reflect his queer, anti-racist, and transnational approach to contemporary art. The author of *Productive failure: writing queer transnational South Asian art histories* (2017) and co-editor of *Storytellers of Art Histories* (2022), he has contributed essays to many catalogs and published numerous book chapters and journal articles. As an art critic, he writes frequently for *Artforum* and other art presses. Grants and fellowships from the Fulbright Foundation, Arts Council England, NEH, Cranbrook Academy of Art, and New York University have supported his research. He is working on his next monograph, *Multiple and One: Global Queer Art Histories*.

THANK YOU

Self is made possible by the Lydon Innovation Fund, Aesthetic Plastic Surgery of Pittsburgh, JENDOCO Construction Corporation, and PFLAG Pittsburgh. General operating support is provided by Allegheny Regional Asset District, The Heinz Endowments, The Pittsburgh Foundation, Cathy Raphael, Opportunity Fund, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Elizabeth R. Raphael Fund of The Pittsburgh Foundation, Anonymous foundation, The George G. Fund, The Fine Foundation, Giant Eagle Foundation, and by private donations. Contemporary Craft is supported, in part, by the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council through its Allegheny Arts Revival Grant. This project is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts. Media sponsor for *Self* is QBurgh.

Embrace
diversion,
irregularity,
and disorder
to find your
own path