

SNAKE SWALLOWS SNAKE by Susan Clarahan

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Fig. 1 Susan Clarahan, *Abyssal Braid*, 2022 double exposed 35mm film scan by the artist

ABSTRACT

SNAKE SWALLOWS SNAKE is a research/creation project that deep dives into the representation of women's sexuality from a sapphic and feminist perspective. This research focuses on the power of the erotic in our bodies and how that erotic power is shared by our bodies in relation to the physical world. This research prioritizes an endogenous, pleasurable method shifting the intellectual dominance of 'rational' thought as the sole mode of expression and knowing and poetically drifts with concepts of the dark, void, intimacy, and intersubjectivity;

These theoretical propositions think along with and are inspired by earlier feminist scholarship. Looking towards Audre Lorde's essay *The Uses of the Erotic, Erotic as Power* and adrienne maree brown's *Pleasure Activism*, and feminists Gloria Anzadúla, Chela Sandoval, and Ursula Le Guin, we return pleasure to the centre for building knowledge, personal agency, and collective resistance. We create a space to honour our erotic bodies, resisting patriarchy, phallogentrism, and the imperialist image and imagination.

Keywords: pussy, pleasure, intersubjectivity, feminism, queer politics

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My name is Susan Clarahan; I am from the Rocky Mountains in Treaty 7. Clarahan is an Irish name, and my maternal side is Hungarian. Most of what I know comes from a mountain valley in Canmore, Alberta, the homeland of the Stoney Nakoda, Blackfoot, Tsuut'ina, Kootenai, and Métis Nations. My favourite storytellers/artists from that part of the world are: Peter Morin (Tahltan/French Canadian), Beric Manywounds (Tsuut'ina/Dene, Sauleaux Anishnaabe, Stoney-Nakoda), Veronica Rose Waechter Danes (Gitx̱san/euro-canadian), Richelle Bear Hat (Blackfoot/Cree), Seth Cardinal Dodginhorse (guts'ists'i), and Traves Rider (Rocky Mountain Stoney). I am thankful for the cultural stories that have been shared with me and the protocols of appreciation, respect, and sharing, as well as most certainly, a reciprocal relationship with the natural world. I approach this research with an offering and reverence and to consider the effects downstream, I know I am a small stream in the big river of ideas and stories.

I write these words to you from Tkaronto, the land of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabeg and the Huron-Wendat. Thank you to the holders of the Dish with One Spoon and Treaty 13 partners for allowing me safe passage here today. I want to thank the hawks and the owls of High Park that have guided my perspective during this season, and I want to thank the keepers of this land, who nurture the fires, that nurture the Black Oak Savanna, that nurture the hawks, that nurture me. The cultivated fires enabled and activated growth; these black oak trees relied on the fire brought to them by Indigenous caretakers (Myers 73), but colonization caused the loss of these practices. This research is a poetic witnessing through research/creation and is also an amplification and acknowledgement of the intersubjectivity of fire, trees, and firekeepers.

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INVITATION

Let's drift along on a journey where I must use words for the indescribable, the unsayable. The presentation of this paper involves a sensuous and sensual multi-layered reading, a braiding of images, poems, and academic language, allowing for a weaving between different ways of knowing along an unseen dimension.

There is an opening in the forest where wild beasts lay to bathe in the moonlight.

Tonight, under the void moon, it is only us

The dark moon draws you to the holographic water, to the edge, to drink

The darkness brings safety, we are the nocturnal animals

We lay here, gravity slows

Her touch skin her smell the sounds she makes, wetness touching a threshold, glistening, a breaking point

the river rushes avalanche, overflows fountain press

ultrasonic waves, abyssal puddle undulates, circling out wide and back into each other,

drifting in the wetness, light beams into underwater waterfalls

INTRODUCTION

Below the surface is a good place to start. This work, the writing, and art, have come from the dark.

Sex, desire, queerness, our bodies, women's bodies have been veiled in darkness through religion and patriarchy (Lerner 17). The erasure of representation from a subjugated place and the suppression and oppression of our bodies have created a void in erotic embodiment and empowerment (Lorde 53).

As a resistance to this removal of power, in my research and visual work, I depict our sapphic eroticism and the hidden dimension of pleasure in ways we have been forbidden. I move into a conceptual darkness to represent the subconscious and repressed elements relegated to the hidden, hushed, secret places, as well as a safe space, a void, a receptive element, the abyss (Sandoval 140).

We visit these places in the spirit of transformation (Anzaldúa) to connect with our erotic bodies, erotic power, queerness, sexuality, and pleasure. My work proposes a space to hold this receptive element (Le Guin) as a site of resistance in response to the forced removal of sexual power.

In the dark I make intersubjective (Tallbear "Decolonial Sex...") representations of the body, my body, her body, sacred, erotic, sex. Our bodies become sites of investigation and resistance: sensuality, pleasure, and "the power of the erotic" (Lorde 87).

The materials of clay, film, resin, wax, salt, bronze are extensions of our earthly bodies and sexuality. The language of nature easily becomes abstraction and metaphor. Gushing, scissoring, dripping, fountains, pussy to pussy sex, pussy to mouth, breast, hands - these are radical representations. This is my purposeful representation of what had to go into hiding.

I am reclaiming associations with the serpent as a symbol of women's sexual power, free female sexuality, queer sex snake on snake. The snake travels into the darkness, the underworld, to find the erotic. Two serpents form an infinity loop, wrestling, sliding, with their mouths swallowing each other - the abyssal braid. The serpent represents pleasure for our liberation (brown 19), generating iconography for our sexually autonomous cult baptized in darkness.

PROTOCOLS FOR SNAKE SWALLOWS SNAKE CULT

1. *You are wanted and welcome*
2. We enter the space with an open heart and open mind
3. Stepping into the circle we enter into and co-create a sacred space
4. We create safety for each other
5. We hold space for each other
6. We accept each other
7. Our bodies are important in the space
8. We choose to create this parallel reality together.
9. Breaking bread and lighting incense, we enter into communion
10. We believe in transformation
11. There is a place for you at our table (Starhawk)



Fig. 2 Susan Clarahan, *Paradise*, double exposed colour negative, 2022. 35mm film scan by the artist

BRAID

I approach this MFA research/creation with a visual language. The writing comes through the narrative technique of the braided essay and the intersections of multiple threads and throughlines. Between this opposition of perspectives is what Barthes calls a gentle abyss (Sandoval 140).

The poetic deployment of the braid is a wayfinder through my academic and creative research. Chela Sandoval is my main inspiration for braiding between different ways of knowing and considering multiple subjectivities simultaneously with her “differential consciousness” theory. Sandoval approaches differential consciousness with Derrida's mode of *différance*: the “structure of an interlacing, a weaving, or a web” allows “different threads and different lines of sense or force to separate again, as well as being ready to bind others together”(qtd in Sandoval 152). Multiple ideologies of resistance are dynamically woven to consider and access an intangible place, a void where new perspectives are possible.

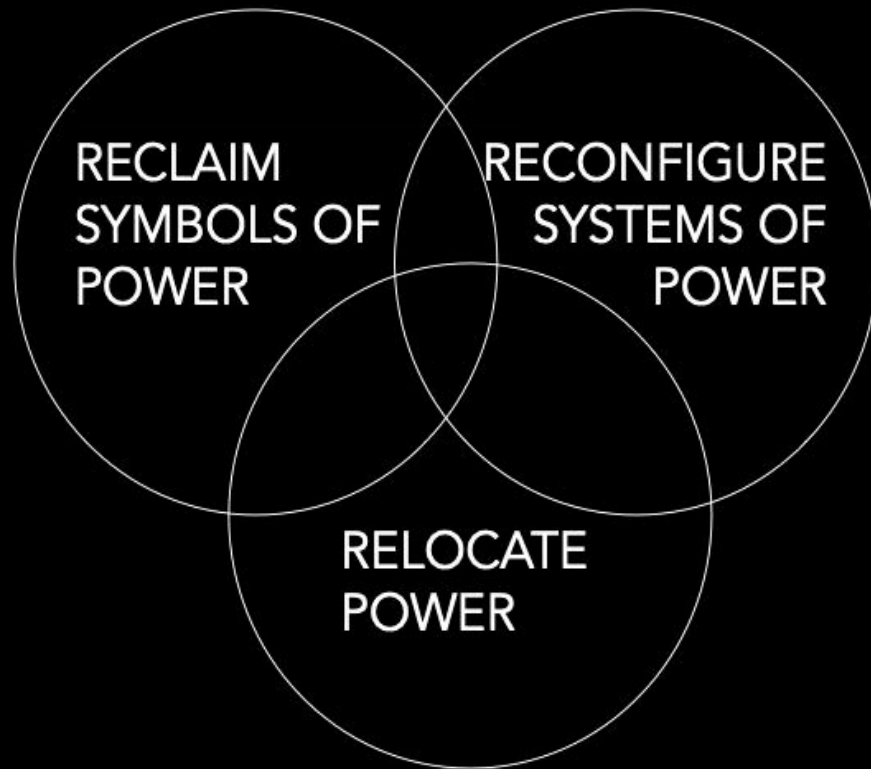
In this stream of braided thinking, I use multiple techniques for this essay: photographs, poetry, and academic writing, braiding multiple ideologies, investigating multiple ways of being and communicating knowledge, like a healthy ecosystem. Sometimes, the threads come together, and sometimes, they pull apart as we can consider the coalitional possibilities (Sandoval 266), which a braiding of ideologies supports. Sandoval writes that differential consciousness is a “new subjectivity, a political revision that denies any one ideology as the final answer, while instead positing a tactical subjectivity with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted” (Sandoval 58).

Thinking alongside an intersectional feminist landscape I employ a feminist citational practice, referencing mostly women’s knowing, and seeing, and experiences of the world in my writing. This research is built on the legacy of theorists who are women who love women - Anzaldúa, Lorde, Rich, brown - with whom I intentionally align my work with reverence. I will also make a note here that when I use the word Women, this includes Trans Women, and the word Pussy includes their bodies. The primary texts I have been thinking with as I have moved through the darkness and my research are Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* chapter on “The Coatlicue State,” and as previously mentioned, Chela Sandoval’s evocation of “differential consciousness”(Sandoval 140), which drifts and thinks along with opposing and alternate perspectives to cross over different ways of knowing. Audre Lorde’s *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* explores the breadth of the potential of the erotic, and how visceral, pleasurable, physical feelings can be used not only for private joy but also for political resistance and the expanded concept of pleasure and its use in revolution in adrienne maree brown’s *Pleasure Activism*. Adrienne Rich’s *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* shares in the feminist positioning of my work and my interest in the undoings of compulsory heteronormativity. Kim Tallbear expands the concept of the erotic beyond sex and articulates the concept of intersubjectivity. Natalie Loveless’ thinking in *How to Make Art at the End of the World* introduced me to research/creation and attending to desire in research. Ursula Le Guin’s *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* evokes a carrier bag for non-linear storytelling to challenge linear hero-based storytelling methodologies. These theorists are braided into this research and creation work.



Fig. 3 Susan Clarahan, *Swallowing each other*, double exposed colour negative 2023. 35mm film scan by the artist

RECONFIGURE/RECLAIM/RELOCATE POWER



This research/creation is braiding and drifting into an unknown abyss: reclaiming symbols of power, reconfiguring systems of power, and relocating power. My work is at the interior intersection of these.

Reconfigure systems of power:

- erotic power
- reclaim and retell our stories,
 - comp het
 - carrier bag
 - paradise

Reclaim symbols of power:

- reclaim symbols from the church
 - sapphic/ wlw representation

Relocate power:

- in the body
 - pleasure methodology
- dissolve hierarchy
 - inter-subjectivity
 - intimacy of material

Fig. 4 Braided Diagram (left).

Below the horizon line, dark under the surface

the inner edge of wetness glides glossy slipping and fitting



Fig. 5 Susan Clarahan, *shimmer fountain*, double exposed colour negative with light leak 2023. 35mm film scan by the artist

RECONFIGURE SYSTEMS OF POWER

DARKNESS

The darkness is a conceptual place that I return to over and over again in this research. In the darkness, I am plunged into emptiness. In “The Coatlicue State,” a chapter in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa travels to a place where the body is arrested in an altered state of consciousness, a place that is dark and unknown. In this chapter, the serpent is Anzaldúa’s familiar and operates as a metaphor to navigate the “underground aspect”(Anzaldúa 42) of the psyche. In the darkness, time moves slowly, and all activity is below the surface. Anzaldúa writes, “by keeping the conscious mind occupied or immobile, the germination work takes place in the deep, dark earth of the unconscious” (Anzaldúa 69). Descending into the subterranean subconscious, with the serpent familiar, “The Coatlicue State” allows for a place to wrestle with unresolved parts of ourselves for transformation. This is where shifts in identity and representation are seeded, and insist on space to emerge.

Anzaldúa’s “The Coatlicue State” shares a sympathetic relationship with the darkness that is reflected in my work. Though I can’t speak to the aspects of a racialized experience in America, I can relate to her experience of the dark feelings coming from a queer experience, her experience with religion, and as a neurodivergent outsider. The darkness is challenging but not negative; as Anzaldúa writes, “the dualism of light/darkness did not arise as a symbolic formula for morality until primordial darkness had been split into light and dark” (Anzaldúa 71). In my work, the snake symbolizes power for women’s sexuality, and there is also a wrestling with the darkness that the snake represents. I am making a connection with the darkness, women's sexuality, and the serpent.



Fig. 6 Susan Clarahan, *Gush Circle*, 2023. 35mm colour negative scan by the artist

EROTIC AS POWER

The first time I heard Audre Lorde's *The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, her voice through my headphones playing on YouTube ("Audre Lorde reads..."). Lorde first establishes how the oppressor will "corrupt or distort various sources of power that can provide energy for change. For women, this has represented the suppression of the erotic"(Lorde 53), and then says, "on the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence."(Lorde 53).

The erotic is about feeling as a form of knowledge and as a source of power in the face of oppression.

Feeling is how the power of the erotic comes into force in the world: "in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, [we allow] that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us" (Lorde 58). From her inspiration, as a site of subversion, I experiment with what representations of this erotic power could look like. I, like many others (brown 24; Hessler 71; Smith et al. 134; Tallbear et al. 6), follow Lorde's lead in looking toward the erotic "as a considered source of our power and information within our lives"(Lorde 53) and embodying the erotic as a means of resistance.

This erotic power is not only meant to be sexual --it extends out into all elements of our lives. Our bodies can be attuned to this heightened sense of feeling that Audre Lorde speaks of-- an expanded field of sexuality and erotic power and an expanded capacity for ecstasy. As a site of subversion, this research expands on women's representation of the erotic. "For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of" (Lorde 57).

This work embodies the power of the erotic as a response to the removal of power, recenters power within each of us, and builds collective power together. Using knowledge formed in darkness, recognized through the erotic, felt through sexuality, and researched through pleasure, a passage is formed beyond patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist narratives.

COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY

Before this MFA and learning through and with this academic language, I knew two other languages. The language of the place I grew up, the river, mountains, bears, glaciers, cougars, osprey, goshawks, calypso orchids, lynx, rainbow trout, herons, forest- and a language I am trying to leave behind of the cult of the catholic church (intentionally uncapitalized and now un-genuflecting to denounce power) and compulsory heterosexuality. Adrienne Rich coined the term “compulsory heterosexuality” [often shortened to comphet] in their text *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. This theory draws attention to the assumption and reinforcement by society that all women are innately, naturally, heterosexual. I first encountered this concept through the queer youtube philosopher Contrapoints, that “heterosexuality is socially required of women, and it is so bound up in the conventional idea of what it even means to be a woman, that gay women often mistakenly believe that they are attracted to men” (“Shame” 22:07-30). This was my experience of comphet, exacerbated by fundamentalist catholicism at home. Inside of this space, sexuality was not a site for knowledge but a force that had to be kept hidden, secret. The queer ecofeminist writer Greta Gaard speaks to religion’s role in stoking a fear of the erotic, an erotophobia “so strong that only one form of sexuality is overtly allowed; only one position; and only in the context of certain legal, religious, and social sanctions” (Gaard 13). I grew up in these two very distinct worlds: the one of magic, an animate loving world, intersubjective intimacy with the more-than-human, and the one of shame and repression in my fundamentalist family and religious community, the one that subsumed my power. This stark contrast generated conflict within myself; I lived through tensions that emerge in my work. I can see the void because of my relationship to it. I can see how powerful it is because so much energy goes into denying and erasing “the power of the erotic” (Lorde 87). In the language that I am unlearning, the christian one, the erotic is so powerful that it has been erased from reference in all of the books (bible) and teachings. Riane Eisler writes in *The Chalice and the Blade*: “If we read the Bible as normative social literature, the absence of the Goddess is the single most important statement about the kind of social order that the men who over many centuries wrote and rewrote this religious document strove to establish and uphold” (Eisler 94).

I hadn't known anything about pussy on pussy sex and queer desire until well into adulthood, when those parts of myself could no longer be repressed. Women loving women was unimaginable for me. Erased. To subvert the influence of the church on my being, I practise apostasy and reclaim and transfigure its symbols throughout my visual and written work. I am reclaiming our stories of paradise, creation.

CARRIER BAG / VOID

“We've heard it, we've all heard about all the sticks, spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained” (LeGuin). In *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, Ursula LeGuin proposes an alternate structure for a work of fiction, a bag. She configures elements inside the bag as a way to “reorganize, reconstitute, retell, recreate world-ings for new possibilities” (Haraway 39). That is the intention of this space, this paper, the exhibition: a container to hold—a receptive element. The patriarchal story of the hero, the strong man main character is dissolved and held in a feminine universe, a view from women's perspective. There is no straight path of the hero's arc, no climax, no crescendo, there is no final destination or goal. Instead, it is “heroically free” (Lispector 10). It is not meant to be exclusive but a point of opposition and expansion to the dominant discourse told from the male point of view. Within this form of non-linear worldbuilding, as a mode of storytelling, we can non-literally write new possibilities, alternative preferred realities. In this work, the carrier bag is a receptacle, an existential site for sapphic stories. A paradigm where power is located in the dark, receptive element - pussy.

We begin with this *carrier bag* in my exhibition, *Parallel Paradise*. This container holds the potential as we transform the form of the gallery into the receptive element. Conceptually, we transform the gallery space into an imagined garden of paradise with iconography of our interiority, intersubjectivity, pleasure. An altar to our bodies, a Parallel Paradise. This allows the concept of paradise to exist within and around us. Layers of the feminine soften as we reconsider the story from this point of view, our own. Imagination, desire, conjure a world into being that sapphics can enter into and see themselves in. We reclaim this story; our creation stories look queer and gushing. In this version we are all main characters; women are the sole owners of their sexual liberty, autonomy, and sovereignty when it comes to their bodies and power.

In my thesis exhibition *Parallel Paradise*, I invite a multiplicity of sensory beings (people), from the (unknown) public, to inhabit the world as receiver, as the site and setting for unknown relational interactions to happen, to weave. Alive with other people, the gallery space becomes populated by many world-makers as they indulge their pleasures and senses around them. The story becomes a multi-layered collective of ideas focusing on tone and atmosphere over logic—a circuitous movement through time in space.

This bag/exhibition/thesis contains all the makings of paradise, intimacy, the body, nature. A relationship between elements, a carrier bag / void set with the iconography of snakes, fountains, trees, pussy. This is our story of the garden of paradise.

RECLAIM SYMBOLS OF POWER

PARADISE

The biblical myth is reclaimed. The garden of paradise theme and the religious references in this work are combined and reconfigured as a method of resistance, challenging the prescribed stories and hierarchies within a space where new relationships can emerge. We resist this myth by rewriting our own. The power of this story is returned to our bodies and to the power of this new story that we share. This story includes our sapphic representation. I invite my queer community to participate in collective meaning-making, together creating a new story and enacting a collective resistance in the form of pleasure.

Our queer bodies are the ones that are present in it. We can alter our relationship to the symbols and the story, we celebrate this important aspect missing from the original story. We insist it is being told with us all there, from all of our complex positions among gushing fountains, glittering crystals, serpents coiled like scissoring legs—pussy to pussy passion.

The Garden of Paradise is atemporal, not sectioned into linear time. Timeless materials of clay and bronze depict queer love and revels in and reveals the fact that queer people have always existed.

From the exhibition text for *Parallel Paradise*:

“We go back to the beginning. For the first 30 000 years of human terrestrial life, God was a woman; we always knew to worship her. At some point along our long history, the patriarchy inserts the biblical narrative where tasting Eve’s fruit sires man’s expulsion from Paradise: The Fall. This incites their dominance over our bodies, our sexuality—women’s fruit, the serpent—cast as the devil, destructive and punishable temptation. Man is our innocent accomplice to whom we owe our Edenic loss, for whom we veil our erotic bodies and to whom our sexualities are owned. The effects of our fabled act justifying our ongoing sexual oppression. We go back, here, and expose the doubleness of meta-history to take our power back. We reclaim atemporal Eden and re-press the clay, this is a parallel paradise, ours. We unravel and reorganize the story patriarchy tells, there has never been a Fall. This place is a Sapphic world, a feminine universe, and here in Paradise we have sexual and erotic autonomy. Our bodies are sites of investigation, sex acts, pussy sex, sensuality, pleasure, the power of the erotic. We hold our power in its intensity; in its generativity and recenter what was stolen from us and used against us to its rightful place within each of us.”

– September 21, 2023



Fig. 7 Susan Clarahan, *Facing North*, exhibition documentation, 2023. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan

Windswept waves undulate

thick slabs of clay

pressing, pushing, rolling tree, clay and tree pressing hollows pussy on pussy sap dripping along edges sparkling, shimmering.

*Velvety, darkness lightning flash fountains mist flowers serpents. Snakes sliding against, together sex acts. Void moon
heavy, smell of forest. Gush puddle to underwater secret caves.*

Lay down in this in-between space.



Fig. 8 Susan Clarahan, exhibition detail, 2023. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan

PARALLEL PARADISE

The installation of *Parallel Paradise* is arranged to evoke a sacred space, an altar, a place of ritual for the veneration of the erotic. The central altar is the exhibition's main focus, a circle surrounded by ritual objects and erotic iconography. Reclaiming the ritual objects of catholics, who stole it from an older world.

A small bronze sphere hangs from a long chain from the tall ceiling. The sphere, the bronze incense burner, the *Touching Tails Ultrasonic Safe Psychic Space Incense Burner* (see Fig. 7), a dark holographic moon, hovers above the water, rippling its reflection in the carpet. The carpet, *Abyssal Puddle* (see Fig. 8), is a gentle invitation to lie down and view the exhibition from this position, surrounded by representations of pleasure. There is a shimmering holographic tactile print on the carpet water, a sign of arousal for women –cum, juices, gushing. It is large enough for two people to lay on, soft, slippery, float in the abyss. Different perspectives and views exist simultaneously.

Hanging above the circular carpet, the sphere incense burner is the most dense object in the room, heavy, made of bronze. The dark moon is the densest mass in the room; it has gravitas. The sphere of bronze calls through infrasonic wavelengths from the touching tails of the luna months on the bottom (see Fig. 11) and the smell of forest we burn resin to denote a sacred ritual. The tails of the Luna moths affect infrasonic wavelength, we touch tails. In this work, they are nearly imperceptible on the bottom of the bronze sphere. You would have to be lying down on the carpet to see them. They are nocturnal animals and represent the darkness. Our familiars, the moth and serpent, also undergo transformation like bronze, like the resin, like ourselves. The bronze undergoes a transformation in fire, like the oak forests, and like the pine resin incense that smells of the forest. This bronze sphere holds the power of smoke and fire. Using bronze denotes sacredness, a material reference to other ritual objects of ceremony. There is weight to the sphere although it fits in the palm of your hand. Opening the sphere reveals its ceremonial purpose, with a delicate grate and hollow centre to burn incense. The *Touching Tails Ultrasonic Safe Psychic Space Incense Burner* reclaims the censor from the christian lexicon. They reverberate at the edges of sight, sound and smell. We light fires in our sacred space. We fill it with smoke and the smoke fills us. Aromatic smoke draws on subconscious visceral responses and reflects our intimacy with the world, is erotic, and connects us with our deep somatic appetites(Strand). Aromatic smoke delineates the space separate from linear time; the resin tumbles over and drips onto the forest floor leaving our mark with fire in the darkness.

At the edge of the carpet is a pair of bronze patens *Eat of my body*. The paten is the sacramental object for offering the body, used by the catholics. We serve each other fruit on these patens, offering each other the body, fruit, pussy. Carved into the bottom is the emblem of the Snake Swallow Snake Cult (see Fig. 9). When the patens are in their ritual position, the snakes are pressed against the darkness of the earth. When they are lifted to serve each other, there is a brief coming to light. When the two patens are stored, they fit into each other. Two bodies of the same shape fit together.

A series of film photographs and ceramic altars encircle the altar. The *Snake Swallows Snake* photo series (see Fig. 1, 2, 3, 12, 16) and the *Held Up by the G-Spot Fountain* photo series (see Fig. 5, 6, 15, 24, 25), displayed as triptychs. Iconographic screens surround the altar in a layout we recognize as sacred. Velvety photographs speak to an ongoing transformation that takes place in darkness. Six large format photographic prints layer nighttime trees in bloom, sapphic bukake fountains making mist in the thunder and lighting rain, serpents sliding along the edges of darkness and each other.

A continuous circle of clay sculptures surrounds us in the space, arranged in pairs along the edges of the void. The clay pieces undulate in waves, clay reliefs of oak bark, clay to tree, pussy to pussy, layered together in rhythmic pairs, split enfolded. We depict this sex act with two pieces of clay touching each other, drawing on the clay's association with the body. The clay and tree press into each other and hallow pussy on pussy; pine resin drips down along the edges of the sculpture like the sap running down a tree. Dripping, shimmery, rushing, gushing. These reliefs are glazed in misty layers of blues and greens, the iridescent glaze creates a surface effect of shimmering holographic serpent skin. The glaze is mid-fired to highlight the earthly shimmering aliveness of the clay.

The ritual begins with breaking bread, sharing our bodies, and eating fruit together. Our presence in the space and eating the fruit invites participation in the work. Candied, dried, and fresh fruit arranged in collaboration with artist Sid Starkman creates a luscious wet element, referring to the act of cunnilingus on pussy, colloquially known as 'fruit'--or for a christian-raised queer, 'forbidden fruit.' A subtle invitation for participation, we eat together, contemplating what eating fruit could mean.

Competing ideologies of religious iconography and explicit erotic sexual representation press against a threshold of representation. Cycling through symbols from previous worlds, the christian stories are obfuscated by the void; no longer the dominant narrative, the symbols release their previous meanings and represent something new.

Using structures and strategies from religion to generate a place of transformation and ritual in the group: eating together, drinking together, gathering in a circle, burning incense; we evoke these strategies to build a sense of connection. With a hedonistic attention to pleasures of the senses, we invite a collective nervous system response. When a community comes together and feels a loss of individuality and sense of unity with the group, this is what Victor Turner calls "communitas." The exhibit is an invitation for collective effervescence (Durkheim) between our attuned nervous systems as we drift into the safe space of the abyss.

The titles of the elements evoke visions of queer pleasure and sex acts, which invite the erotic imagination:

Abyssal Braid,

Abyssal Puddle

Crystal Fountain with Flowers

Eat the Fruit,

Gush Circle,

Held Up by the G-Spot Fountain,

Paradise,

Pussy to Pussy,

Snake Swallows Snake,

Serpent Cult Patens,

shimmer fountain,

Swallowing each other,

Touching Tails Ultrasonic Safe Psychic Space Incense Burner

GLOSSARY OF SYMBOLS

Clay

Robin Tieu taught me that clay is alive. It is affected by the force and touch that goes into it, and it records it all.

Clay's association with the body has existed throughout time. Sensual earth, fingers in the earth, touching, intimacy, wetness, wanting to be touched. The Earth element on the altar.

Flowers

Association with blooming pussy directly, direct metaphor and representation of arousal, softness, wetness, smell.

Fountains / Puddle

A sign of arousal for women. Women's association with this element, the earth's waters, oceans, rain rivers, how our bodies hold parallels, cum, juices, gushing. Floating in the abyss. The water element on the altar.

Fruit

Pussy, eat the pussy in the garden.

Moon

Darkness, void, mystery

Moths

Luna Moths can see ultraviolet light and affect ultrasonic sounds with their tail. They are nocturnal animals. The air element of the altar.

Serpents

Our symbols in the sapphic cult are two snakes gliding along and swallowing each other. The snake travels into the darkness, the underworld, to find the erotic. The symbol for women's sexual power, free female sexuality.

Tree

Pagan tree, sacred groves, Irish/pagan association with the tree of life, the tree of knowledge, here in our story, the knowledge comes from the power of the erotic, pussy, pussy to pussy.



Fig. 9 Susan Clarahan, *Serpent Cult Patens*, bronze, 2022. Digital photograph by the artist



Fig. 10 Susan Claraham *Pussy to Pussy* series, low-fired clay, oak relief, 2023. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan



Fig. 11 Susan Clarahan, *Touching Tails Ultrasonic Safe Psychic Space Incense Burner*, exhibition documentation, 2023. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan

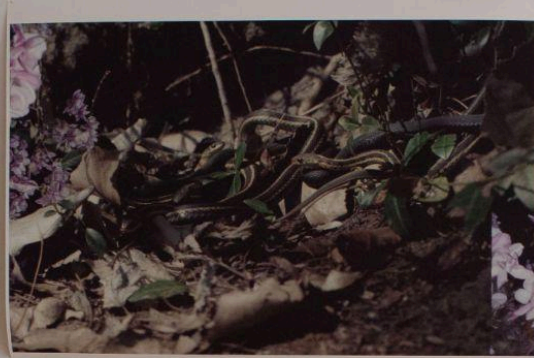


Fig. 12 Susan Claraham *Snake Swallows Snake series*, exhibition detail, 2023 Digital photograph by Natalie Logan



Fig. 13 Susan Clarahán, *Eat the Fruit*, candied, dried and fresh fruit collaboration with Sid Starkman, 2023. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan



Fig. 14 Susan Clarahan, *Collective Effervescence*, exhibition documentation, 2023. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan



Fig. 15 Susan Clarahan, *Facing North*, exhibition documentation, 2023. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan



Fig. 16 Susan Clarahan, *Facing South*, exhibition documentation, 2023. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan



Fig. 17 Susan Clarahan, *Facing South*, exhibition documentation, 2023. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan



Fig. 18 Susan Clarahan, *Facing West*, exhibition documentation 2023. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan



Fig. 19 Susan Clarahan, *Facing West*, exhibition documentation, 2023. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan

RELOCATE POWER / THE BODY

PLEASURE METHODOLOGY

This research uses research/ creation and pleasure as methodology inspired by Natalie Loveless and adrienne maree brown. brown developed a pleasure-based strategy for activism, described in the book *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. For brown, pleasure is revolutionary and holds possibilities of being with others in liberatory ways ("Transcript: ADRIENNE"). brown employs pleasure to resist the oppressive influences of religion, hetero-patriarchy, and capitalism, revealing the false narratives that benefit oppressors and the power of pleasure to subvert these narratives. Following Lorde, brown "explores nonbiological feminine erotic power, which [they] believe all bodies can tap into," and they "have seen, over and over, the connection between tuning into what brings aliveness into our systems and being able to access personal, relational and communal power" (brown, 19). The pleasure methodology of my research thinks alongside adrienne maree brown, who was also inspired by Audre Lorde's thinking on the erotic.

My pleasure-centred framework employs various strategies. I used pleasurable materials, which triggered the sensory aspects of eroticism: pleasure in imagining, creation, making, and sharing. Part of this pleasure methodology takes pleasure in the body. Hedonism opposes Platonian intellectualism (Onfray), which aligns with the christian worldview of denying the body pleasure now in exchange for the promise of heaven. The christian worldview wants us to wait for an abstract concept in the sky rather than experience the embodied now.

In contrast, hedonism returns the source of knowledge to the body and to the pleasures of the senses. My work weaves in hedonism, wherein the body is valued as a source of knowledge, an endogenous way of knowing. These experiences of knowing in the body are guided by pleasure. This is a resistance to an over-intellectualization of knowledge in academia and in the lineages of Plato (Onfray), Christianity, and Patriarchy.

Pleasure methodology allowed me to approach the research from a bodily and sensory-focused approach (rather than intellectual or ideological). Focusing on the pleasures of materials and the body allowed me to connect bodily with the process. Pleasure methodology allowed my body to be present in the work and for there to be erotics in the process, not only in representation in the final work. It allowed for space for pleasure to permeate all aspects of the work. The materials and subject matter were catalysts for arousing and erotic effects. These materials allow for intimacy in the imagination because they are stand-ins for the body, enabling you to look closely at it and contemplate its meaning.



Fig. 20 Susan Clarahan, *Pussy to Pussy* series, low-fired clay, oak relief, 2023. Digital photograph by artist

INTIMACY OF MATERIALS

Prompted by a suggestion from one of my professors, I omitted direct representation of the female form. Reflecting in this way allowed me to build a different relationship between myself and the materials, symbols, and, ultimately, the production of the work. By doing so, the work reads less literally and instead allows for a plurality of readings. This plurality opens to layers of how to locate the work within our own body through arousal and imagination. Using metaphor instead of directly depicting the body circumnavigates the male gaze and allows for the interpretive imagination. It allows for representation of feelings rather than how the body looks. Imaginative or abstract representation also creates an element of safety for viewers, who the directness of the nude figure may trigger. When it's not represented directly but rather indirectly using abstraction and metaphor, we have permission to imagine it. It is gentle instead of confrontational. It opens up viewers to the ideas in the piece represented in the titles.

In investigating our interiority, we are subjects—inter-subjective, subject to subject—instead of objects. In exploring our interiority, we create a story, a perspective about our bodies from interior experience and feelings. It is personal and intimate for every person; each person individually fills in the details.

Conveying the erotic feminine without traditional representation with the female nude circumnavigates an aspect of the hegemonic patriarchal representation of women and our erotic bodies. Without using patriarchal traditions of objectification that rely on the subject-object divide, such as the nude figure or religious prescriptions, subjectivity depicts the feeling rather than objectifying the body.

There are a variety of means for creating intimacy and an intimate relationship between material and subjects during the making process, visible in the final artwork. Touch and relationship-building threads through all the media I have engaged with during my research and has been a central focus and method of understanding material engagement, and it has been my strategy for intimacy. Both creating and viewing the work brings in the body, touching, and intimacy. The practices and processes of photography, bronze casting, and clay, are tactile and sensual. Developing film negatives involves a process of bathing in the dark, wet under a moonless, starless sky.

These materials and processes are sexual, sensual and erogenous, and they undergo transformation. Clay, resin and wax are malleable with the fingers. As I worked the clay, I imprinted my skin against the clay and could feel and touch the imprint afterwards, the imprint of skin-to-skin visible along the surfaces. The process for bronze begins with warm liquid wax, then flows out to be replaced with a golden molten liquid metal, fiery hot like the passion of love that holds fast to its final shape. Salt, sticks, hair and soil come from the earth, and are extensions of ourselves. Wetness relates to the body - the evocative sensuous nature of wetness between our legs as a revolutionary feminist stance - and bridges the human and earthly worlds. The Earth here is shown as an extension of the self. These sensory aspects of the materials invite the viewer to bring their own bodies in closer: closer to the work and to each other.

EROTIC ECOLOGY / INTERSUBJECTIVITY

I acknowledge the romance of reciprocal relationship between myself and the more-than-human.

The clay presses into the tree, and the tree speaks back to the clay. There is a two-way relationship between tree and clay.

The idea of intimate relation with the more-than-human world is not new. It has been a way of knowing and being of Indigenous worldviews like the Dakota peoples near where I am from. In an episode of the podcast *For the Wild* (Young), Kim Tallbear shares her Dakota perspective on intersubjectivity, a two-way relationship with humans and more-than-humans built into the Dakota language. She speaks about the non-hierarchical relationship between humans and nature. I see it also in the pagan worlds of Ireland, although that topic is beyond this project's scope. It is a form of knowledge the settler colonial project seeks to erase.

I investigate these intersubjective relationships with metaphors for multidirectional communication. I explore repositioning power between subjects, and I delink relationships from hierarchy; each person, tree, clay, is a subject. This creates an opportunity to dissolve the hierarchy of the subject-object male gaze. When we are communicating subject to subject, that hierarchy is diffused. Intersubjectivity, with intimacy of materials, has allowed for the intimacy of people.



Fig. 21 Susan Clarahan *Pussy to Pussy* series, low-fired clay, oak relief, 2023. Digital photograph by artist

RECEPTIVITY OF CLAY

In making the ceramics series *Pussy on Pussy* I would roll out a palm-sized sphere of clay on the studio table and stretch it open into a thin, delicate disk. With great care, I would bring the slab to the oak tree outside, and press the wet, soft clay into the valleys and folds of the bark, imbuing the stretched clay with the relief of the tree, pressing the clay into the tree and the tree into the clay.

Back in the studio, I would fold the clay into undulating shapes, thinking about windswept mountain ridges and the edges of my lover. In this work, the earthly more-than-human subjects are my lovers; we cultivate an intimate relationship.

Robin Tieu taught me that clay records the energy that you put into it. It would record the tree and the intention of the pleasurable process and intimate relationship we would develop over time.

On a hot restless night in the summertime, I dreamt of looking up at this tree, full of dappled light and layers of leaves, the branches and bark shimmering with droplets of shiny sap. As I pressed my bottom lip against the tree and extended my tongue into the bark, splashy shimmery sap gushed down the tree into my mouth.



Fig. 22 Susan Clarahan, Pussy to Pussy series, low-fired clay, oak relief, 2023. Digital photograph by the artist



Fig. 23 Susan Clarahan *Pussy to Pussy* series, low-fired clay, oak relief, wax, resin, stick with lichen, 2022. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan



Fig. 24 Susan Clarahan, *Held Up by the G-Spot Fountain series*, inkjet colour prints, 2023. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan

RECIPROCITY / MULTIPLE ORGASMS

The exposure is a decisive moment analogous to orgasm. Multiple exposures are analogous to multiple orgasms. In the *Snake Swallows Snake* photo series (see Fig. 1, 2, 3, 12, 16) and *Held Up by the G-Spot Fountain* photo series (see Fig. 5, 6, 7, 15, 24, 25), film photos explore the concept of reciprocity in multiple exposures.

In the dark of night, while the flowers bloom in the trees of High Park, I shine a burst of expanded energy; a flash, which collects the contrast of the flowers with the darkness on a small piece of emulsion. I rewind the frame and when I open the shutter again, the film adjusts to make one shared image with two different perspectives, like when the river widens as two meet. The 35mm film emulsion undergoes a process of reciprocity, where the exposure is made in relationship to two different views, and sometimes more—another perspective on top of this one. While the springtime flowers bloom the hibernaculum of garter snakes awaken along the bank of Ward's Beach with their queer pheromone-driven ritual. I layer this onto the same small piece of emulsion, and the two perspectives are joined.

These photos speak to an ongoing transformation of women's sexuality that takes place in the darkness.

My practice in analogue photography takes a feminine approach. I do not emphasize focus, clarity, containment, order, or "proper" exposure—it is my intentional decision to challenge this medium that is focused on the "correct" technique.



Fig. 25 Susan Clarahan, *Crystal Fountain with Flowers*, 2023 double exposed with light leak colour negative 35mm film scan by the artist

CONTEMPORARIES

Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski's drawing *Against All Origins* features four women, a line of starry caribou circling the sun, flames, clouds, and rainbows. Two large femme women frame the image with third nipples that shoot iridescent rays. Two other women lounge in the distance, being pleased by unknown forces with gushes of pleasure streaming from their pussies. Symbols like knives, clubs, bones, and teeth are on the edges. Moleski describes the drawing as a map, the two large women as guardians, and the objects at the edges as "candy-coloured ritualistic tools and objects of protection" (Moleski, "Against All Origins"). These are recurring motifs that point to Moleski's development of a queer femme visual vernacular.

Moleski writes that her practice comes from a "metaphysical hunger to uplift my communities in our collective psyche and complicate the visual culture that keeps us handcuffed to the past" and that her work documents worldbuilding (Moleski, "Against All Origins"). Her work is a visual language paying attention to the spaces in-between categories and revering those who know the trouble and pleasure there. Her non-linear symbols allow her to visually describe what we don't yet have language for. This has informed my approach to building a visual vocabulary for my art practice, as well as empowering the use of the word 'pussy'.

The exhibition publication for *Even There, There Are Stars...* curated by Allie/A.L. Richard, includes a conversation between Moleski and artist Chitra Ganesh. The title comes from a Ursula LeGuin novel. Moleski talks about her interest in the influence of origin stories on how people build community and go about their lives. She asks, "what would our lives and our livelihoods be like if we had inherited a different genesis, a femme genesis of humanity?" This question is connected to my approach to reimagining a world without patriarchy and the process of building a world that is safe and welcoming for queer people.

CONCLUSION

“It is only then that her conscious expands a tiny notch, another rattle appears on the rattlesnake tail and the added growth slightly alters the sounds she makes.”
(Anzaldúa 71).

The approach of this paper and work connects with navigating darkness, a structure of recursion translating a series of ‘coming to lights,’ renewal through the almost in-reach climax of understanding or knowing, a crest, and then down below the wave.

Representation is a liberatory practice.
Representation is power.

Depicting intimate experiences and intimate materials creates space for people to be intimate with each other. It is a permission slip for arousal, a space where you can explore that side of yourself and see the value in pleasure. It is not cognitive or logical but based on the felt sense of the body and in power in the body.

Together, we build a worldview that is on the path to sexual liberation. This moment, all together, contributes to writing ourselves into the story, the archive, and history. It challenges the imperialist story and carves out a place for other ways of knowing, a space for the erotic, made by us. This project contributes to sapphic representation and creates a slice of temporary queer space with intimacy and intersubjectivity.

Since completing the exhibition, I will continue to consider what *power is* instead of focusing on who took away the power. I will continue to move beyond a simplistic opposition to patriarchy and religion. The inspiration from the 3rd World US Feminists will stay with me forever. I will carry themes of differential consciousness, a poetic tradition, the void, darkness, metaphor, interpretive imagination, intersubjectivity, and collective effervescence in my satchel of theory as I continue my research and creation practice beyond this paper.

I hope this *parallel paradise* will linger.



Fig. 26 Susan Clarahan, *View from the Abyssal Puddle*, exhibition documentation, 2023. Digital photograph by Natalie Logan

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