



# External Space



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Dylan Glynn

## **My Build, My Bills**

August 4 - September 3, 2020

A pair of hands shuffles a stack of green dollar bills on a seamless animated loop. Each frame of the animation is hand-painted softly in watercolour using a warm fleshy palette, creating a tender feel. Rather than images of monetary symbols one might expect to find on currency, we see bills that depict solo shots of lightly erotic, robust male figures, naked aside from their white underwear. They have black hair and their painted skin tones fluctuate between paler complexions and more ochre pigments – and the artist’s statement identifies these figures as Asian. The men are posing in ways which frame a different “sexy” body part. Bare asses, crotches, big chests, armpits, a few of the bills even feature them taking selfies. These pictures recall shots you might see on dating apps like Tinder, or more likely, the hookup app Grindr, where queer men post photos showing off their physique to an invisible audience. However the painterly rendering of these men, relaxed and gentle, relates comfort, rather than vanity.

In the post-Gay liberation world of the 1970s, emphasis on hypermasculine traits began to rapidly formalize in the media (mostly porn) targeting White American gay

culture<sup>1</sup>. While fashion has changed over time, the signs of masculine virility – big muscles, thick facial hair, and a dick which is ideally both – remains a default standard of beauty which a large portion of North American gay men gravitate towards. With the establishment of these aesthetic conventions, a culture around objectification and body dysmorphia has become hyper-focused and encouraged. And by extension, that attaining an idealised, masculine body allows the most privilege, in gay cisgendered male spaces. In this dynamic, physical attractiveness becomes currency for acceptance and appreciation. Dylan Glynn’s animation *My Build, My Bills* makes allusion to this premise. Setting a direct visual metaphor that feels lighthearted but critical in its observation of a simple, yet deeply intersectional subject.

The images of men Glynn re-imagines as money feel familiar to the shots you might see on hookup apps. As these ‘sexy selfies’ get shuffled for an almost obsessive duration, the manly bodies become repetitive patterns that seem to hypnotize. This combination of selfies and a scrolling gaze, calls to mind how we engage on social-networking apps. Particularly Grindr, which is popularly known as a method for arranging hookups and is targeted towards gay, bi, trans and queer individuals. Users create profiles where they post photos of themselves, detail their sexual preferences and are then placed in a cascade of profile images based on location proximity. Such digital spaces offer readily available, nonheterosexual worlds which make them the easiest way for queer people to meet. While they allow for new forms of self-representation, they are also structured as highly visual environments where users compete to establish status and connections with others.<sup>2</sup> With Grindr in particular, identity becomes reduced to profile images within a hypersexual sphere. One that encourages users to make quick judgments and exaggerated forms of self presentation. In such a space, the

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<sup>1</sup> Kittiwut Jod Taywaditep, “Marginalization Among the Marginalized,” *Journal of Homosexuality*, 42, no. 1, (2002): 9

<sup>2</sup> Christopher T. Conner, “The Gay Gayze: Expressions of Inequality on Grindr,” *The Sociological Quarterly*, 60, no. 3, (2019), 402

hypermasculine standards of beauty gay men set for themselves play a larger role in choosing who to interact with. So as Glynn's work illustrates, a 'masc'<sup>3</sup> body (presented via selfies) can metaphorically work as a kind of currency. A measure to potentially help gain connections and appreciation amongst other gay men. On the flipside however, it also forms a basis for both objectifying and excluding those who do not (or cannot) fit these standards.<sup>4</sup> Alongside encouraging a culture of body shaming and femmophobic attitudes, as individuals feel pressure to conform to masculinity in order to gain acceptance. That said, it would be wrong to place the blame for this squarely on Grindr. Technology is often just a catalyst for inequities already present in a community<sup>5</sup>. As such, a structure of social currency is indicative of broader issues within gay culture.

Through the playful, handmade qualities of his animation, Glynn avoids the angst that could easily become associated with this topic. And this refreshingly candid approach is very useful in how it allows Glynn to open another difficult subject. Namely, how objectification and social capital are intrinsically linked to racialized experiences in the gay community. The artist's choice to render Asian men as seductive figures is a frisky defiance of their historic desexualisation in North America – especially within a White-dominated gay culture. Stereotypes around Asian men tend to portray them as nerdy, passive or emasculated. Unlike Asian women who experienced being fetishized by the colonial gaze, Asian men have been desexualised over time through historic forms of exclusion. For example, in the early 20th century, anti-Chinese immigration laws isolated male populations of workers who had come to North America as laborers. Separated from their spouses, these 'bachelor societies', with their excess of Asian men, were mocked as

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<sup>3</sup> Slang term for a stereotypical and idealised masculine body

<sup>4</sup> MacCallum, Fiona and Heather Widdows, "Altered Images: Understanding the Influence of Unrealistic Beauty Images and Aspirations", *Health Care Analysis*, 26 no. 3, 235–45 (2016). Quoted in Christopher T. Conner, "The Gay Gayze: Expressions of Inequality on Grindr," 401

<sup>5</sup> Christopher T. Conner, "The Gay Gayze: Expressions of Inequality on Grindr," 413

effeminate as they were viewed as having few interactions with women<sup>6</sup>. A perception that grew stronger when these men were eventually forced to work in industries traditionally associated with women (laundries, cooks, domestic service, etc.).<sup>7</sup> These attitudes were rooted in misogynistic notions about the perceived inferiority of women in comparison to men, at the time. By labeling these male Asian immigrants as ‘womanly’, it put them into a pseudo-gendered binary relationship where they could be seen as inferior to White American masculinity.

This desexualisation has also been further echoed in the media. In his seminal essay *Looking For My Penis*, video artist and cultural critic Richard Fung examined the absence of Asian men in gay pornography and wider media. Written in the 90s, he noted that Asian male characters in cinema were often consigned to stereotypes such as ‘brainy wimps’ or ‘martial arts ascetics’.<sup>8</sup> Both desexualised tropes who were rarely portrayed as individuals capable of feeling desire for another. This denial of sexual subjecthood led to an absence particularly felt in gay porn, as Fung stated “if Asian men have no sexuality, how can we have homosexuality?”<sup>9</sup>

Intriguingly, rather than focusing solely on counter-representation, Dylan Glynn’s *My Build, My Bills* clarifies the reality of social objectification in the gay community. As well as the contradictions and intersections that gay men (particularly racialised ones) find themselves shuffling. On one hand, the artist seems critically aware of how his painted, racialised figures participate in a system that rewards masculine bodies with acceptance. But despite this, it feels as if there’s a sense of empathy for their struggles

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<sup>6</sup> John Lung, *Chinese Laundries: Tickets to Survival on Gold Mountain* (Yin & Yang press, 2007). Quoted in “Analysis,” Chinese Laundry Services Victoria, University of Victoria, <https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/mappinghistory/about/>.

<sup>7</sup> John Lung, *Chinese Laundries: Tickets to Survival on Gold Mountain*

<sup>8</sup> Richard Fung, *Centre the Margins* (1991), 1991, <http://www.richardfung.ca/index.php/?articles/centre-the-margins-1991/>

<sup>9</sup> Richard Fung, *Looking For My Penis* (1991), 1991, <http://www.richardfung.ca/index.php/?articles/looking-for-my-penis-1991/>

that moves them beyond feeling superficial. Glynn's cheerful painterly touch is key to this. He gives a friendliness to the bit of eroticism the figures have. Something that helps them avoid coming off narcissistic and objectified – instead feeling gentle, approachable and at ease with themselves. This sensitivity for the figures is perhaps reflective of the artist's own insight into the "inner scrutiny and sexual discounting Asian men face in a community obsessed with appearance and sexual capital."<sup>10</sup> Glynn is able to give us a frank but charming observation of this reality and its deeply embedded complications. And does so without imparting too much judgement for the anonymous shuffler who is forever counting their bills with both tenderness and obsession.

- Ron Siu

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<sup>10</sup> From correspondence with the artist