

*Imagining a Queer Utopia: A Manifesto*

Exploring queer utopia, dreaming, queer abstraction, and the possibilities of queer futurity through fashion, textiles, and painting.

By Nicole Melnick

A thesis presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design.

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Abstract:

In the thesis of *Imagining a Queer Utopia: A Manifesto*, I evoke the spirit of a utopic, futuristic Bluefire Phoenix Bird—Rising into its Future Destiny; the power of utopia manifested through dreaming and imagining of a liberated future. I envision a utopian world that transcends our karmic pasts, flaws, and dystopian realities, achieved through the Phoenix's renewal and transformation. A blue Firebird is reborn from its own preceding ashes, suggesting an acceptance of queer vulnerability, expressing individuality and liberty. We break free and heal from our political pasts by allowing love to surface through shedding, leading us towards a more hopeful and liberated future.

In my Master of Fine Arts Thesis, I explore the methodologies of Queer Utopia by José Esteban Muñoz, Queer Threads by John Chaich, Queer Abstraction by David J. Getsy, Camp by Susan Sontag, Utopia in Performance by Jill Dolan, dreaming, kitsch and pride through painting, textiles, and fashion. By utilizing colourful digital prints, innovative embellishment, and unconventional materials, I generate a surrealistic space in which the possibilities of the future become tangible through the process of imagination. In my research, installation, and fashion garments, I transmute emotions and thoughts through bold, confrontational colour, dreaming, and through the imagining and union of an autonomous twin soul love. Hence, creating a powerful gateway or threshold into a liberated utopian universe. Through fashion and painting, I generate an expansive ocean, a dream space, in which our queer desires of love become manifest in physical reality.

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Dedication:

I would like to dedicate my thesis *Imagining a Queer Utopia: A Manifesto* to my twin flame. Thank you for always inspiring me, guiding me forward, providing me with faith, reverence, and pushing me to become my best self. I am beyond grateful that you have fostered my growth of strength, courage, and pride. I am so proud of how far I have come, thank you.

Only and All,  
With Love,

Nicole Melnick

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<sup>1</sup> Lady Gaga, Jeff Koons, *Artpop*, November 6, 2013, Album Cover, Genius Media Group Inc., accessed May 9, 2021, <https://genius.com/Lady-gaga-artpop-lyrics>.

<sup>2</sup> Lady Gaga, *Lady Gaga's ArtRave: The Artpop Ball*, May 27, 2014, Out Magazine accessed May 9, 2021, <https://www.out.com/entertainment/popnography/2014/05/27/numbers-lady-gagas-artrave-artpop-ball>.

<sup>3</sup> Marsden Hartley, *Portrait of German Officer*, 1914, oil on canvas, 68.25 x 41.375", The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accessed May 9, 2021, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/488486>.

<sup>4</sup> *Lady Gaga Release new album 'Chromatica'*, May 6, 2019, UPI.com, accessed on January 10, 2021, [https://www.upi.com/Entertainment\\_News/Music/2020/05/29/Lady-Gaga-releases-new-album-Chromatica/9831590747790/](https://www.upi.com/Entertainment_News/Music/2020/05/29/Lady-Gaga-releases-new-album-Chromatica/9831590747790/)

<sup>5</sup> Duncan McLaren, *Pride Mural, Church and Wellesley*, January 30, 2014, Duncan McLaren Photography accessed May 9, 2021, <http://www.duncanmclarenphotography.ca/?q=node/2285>.

## Preface

### 1.1 My Story

Being queer is an innate part of who I am. Others have identified me as Queer through my childhood, teen, and early adult life. These moments have forever left an impression on me and have impacted my life, shaping and building me into the strong person I am today. I still remember several of my earliest memories, how it felt to be seen as different and to be outside of the “norm.” Today, as a result of my past, I don’t let others define me; I write as a powerful creator, and I express myself with openness.

Through my childhood and teenage years, I lived my life filled with playfulness, energy, and excitement. Yet, I lived my life unaware of my queerness. I came to realize my identity in my early adulthood. My environments often made me feel cornered, unsafe to be my true self. Therefore, similar to other LGBTQ+ individuals, I started hiding in order to fit in. I began utilizing the concept of “shielding.” I would create a symbolic protective shell that I would wear in front of others, facilitating my movements and mannerisms to fit in. Instead, I presented an “acceptable” version of myself by wearing clothes that were often bleak and muted to obscure my queer identity. I came to decipher and become comfortable with my sexuality on my own before “coming out” to the rest of the world. Throughout my journey, I learned that self-acceptance was the greatest gift I could give myself.

In the summer of 2017, my dream of becoming a textile print designer led me to New York City. In New York, I experienced a simultaneous acceptance of my sexuality and clarification in my life’s purpose – uncomfortable yet self-aware of something distinctive about my sexuality. One day at work, I shuffled across the song, *Jailbird* by Shells.<sup>6</sup> I burst into a frenzy of tears as it captured my conflict with sexuality. I walked home feeling melancholic; my eyes landed on heart-shaped pride stickers pasted onto the sidewalk, overturning this negative emotion. After an immense amount of soul searching, I awoke on June 27, 2017, yearning to disclose my sexuality and to step into my power. The energy, acceptance, and freedom of NYC encouraged me at age 24 to come out as Pansexual - the attraction to people despite sex or gender identity.<sup>7</sup> As I’ve felt neutral in my body and sexuality, possessing feminine and masculine qualities. At eleven years of age, a queer boy elicited my first love. As my feelings towards women and LGBTQ+ individuals continued, forced into my recognition that my sexuality is different by nature.

The quest to discover my identity liberated my career path in a fierce light. It motivated me to become a voice and catalyst for the LGBTQ+ community and Queer youth with my voice and work. Now, I seek to empower and uplift others through my philanthropic vision and studio practice. I desire to create art that transforms the world’s perception of the LGBTQ+ community, reducing stigma and bringing a positive conversation into the light. By dreaming, I continue to

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<sup>6</sup> Shells, “Jailbird,” Genius. Genius Media Group, Inc., <https://genius.com/Shells-jailbird-lyrics>.

<sup>7</sup> “What is Pansexuality?” STOP Homophobia, [www.stophomophobia.com/pansexuality.htm](http://www.stophomophobia.com/pansexuality.htm)



challenge the notions of gender, feminism, and sexuality through fashion, textiles, and painting.

### 1.2 Phoenix for the People

In my first fashion collection, the robust burst of a powerful Phoenixbird emerging echoes. Through fashion, the conjuration of power captivates me - intrigued by the capacity elicited through the juxtaposition of closure with disclosure, by the dichotomy of vulnerability embraced within costume security. The seductive application of materials in my first fashion collection *Phoexion* conjures the soul of a bird. In the process of cultivating a new, stronger self, wearing its identity fashionably, and the vulnerability of self with pride, the difference between living one's identity out loud and living in the ash darkness of a protective shell.

Fashion empowers us to exhibit our perspective and identity - an expository visual language. Dolce Vita stated, "Queer fashion is [a] direct disobedience and a reclaiming of agency over our bodies."<sup>8</sup> My previous fashion collection *Phoexion - Phoenix for People*, utilizes unconventional recycled materials, scientific meat-inspired digital prints, mustard weavings, umbilical cords, and innovative textile paintings. I evoke the spirit of a futuristic Phoenix Bird—Rising out of its Ashes "Coming Out" and the power of individuality through the Female Gaze.<sup>9</sup> The title evokes a fiery bird reborn from its own preceding ashes, suggesting an acceptance of vulnerability, expressing individuality and liberty.

The *Phoenix* became a central methodology for my work, my identity, and my life purpose. It became a mechanism for reinvention, reimagination, queer reclamation, and redemption. Through coming out, I had closure of the past, with liberated disclosure. By stepping into my power, I shed my past self, rose from the ashes, and recreated a more robust version of myself.

As a queer person, I utilize the symbolic *Phoenix* within my work as a potent activation of honesty, both with the external world and within myself. The Phoenix dies, forgives, and then is reborn into a stronger self that wears its identity fashionably and the vulnerability of self with pride. The process of revealing your true self and identity can be a powerful and liberating experience. More commonly, identity is constant, while I suggest it can also be in flux or in the process of change. To step into a new powerful version of yourself, you must let your past self die. Hence, through the process of shedding and letting go, a queer person can become connected to their higher spiritual self; by embracing the Phoenix, we can come into accurate alignment with our identities.

For me, creativity is a vehicle of expression for my queer identity. Consequently, as a child, creativity was a tool for me to escape the real world, through which I created imaginary worlds or landscapes that made me feel joyful. As a child, I would make the tools or utensils that were a part of invented dream

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<sup>8</sup> Nichols, James Michael. "The Largest Showcase Of Queer Fashion Designers at NYFW Will Be A"R/Evolution." Huffington Post, [www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/dapperq-showcase-nyfw-2017\\_us\\_59b7ed87e4b09be416583951](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/dapperq-showcase-nyfw-2017_us_59b7ed87e4b09be416583951).

<sup>9</sup> Leibovitz, Annie. Sontag, Susan. *Women*, (New York: Random House, 1999).

worlds – wands, mittens, clothes, or devices that would allow me to enact these mythical places in real life, making these stories and narratives real.

I would create make-believe places with dolls and characters that would reside within them. These invented spaces, constructed “imaginary” worlds that were tangible for me to escape within. My dream worlds and narratives were genuine to me, and the few others that I somehow convinced to play with me.



Figure 1: Nicole Melnick, *Uranus*, 60 x 60", Digital Print, 2020.

## Chapter 2: Introduction

I dream of a queer utopia. I yearn for a future filled with possibilities. I dream so that my queer vision can one day become tangible. This idea of dreaming is at the heart of my work. I dream of colour. I dream of a pink ocean, of queer heaven on earth. I dream of a cotton candy-coloured sky, pink clouds, bluegrass, purple trees, and rose-toned sea. I dream of a mystical world that is colourful. I dream of queer love. I dream of a fluid world. I dream of a future that is free. I dream of a future with my twin soul.

### Chapter 3: Queering the Dream

I view the world through a queer lens. Through fashion, textiles, and painting, my studio practice becomes a vehicle of manifestation towards a reconciled and redeemed queer future. I embody pride within my identity through the wear of eccentric garments with extreme power. These garments display a fearless nature and aura of a queer autonomous body. By painting dream-like, imaginary futures and romantic spaces, I can manifest and generate reimagined queer ways of living and being. Through my interdisciplinary art and design practice, I hope to one day alter the consciousness of contemporary society and transform the false perceptions that the world has on LGBTQ+ culture.

Through my practice, I utilize this idea of “transmutation” by performing the future as it occurs in present time, allowing me to surpass the past and step into my destiny as a creator. Jill Dolan discusses this idea that “*Utopia in Performance* tries to find...a way to invest our energies in a different future, one full of hope and reanimated by a new, more radical humanism.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, embracing our “hopes for some otherwise intangible future.”<sup>11</sup> In my work, I embody *utopia in performance* both in my photography and through the utilization of bright colours, neon’s, textiles, and fun embellishments in my fashion-based work. With the application of unconventional materials, I can generate a sense of queer optimism that operates as a weapon in the face of queer struggle. Using bold colours as an oppositional force and optimistic spirit, I state my hopes, dreams, and vision for the future with unyielding power. With colour, I combat discrimination; colour becomes a weapon and armour of my identity. I create my work as a mission to liberate and inspire others. In my work, I aim to uplift the LGBTQ2S+ community with colourful optimism by encouraging others to empower one another. Thus, we can keep faith that queer life does get better.

My studio practice is an innate mirror reflection of my own queer lived experience. I know that every LGBTQ2S+ identifying person has learned how to face oppression and survive. By following my intuition and presenting myself as visible and queer, I have built a “thick skin”<sup>12</sup> by wearing my Queer identity with pride and creating a defense of an unstoppable optimistic perspective. In moments of struggle, I often look towards the future with solid sensations of queer intuition and an innate knowing that something extraordinary is forthcoming.

My own artistic and personal trajectory is forever unfolding towards realizing my queer utopia and true freedom. My purpose as an artist is to become part of a force that is much greater than myself. I hope to connect with LGBTQ2S+ individuals through my work and impact society. I wish others to become allies and repeal their homophobic and harmful prejudices towards identities of varying differences. To achieve my mission of creating a peaceful and loving world, I apply the Utopian methodology presented and discussed by José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*.

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<sup>10</sup> Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at The Theater*, (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Nick Cave, “Thick Skin,” Art 21. New York State Council on the Arts, <https://art21.org/2016/10/07/nick-caves-thick-skin/>.

Muñoz states we continue to “strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing [the] rendering of reality.”<sup>13</sup> By employing this approach in my research-creation practice, I reimagine new possible and liberated futures in my creative trajectory and maintain resilience and perseverance when faced with LGBTQ2S+ hardship and adversity.

Through endurance and the reverence felt towards my identity, my goal as an artist creates a new, innovative queer revolution that will further push the frontier of Queer rights and equality in North America. I plan to move these boundaries by “Going Gaga”<sup>14</sup> and building on Lady Gaga’s LGBTQ2S+ activism with my philanthropic, artistic practice by pushing the limits and taking risks with my fashion.

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<sup>13</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Judith Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and The End of Normal*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

### 3.1 Going Gaga



Figure 2: Lady Gaga, Jeff Koons, *Artpop*, Album Cover, 2013<sup>15</sup>

The *Born This Way* album preceded Lady Gaga's release of *Artpop*. Through her music and performance, Gaga promotes her own political yet utopian vision of a queer future. She expresses this through piano melodies, dreaming, romantic lyrics, and surrealism. Gaga utilizes the Utopian methodology in her song *Artpop*, as she elicits a premonition of her future of love, overcoming the queer challenges and hardships endured in the past and present.

Gaga sings:

*"A hybrid can withstand these things  
My heart can beat with bricks and strings  
My ARTPOP could mean anything  
We could; we could belong together, Artpop!"*  
- Lady Gaga<sup>16</sup>

In this song, Gaga produces her envisioned idea of a liberated queer future with her lover; she proposes a colourful and joyful future union with her twin soul. Her lyrics describe the tumultuous twin soul journey, one undergoes and endures, leading towards a harmonious partnership with their twin flame. Spiritual teacher Todd Savvas defines the concept of twin flames; he explains, "A

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<sup>15</sup> Lady Gaga, Jeff Koons, *Artpop*, November 6, 2013, Album Cover, Genius Media Group Inc., accessed May 9, 2021, <https://genius.com/Lady-gaga-artpop-lyrics>.

<sup>16</sup> Gaga, Lady. "Artpop," Genius. Genius Media Group Inc, <https://genius.com/Lady-gaga-artpop-lyrics>.



twin flame is your own soul, shared across what appears to be two physical beings. It's one soul split into two bodies.”<sup>17</sup> He further describes that “When a soul is created, it is split into two parts, mirrors of each other, constantly yearning to reconnect.”<sup>18</sup>



Figure 3: Lady Gaga, *The Artpop Ball Tour*, Performance, 2014. <sup>19</sup>

In my work, I aim to create a revolutionary fashion brand in order to complete my mission of changing society's greater consciousness. Through my spiritual ascension, I do this by connecting my artistic practice to my higher spiritual self and creating meaningful pieces. I choose to step forward with power by leaving the past behind, to radically transform LGBTQ2S+ lives in the world today through my multidisciplinary practice.

Lady Gaga's revolutionary activism inspires my artistic practice. By releasing her *Born This Way* album, she created an empowering movement in support of LGBTQ2S+ rights and towards building world-wide acceptance of sexual, gender, and identity diversity. I employ the Gaga Feminist methodology in my work. Author Judith Jack Halberstam explains that Gaga “Feminism is invested in innovative deployments of femininity and finds them... represented by pop performances characterized by their excess, their ecstatic embrace of loss of control, and a maverick sense of bodily identity.”<sup>20</sup> Lady Gaga employs this

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<sup>17</sup> Sharon Brandwein, “What is a Twin Flame? 8 Signs You’ve Met Your Match,” Brides. Dotdash Publishing Family, <https://www.brides.com/twin-flame-love-5097590#:~:text=According%20to%20Savvas%2C%20%E2%80%9CA%20twin,%2C%20constantly%20yearning%20to%20reconnect.%E2%80%9D>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Lady Gaga, *Lady Gaga’s ArtRave: The Artpop Ball*, May 27, 2014, Out Magazine accessed May 9, 2021, <https://www.out.com/entertainment/popnography/2014/05/27/numbers-lady-gagas-artrave-artpop-ball>.

<sup>20</sup> Judith Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and The End of Normal*, (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 2012), xiii.

through “punk aesthetics, anarchic feminism, and the practice of going gaga.”<sup>21</sup> I admire her courage to take risks, be bold, unique, different and original, as she broke the forefront as a philanthropic artist.



Figure 4: Nicole Melnick, *SuperUtopia*, 12 x 20", Garment Constructed from Digital Print on Cotton Sateen, Painted with Fabric Gloss, Elastic Inset, 2021.

Through the act of making, constructing, and creating my colourful garments, I manifest my queer dream into reality. With my research-creation practice, I choose to brave the currents of my difficult challenge and mission. By constructing a queer dreamland and a vision for the future, I embody queer dreaming by creating vibrant garments adorned with sequins and unique palettes. I utilize the *Adorned in Dreams* methodology in my work as a tool of transformation; Elizabeth Wilson states: “When we change our clothes, we change ourselves.”<sup>22</sup> Through this methodology, I create garments that elicit positive queer perspectives, encouraging a trajectory towards the queer liberation of the body. I create couture-designed garments that are hand-embroidered and meticulous. I consider every step, cut, embellishment, and detail of couture design —genuine handcrafted dreaming. For me, the act of

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<sup>21</sup> Judith Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and The End of Normal*, (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 2012), xiii.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned In Dreams*. (London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2003).



creating garments becomes an instrument towards achieving utopia, an eternal practice that pushes me forward; it is a projection of manifestation towards change, queer liberation, sexual freedom, and gay futurity. I express “1968 [Czech] rebellion in Paris with its explicit... utopian message ‘Le Realisme qui demande l’impossible’”<sup>23</sup> translating and referring to ‘Be realistic, demand the impossible.’<sup>24</sup> I express this message through my work by challenging the current day, enforced patriarchal “boundaries” with fierce, colourful confrontation. In my work, I present a divergent yet political utopian perspective with oppositional colour. Through the power of utopia and creation, I step closer towards attaining my dream and manifest the intangible as tangible.

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<sup>23</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



Figure 5: Nicole Melnicky, *Utopia Manifesto*, 66.5 x 42", Acrylic, Pastel, and Ink on Paper, 2020.

## Chapter 4: Studio Practice

### 4.1 Utopia Paintings

I create watery pools of colour striations of paint with linear elements and flat abstract organic shapes. My paintings have a playful, optimistic, and otherworldly quality, evoking the possibility of a queer body or underwater creature and a utopian future through colourful shapes. I approach painting by creating thinned washes of acrylic paint and layering them upon one another. These multiple layers create complex surfaces and multidimensional 2D images. Abstraction provides me with the possibility of the invention and the opportunity to generate an innovative and complex visual feeling. Throughout history, such as artist Salvador Dali, who conveyed his dreams by painting, in the movement of surrealism, "the surrealists expressed through their wild paintings the conviction that dreaming...[is] an authentic state of consciousness than waking."<sup>25</sup> In my work, I propose abstraction as a new movement of queer utopianism that captures this idea of dreaming and futurity.

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<sup>25</sup> J. Allan Hobson, *Dreaming: A Very Short Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14.



Figure 6: Nicole Melnicky, *Into Clouds*, 40 x 48," Mixed Media on Paper, 2020.

I envision a future, a queer utopia that is palpable. Through my paintings, I evoke a surrealistic space where the future's possibilities become tangible through imagination. By utilizing my ability to paint, sew and dream, I create paintings that evoke a watery sensibility of a whimsical space and garments that exude futuristic auras. I dream of a future world that is free; A world that glitters with the essence of pride. By painting marbled pools or expansive oceans, I imagine a watery space that is airy, and blue, a space that glimmers within the shadow of ultraviolence and luminescence of queer waters. My work embodies the idea of a queer liberated body, exemplifying gay pride. Hence, I manifest my vision of an empowered queer future.



Figure 7: Nicole Melnick, *Subliminal Bodies*, 9 x 12", Mixed Media on Paper, 2020.

The combination of collated thin, layered washes, linework, and opaque, bold colours creates diluted, watery bodily shapes and euphoric images. I elicit abstract possibilities. By painting, I generate my own original "soul song," making my unique signature statement. Through which I draw in my twin soul. For example, my painting *Subliminal Bodies* encompasses the intersection of queer bodies as the bodily shapes suggest sexuality, connection, and fluidity. Through this painting, I encapsulate sexual freedom and my queer dreams and vision for a utopian future that is "not yet here."<sup>26</sup>

#### 4.2 Photography

In my research-creation practice, I challenge patriarchal and hegemonic norms of sexuality, gender, and feminism by wearing and creating my artistic fashion garments, textiles, and paintings. My practice is akin to the iconic photographer Cindy Sherman and musical performer Sia. Through the power of photography, I utilize fashion, makeup, and wigs, to transform my body through performance and image to capture my queer identity. I approach photography with freedom in my practice, as I wear expressive makeup and flamboyant fashion to exemplify various characteristics and personas of my Queer identity. Like a bird, such as a pheasant or a peacock, I wear, express, and perform my identity loud and proud. By embracing vulnerability and confidence in my identity

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<sup>26</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009).



through animated and exuberant fashion garments, I empower and inspire others to be their authentic and queer selves.



Figure 8: Nicole Melnick, *Supernova*, 13.3 x 20", Garments Constructed from Digital Print on Cotton Sateen, Painted with Fabric Gloss, Twill Canvas, 2021.

#### 4.3 Brand Identity

In my new fashion collection NICOLE MELNICKY, I utilize feminine silhouettes, raw embellishment, colour, bold graphic prints, digital textiles, sequins, and beading details to create one-of-a-kind and unique fashion garments. My brand NICOLE MELNICKY is for a queer womenswear customer who is confident and assertive in who they are. I design for a customer who wants to be seen, heard and a customer who is unafraid to speak up and stand out in a crowd. Through the process of elimination or act of “negation,” employed by the utopian methodology.<sup>27</sup> I confront and challenge the notions of gender, sexuality, and feminism placed on queer female bodies. My designs overcome the power of subversion by utilizing bright, bold colours and juxtaposing them with adorned embellishments and details. By dismantling and embracing the 1970s punk fashion movement of rebellion, such as fashion designer Betsey Johnson, I liberate and empower my queer womenswear customer to “show-off.” I uplift and invigorate a resilient sense of pride through bold fashion. I challenge these patriarchal perspectives and hegemonic norms placed on women’s bodies. With feminine lux fabrics, digital textiles, and unique surface embellishment, I design for an unapologetic woman who stands strong in their queer identity. She is fearless and unafraid to wear bold and bright colours. My garments build a dichotomy of vulnerability embraced within the security of costume by exposing the construction details and raw structural elements within the garments. My garments become the “armour of pride” by embodying, exposing, and performing identity through fashion. My garments “claim” queer identity, loud and proud, through the wear of colour and raw construction with unyielding power, play, glitz, and flamboyance. Hence, I evoke an eternally bound manifestation of pride.

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<sup>27</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009).



Figure 9: Nicole Melnick, *Mars Fruit*, 12 x 20", Garment Constructed from Collaged, Digital Print on Cotton Sateen, Overlayed a Digital Projection of Utopian Universe, 2021.

## Chapter 5: Theoretical Framework + Thesis Portfolio

### 5.1 Queer Abstraction + Pride Paintings

I utilize David J. Getsy's methodology of Queer Abstraction in my painting and incorporate the mixed-methods of Queer Utopia and Chromophobia into my abstract works. Painters Heather Day, Helen Frankenthaler, Kathryn Macnaughton, Cecily Brown, Sterling Ruby, and Christina Quarles inspire my abstract and bodily paintings. Their paintings have invigorated me to build a dichotomy of visual language by studying their works, through which I reflect my inner queer experience in a two-dimensional image. I create paintings of varying bodily sensations and watery spaces, depicting the feeling of being queer and voids of futuristic utopias. I utilize colour within my work to uplift and liberate the viewer and generate a sense of queer optimism. Colour can parade queer identity and present a positive perspective on the queer experience, which is why I exploit colour within my work.

My research on the core concepts found in the article *Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction* and in the lecture of *The Possibility of Queer Abstraction* by David J. Getsy insinuates my ideas in the utilization of visual "coding" in my textile designs and paintings. The exhibition *Queer Abstraction* curated by David J. Getsy addresses "the questions [which arise out] of the problems of being visible"<sup>28</sup> as a queer individual. Author Getsy points out that the title Queer Abstraction may seem contradictory, as Queer speaks to visibility.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, the word abstraction is the "avoidance of representation and ... [how] which it seems distant from the recognizable world of everyday objects."<sup>30</sup> While "Queer - conjures bodies, protests, sexuality and love and revolt."<sup>31</sup> The correlation of the two contradictory words is uncovered by Getsy's closer look on the "concept of queer itself, as this word captures the experience of being told one is wrong and outside the norm..." Nevertheless, this conversation evolved due to the activism in the 1980s and 1990s. Since the reclamation of the demeaning word, Queer became an emblem of pride and badge of honour and defiance for LGBTQ+ identities.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> J. Getsy, David. "Webcast: The Possibility of Queer Abstraction by David J. Getsy." Des Moines Art Center. <https://www.desmoinesartcenter.org/blog/webcasts/the-possibility-of-queer-abstraction>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> J. Getsy, David. "Webcast: The Possibility of Queer Abstraction by David J. Getsy." Des Moines Art Center. <https://www.desmoinesartcenter.org/blog/webcasts/the-possibility-of-queer-abstraction>.





Figure 10: Marsden Hartley, *Portrait of a German Officer*, 68.25 X 41.375", Oil on Canvas, 1914.<sup>33</sup>

By positioning my work amongst artist Marsden Hartley. Concerning his painting of "Portrait of a German Officer." (Pictured Above), Created in 1914, before World War I, "at a time when [the] representation of same-sex love was not allowed."<sup>34</sup> As Getsy points out, Hartley employs the use of language by adopting an obscure methodology. He further eludes to Hartley's visual methods of using colour, abstraction, cubism, and coding, granting him a speech in which he could represent his forbidden queer love. Hartley's transverse approach to painting, whereby he creates a language of love using signified coding, symbols, letter inscription, and abstract elements, is a classic example of Queer Abstraction. Through his paintings, Hartley depicts his passion and deep commitment for his beloved partner Karl von Freyburg by inscribing the letters "K.v.F" amongst the various military insignia and flags. This use of language itself deploys and proposes meaning through abstraction. The result of "produc[ing] meaning out of abstraction"<sup>35</sup> have assigned the letters have gained significance and importance. By further researching contemporary examples of artists in the exhibition curated by David J. Getsy inspires me to develop my language of queer abstraction in my painting work.

<sup>33</sup> Marsden Hartley, *Portrait of German Officer*, 1914, oil on canvas, 68.25 x 41.375", The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accessed May 9, 2021, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/488486>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> J. Getsy, David. "Webcast: The Possibility of Queer Abstraction by David J. Getsy." Des Moines Art Center. <https://www.desmoinesartcenter.org/blog/webcasts/the-possibility-of-queer-abstraction>.

Getsy elaborates this externalizing methodology of symbolism and pride through the pattern; he describes that Queer Abstraction is the “invention of a new language.”<sup>36</sup> As it employs a unique technique and approach by depicting the experience of the ability “to hide in plain sight.”<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, this concept is akin to a woven cocoon, spun with intricacy by a caterpillar, creating protection during the pupal stage of metamorphosis. Moreover, it automatizes the artist’s ability to communicate a mysterious yet bewildering, direct yet discreet, blunt yet perplexing visual image. The patterned language is a “visible” yet obscured meticulous visual puzzle. Moreover, in my textile design and painting practice, I utilize the mixed-method approach of signified “coding” through abstraction and my surface patterns’ complexity by incorporating the pride flag with my paintings Queer Pride.

Furthermore, I utilize the methodology of John Chaich in his book *Queer Threads* by crafting and constructing identity<sup>38</sup> through woven textiles, by mixing, remixing, and combining patterns by juxtaposing and integrating opposing colours. John Chaich outlines that contemporary artists such as Larry Krone, Nick Cave, Athi-Patra Ruga, Chicachio, and Giannone utilize the pride flag’s colour palette of red, orange, yellow, green, and blue within their work. Thus, signifying the artist’s identity with visual iconography found within the painting, becoming the hallmark of queer identity. By utilizing the Queer Threads methodology, I incorporate LGTBQ2S+ symbolism, flags, colours, and logos into my work. Hence, creating visible artwork and recognized to have been created by a Queer identifying artist.

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<sup>36</sup> J. Getsy, David. “Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction.” Des Moines Art Center. <https://www.desmoinesartcenter.org/webres/File/Gettsy-QueerThesesOnAbstraction-2019.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> John Chaich, Todd Oldham, *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community*, (New York: Ammo, 2017).



Figure 11: Nicole Melnicky, *Queer Pride*, 5.8 x 12", Mixed Media on Paper, 2021.

During my undergraduate degree at Moore College of Art and Design, I worked under the mentorship of great American abstract painter Moe Brooker. Brooker impacted my identity as a queer painter, as he always inspired me to be confident and proud of who I am. He influenced my studio practice, as he encouraged me to be bold and use bright colours, patterns, and oil sticks within my work. Through his teaching and mentorship, I discovered my strength and abilities as an oil painter and abstract artist. This past year I have had multiple conversations with him about my recent work, and he encouraged me to take risks within my paintings and incorporate elements of surprise within my pieces.

In my pride painting series, I utilize the mixed-methodologies of *Queer Abstraction* by David J. Getsy and the *Queer Threads* by John Chaich. The work above *Queer Pride* incorporates the colours of the pansexual pride flag of pink, yellow, and blue within the abstract elements of this “textile painting.” This work is positioned and is akin to Marsden Hartley’s *Portrait of a German Officer*, through which he proclaims and identifies his love towards his male counterpart. In my mixed-media painting series, I embrace my identity through my signature abstract style, in which I create my abstract portrait of pansexual identity.

## 5.2 Chromophobia + Colour

Colour is an integral part of my studio practice, as certain colours evoke specific emotions, feelings, and frequencies. Donald Judd once said, “I knew as a child that certain colours were supposed to produce certain feelings”<sup>39</sup> Conversely, I remember the first time my eyes landed on heart-shaped pride stickers pasted onto the sidewalk in New York. The oppositional colour evoked freeing energy within me. The bright and bold colours were contradictory and to the internal conflict that I once wrestled with towards my identity. However, this moment in time became my epiphany leading me towards liberation.

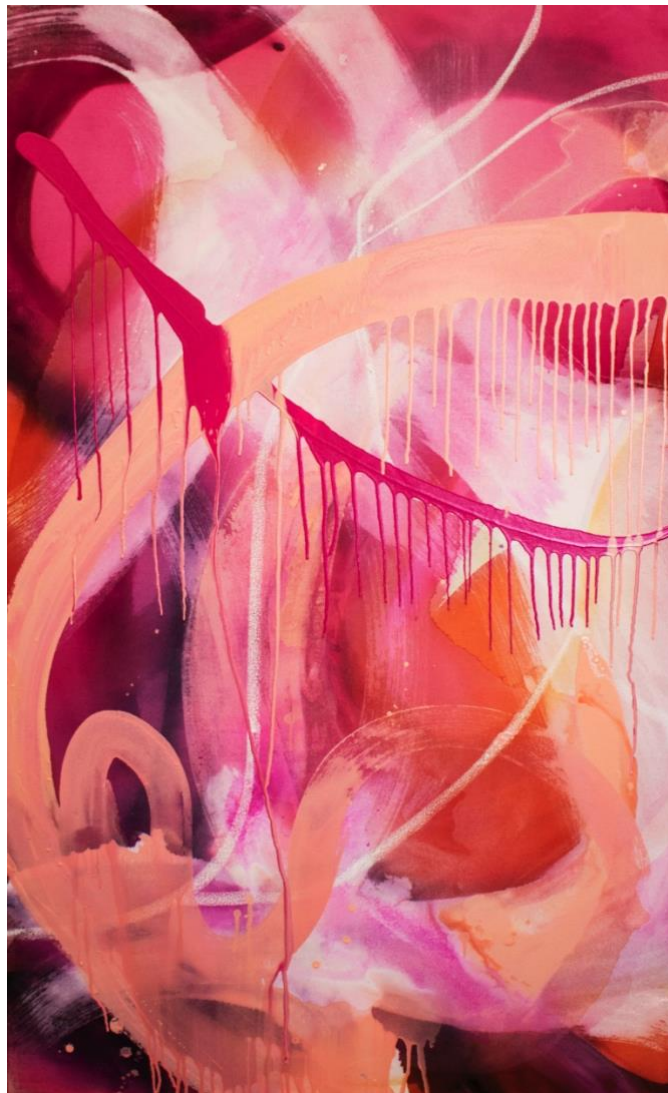


Figure 12: Nicole Melnick, *Tangerine Romance*, 34 x 55", Mixed Media on Canvas, 2021.

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<sup>39</sup> Donald Judd, *Donald Judd Writings*, (Verona: Judd Foundation, David Zwirner Books, 2016), 842



The article *Chromophobia* written by David Batchelor describes, “in the West...colour has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished, and degraded.”<sup>40</sup> He explains that this deep-seated fear that colour has the power to infiltrate our lives but not in a positive way. He describes this intense fear of colour corrupting society,<sup>41</sup> and you can see it found in neutral furniture, clothing, and the surrounding colours of our environment. David Batchelor presents and names this fear as Chromophobia.<sup>42</sup> He explains that:

“Chromophobia manifests itself in the many and varied attempts to purge colour from culture, to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity...this purging of colour is...accomplished in one of two ways. In the first, colour...the property of ...‘foreign’ body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological...colour is dangerous, or it is trivial...sinister and superficial”<sup>43</sup>



Figure 13: Nicole Melnick, *Dirty Stiletto*, 34 x 55", Mixed Media on Canvas, 2021.

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<sup>40</sup> David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000), 22-23.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



Figure 14: Nicole Melnick, *Monster*, 34 x 55", Mixed Media on Canvas, 2021.

I challenge David Batchelor's perspective on colour by confronting chromophobia and by bringing attention and meaning to the use of colour. Colour creates an activist movement of revolution to present my queer identity in my fine artwork and fashion. Colour – both deconstructs and dismantles this idea of chromophobia and homophobia by showing my identity with flashiness and flamboyance. Thus, I speak to my pansexual identity in my interdisciplinary application between painting, textiles, and fashion, evoking freedom and fluidity.

### 5.3 Reimagining Pride + Queer Threads



Figure 15: Nicole Melnick, *Reimagining Pride*, 17 x 10",  
Pipe Cleaners, Yarns, Embroidery Thread, 2020

Multiple colours comprise the pride flag. Originally designed by American artist Gilbert Baker, the flag became a symbol of LGBTQ+ rights and gay liberation. This iconic design expanded from six to eight stripes in variations of black and brown, representing Indigenous and Black individuals. The pride flag has been a consistent symbol of liberation and freedom. Thus, throughout history, the pride flag has been redefined and recreated. Colour creates the possibility to reimagine and define pride.

Inspired by Jeffrey Gibson and through my experimental textile practice, I created my flag design by utilizing unconventional colours, yarns, pipe cleaners, and thread. I dismantled, reconstructed, and communicated my narrative of pride through my flag design. For example, in my flag *Reimagining Pride*, Queer identity can be in flux or transition, speaking to the experience of queer youth, questioning individuals or transgender individuals, who may be receiving hormone therapy to transition into their gender identity. Pride is in tandem with the concepts of change and evolution, as it can grow, morph, and shift. This flag represents the defined and undefined identities, speaking to the complexities of the queer experience and to the journey of discovering who you are.

In my studio practice, Pride is at the core of my brand's identity Nicole Melnick. My purpose as a fashion designer is to redefine the voice and surface of fashion through colours and textiles. I can generate my own symbolic fashion identity using the mixed-methodologies of queer abstraction, chromophobia, and utopia. Inspired by thinking about what Pride means to me, I innovated my

unique design of the pride flag. I created my flag design through my experimental practice by utilizing unconventional colours, yarns, pipe cleaners, and thread. Hence, allocating me to dismantle, reconstruct and communicate my narrative of Pride.

In this project, I apply David Chaich's methodology of *Queer Threads* through found material and within my flag's woven structure. I experimented with colour through varying yarn textures, embroidery threads, and my unconventional material choice of pipe cleaners. Historically, colour indicates gender and sexuality. Queer individuals wore "brightly coloured clothing or accessories as a form of covert communication"<sup>44</sup> The iconic colours found in the pride flag are known to be symbolic aspects of Pride; "Pink...for sex, red for life, orange for healing, yellow for sunlight, green for nature, turquoise for magic, indigo for harmony, and violet for spirit."<sup>45</sup> By experimenting with the intricate colours of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, pink, and purple, I created my exclusive design of the pride flag.

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<sup>44</sup> Curtis Wong, "The History and Meaning of the Rainbow Pride Flag," Huffington Post. The Huffington Post, Inc., [http://huffingtonpost.ca/entry/rainbow-pride-flag-history\\_n\\_5b193aafe4b0599bc6e124a0?ri18n=true](http://huffingtonpost.ca/entry/rainbow-pride-flag-history_n_5b193aafe4b0599bc6e124a0?ri18n=true).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.





Figure 16: Lady Gaga wearing CAMP fashion at *The Met Gala Celebrating Camp: Notes on Fashion*, Photograph, 2019.<sup>46</sup>

#### 5.4 Act Up: Camp + Kitsch

Lady Gaga, Alexander McQueen, Erin Robertson, Delpozo, and Betsey Johnson influence my fashion design aesthetic. Their bold designs and impenitent expression of identity inspire me. Through my unapologetic use of colour, my design aesthetic is for a queer womenswear customer who is daring, rebellious, and inspired. I challenge the present-day, ordinary “ready-to-wear” aesthetic by designing prints and colourful garments reimagined through embellishment and bright colours. I create for a womenswear customer who is confident and assertive in their queer identity and for a customer who is unafraid to be seen or noticed in a crowd.

I utilize Susan Sontag’s CAMP methodology by repurposing and revaluing discarded objects in my fashion collection. Sontag describes that “Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric – something of a private code, a badge of identity.”<sup>47</sup> Camp – is a queer fashion that incorporates flamboyance, ironic nature, humour, eccentric kitsch, playfulness, and colour. Hence, functioning as a robust methodology, Sontag explains, “The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp fashion is playful, anti-serious.”<sup>48</sup> Camp acts as a vehicle of transfiguration, she explains,

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<sup>46</sup> *Lady Gaga Release new album ‘Chromatica’*, May 6, 2019, UPI.com, accessed on January 10, 2021, [https://www.upi.com/Entertainment\\_News/Music/2020/05/29/Lady-Gaga-releases-new-album-Chromatica/9831590747790/](https://www.upi.com/Entertainment_News/Music/2020/05/29/Lady-Gaga-releases-new-album-Chromatica/9831590747790/)

<sup>47</sup> Susan Sontag. *Notes on “Camp.”* (London: Penguin Modern, 1964), 1.

<sup>48</sup> Susan Sontag. *Notes on “Camp.”* (London: Penguin Modern, 1964), 1.

“Camp involves a new, complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.”<sup>49</sup>



Figure 17: Nicole Melnick, *Love Armor*, 20 x 12", Garment Constructed from Digital Graphic on Cotton Sateen, 2021.

Camp, known as the first original Pride fashion, became a movement informed by LGBTQ2S+ aesthetics. In *Notes on Camp*, written in 1964, Sontag writes Camp originated from “an improvised self-elected class...homosexuals, who constitute themselves as [the] aristocrats of taste.”<sup>50</sup> Camp aesthetic is directly associated with gay culture and identity is an exuberant, proud, colourful, and excessive fashion presentation.

Through rethinking found, unconventional, and upcycled materials such as manure trash bags, I repurpose them into creative art-to-wear garments and

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 36

<sup>50</sup> Susan Sontag. *Notes on “Camp.”* (London: Penguin Modern, 1964), 29.

colourful accessories. I experiment with the reuse of found materials by introducing an element of playfulness into my practice. I exude a similar queer artistic expression akin to Lady Gaga, and Nick Cave, through my fashion wear.

I utilize the kitsch methodology by embellishing particular garments with repurposed children's toys as beads. By beading with Polly Pocket, or Ello, as an embellishment element or beads on my fashion garments, I employ the camp methodology in a youthful approach. By utilizing the queer mixed-methodologies of Camp, kitsch, and pride, my garments claim queer identity with bold, confident intention through the wear of colour and flamboyance. I capture the queer experience through high-spirited, fashion garments. Therefore, evoking a strong sense of self and queer identity.



Figure 18: Duncan McLaren, Pride Mural found in The Village in Toronto, ON, Photograph, 2014 <sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, I expand my toolbox by utilizing historical LGBTQ+ iconography. I reimagine these symbols through surface embellishment and embroidery within my garments. For example, I reclaim the Gay Nazi triangle in my dress "Act Up." By utilizing LGBTQ+ symbolism and iconography within my work, I use it as a powerful symbol of reclamation and queer visibility. I apply the mixed-methodologies of camp, kitsch, and pride through upcycling discarded objects in my garment *Act Up*. *Act Up* boldly claims queer identity loud and proud through the wear of colour and flamboyance. The Gay Nazi triangle, Originally known as an emblem of oppression, became reclaimed by the LGBTQ2S+

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<sup>51</sup> Duncan McLaren, *Pride Mural, Church and Wellesley*, January 30, 2014, Duncan McLaren Photography accessed May 9, 2021, <http://www.duncanmclarenphotography.ca/?q=node/2285>.



community. This symbol subjected gay males to concentration camps in the 1930s.



Figure 19: Nicole Melnick, *Act Up*, 14 x 20", Garment Constructed from Manure Trash Bags, Twill Canvas, Beaded Embellishment, 2021.

In my garment, it became a symbol of pride of the pink triangle juxtaposed with the Camp methodology and, paired alongside manure trash bags, constructing the entire garment. My garments evoke and become iconic symbols of pride by reclaiming the Gay Nazi triangle and repositioning it with the Camp methodology. The tension between the triangle vs. the dress builds a powerful dichotomy and a reclaiming agency within the work. My garment, *Act Up*, elicits a sense of queer empowerment, survival, and free-spirited nature, displaying a sense of uprising and victory in resistance to the face of oppression.

My Camp fashion garments elicit a sense of queer empowerment, survival, and free-spirited nature, displaying a sense of uprising and victory in resistance to the face of patriarchal domination. *Act Up* evokes an eternal bound manifestation of pride by claiming queer identity loud and proud in my fashion.



Figure 20: Nicole Melnick, *Act Up*, 14 x 20", Garment Constructed from Manure Trash Bags, Twill Canvas, Beaded Embellishment, 2020.

### 5.5 Hummingbird Awakening



Figure 21: Nicole Melnick, *Hummingbird Awakening*, 9 x 12", Garment Constructed from Digital Print on Cotton Sateen, Embellished with Beads, Sequins, 2021.

I combine manual hand painting and drawing and then scan my designs into my computer; I work fluidly between digital and analog formats. I create new textile variations that are visual, appealing, unusual, and unique digital combinations. Designers Tanya Taylor and Alice & Olivia inspire my colourful textiles and prints. I display pride, freedom, and optimism through hand-painted watercolour paintings, floral and bright abstracts in my textile prints.

For example, through digital textiles and colour, I evoke the spirit of a *Hummingbird Awakening* – rising forward with joy, warmth, and forgiveness. Within the digital textile's airy drawing and line-quality, I create a sense of lightness, playfulness, and bliss, surrounded by an elegant pink hue. The abstract white illustration suggests a type of energetic shift and a vibrational

clearing, becoming symbolic of transformation. I inspire my femme, queer womenswear customer to remain hopeful and bright in the face of struggle or discrimination, hence employing the utopian methodology. By suggesting a bold perspective on the power of renewal and femininity, this garment becomes the symbol of rebirth, freedom, and a metaphor for revival, guiding us towards a queer utopian future.

## 5.6 RISE

For example, RISE is a heavily-painted, multi-layered, and textural garment. The garment symbolizes the evolving heart of the Phoenix as it evolves and creates its autonomy. It incorporates the mixed-method approach of painting, performance, LED Lights, and fashion, creating a unique, expressive, one-of-a-kind garment. This garment is reminiscent of a Lion's Mane Jellyfish. The jellyfish's abundant amount of intertangled tentacles inspires the garment's surface quality. Furthermore, researching Raf Simon's collection of dresses for the Dior Fall/Winter 2012 collection, in which Raf incorporated Sterling Ruby's masculine and textural paintings, furthers my investigation of the painted surface RISE.

RISE encourages the queer community and others to step into their own identities, accept themselves, and stand up for their own beliefs and rights. It combines the mixed-methodologies displayed in two exhibitions: *Gender-Bending Fashion and Queer Abstraction*. *Gender-Bending Fashion* exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, "challenges notions of clothing"<sup>52</sup> and "aims to explore and question assumptions about gender-specific clothing."<sup>53</sup> I have incorporated this research in my formal design elements of fluid lines and shapes found in the design of this garment's shoulders and pockets, creating a gender-neutral aesthetic. Moreover, I have also included piping around the garment's framing as representative of the *Queer Abstraction* methodology. By capturing an abstract "cut-out" Matisse or Paperdoll aesthetic, I signify the idea that gender is a construction.

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<sup>52</sup> Jenna McKnight, "Gender Bending Fashion exhibition in Boston challenges notions about clothing" Dezeen. Dezeen Limited, Inc., <https://www.dezeen.com/2019/04/03/gender-bending-fashion-exhibition-museum-of-fine-arts-boston/>.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid





Figure 22: Nicole Melnick, *Venus*, 19 x 12", Garment Constructed from Digital Print on Cotton Canvas, Embellished with Beads and Sequins, 2021.

### 5.7 Utopian Wrap Jacket

By imagining a future world, a queer utopia, through fashion, queer textiles, and colour, I create unique fashion garments symbolic of queer emotion, thought, and evoke utopic sensations. For example, *Utopian Wrap Jacket* represents hope, sanguinity, and future possibility through contrasting colours within my digital textile, evoking a watery blue space, suggesting the queer subconscious. Through the methodology of queer utopianism and futurism, I designed a fashion wrap jacket, which caters to a queer, feminine womenswear customer. The idea of creating a surreal space inspired by the visual merging of ocean, and clouds inspired my *Utopian Wrap Jacket*. By utilizing contrasting colours within my digital textile, I create a point of comparison; the white ground colours make sense of "neutrality" or dystopian perspective in opposition to the vibrant blues, which provide an understanding of the utopian, optimistic outlook. Furthermore, through the use of the methodology of queer utopia, outlined by José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, I evoke feminist power, queer optimism, electric vibrancy, fantasy, possibility, pride, and a sense of queer futurity.



## Chapter 7: Conclusion

In *Imagining a Queer Utopia: A Manifesto*, I present and discuss the methodologies of queer utopia, dreaming, chromophobia, utopia in performance, gaga feminism, queer abstraction, queer threads, queer futurity, kitsch, camp, and pride through painting, textiles, and fashion. I propose utopian spaces of dreaming, subconscious spaces, and the queer body positioned in voids of water in my abstract watery paintings. In my Utopian fashion collection, I create fun and exuberant garments that are expressions of queer pride for a womenswear customer. My collection of garments exemplifies gay pride, as these garments are colourful, bold, and playful. Through my paintings, textiles, and fashion, I claim queer identity through the power of colour, utopia, subversion, and dreaming.

Now, I have awakened *The Phoenix of Dreams* – a mighty *Bluefire Phoenix* rises forth, a creative, free-spirited, intuitive, and fearless bird that embraces its unique spiritual journey and upward creative ascension. Through healing, regeneration, and the identity integration of pain, the Bluefire Phoenix ascends towards its greatness with newfound freedom, abundance, and internal wholeness. *The Phoenix of Dreams* liberates and inspires others through its innate authenticity by embracing its true queer self and living out loud.

*Imagining a Queer Utopia: A Manifesto* is a collection of works that creates a threshold, gateway, or entry point into future possibilities. My MFA Thesis establishes a foundation of research towards a precipice point, through which I plan to set out on my new creative journey and mission to liberate and inspire future generations, by altering the consciousness, and queering the planet through fashion and art.

Now, the spirit of the evolved Bluefire Phoenix stirs awake, bubbling up, flying vigorously forth with strength, shedding the past, and beating fearlessly towards its wild destiny. The Phoenix knows that the possibilities start today, as I create the art of the future, tomorrow.

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Appendix A: MFA Portfolio

MFA Portfolio, Collection of Fashion Garments and Paintings, 2021  
Nicole\_Melnicky\_MFA\_Portfolio.pdf