



Main Space

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behind the curtain cultivated by Morgan Sears-Williams

Maddie Alexander, Dana Buzzee, Faith Alexandra Marie, Adrienne Huard,
Wren Tian-Morris, and B.G-Osborne
November 20th – December 19th, 2020

In November 2019, I was en route to Calgary to install *Femme4Femme*, a collaborative exhibition with Maddie Alexander, in a local downtown library. We were excited to have our work publicly accessible in a conservative city and were thinking of the young queer and trans folks who would be able to view our work. We hoped that young queer and trans folks would be able to see themselves through our work, and to be able to offer a space where they would feel validated, supported and acknowledged. During the installation, in a short conversation with a senior library staff member, I was told that in order to continue with the exhibition we would be asked to remove parts of the show —in particular, the parts that referenced safer sex practices between queer people. While explaining that the exhibition came as a whole — and that they had access to all the materials months beforehand — we stated that we were unwilling to compromise our artistic integrity by removing parts of our exhibition. This conversation ended with us pulling the exhibition from the library and finding another venue.

behind the curtain is an exhibition that seeks to create an exchange about these experiences that happen often within institutional spaces, where works that are deemed “obscene” are pushed behind a curtain or removed altogether rather than allowing a potentially difficult dialogue to occur. The artists in this exhibition interrogate their own feelings regarding censorship from organizations or institutions, while also unpacking instances of their own self censorship.

Maddie Alexander’s work is an act of intentional practice working through personal and embodied experiences. They are able to weave small moments — moments of solitude, exasperation, deep love and joy — and put them into objects that speak to me as a queer person. Acknowledging the shame and hurt that can come with their queer lived experience(s), their work is a celebration — a mirror held up to you, in a way that validates and provides a warm embrace.

In their video work, *untitled*, presents safer sex materials acts as a form of education and as a recognition of queer sex educators. *untitled* is presenting queer sex, that is seen as ‘outsider’ material — as something so normal. The safer sex materials and explanation of different tools and techniques for queer and trans sex is a nod to past queer and trans safe sex activists - such as ACT UP - , and is also a method of continuing the practice of intergenerational knowledge sharing to queer and trans youth.

1978//2019, another work by Maddie Alexander, references three books that were seized in passage to Halifax’s leftist bookstore Red Herring Cooperative Books.¹

¹ In 1978 Canada Customs seized a shipment from Diana press, a local lesbian feminist publishing house in California, that were on their way to Halifax’s leftist bookstore Red Herring Cooperative Books. The title of the three books seized were Lesbian Lives; Lesbian Home Journal, The Lavender Herring, and The Ladder. When Red Herring Cooperative member Denise Roberge asked the customs officer “you mean to tell me that books on lesbians aren’t allowed into the country?” he replied “Yes, that is exactly what I mean to tell you.” (Before the Parade by Rebecca Rose, page 57)

Both in response to our experience in Calgary, and to ongoing censorship of queer and trans literature, Maddie has coated the books in lavender paint — a colour signifying queer resistance — and included a cut-out storage place within where safer sex items are held. Historically, the colour lavender has been used by queer folks to signal their queerness discreetly and has been used by heteronormative society to fuel discrimination and oppression. Most notably Betty Friedan, President of the National Organization for Women, labelled their lesbian readership a “Lavender Menace” insinuating that lesbians would threaten the feminist movement which was met with a reclaiming of ‘lavender’ by queer activists.

If Every #Trans Had a Diary transports us into a pixelated, black and white world through the use of a PXL-2000 camera -- a toy camcorder from 1987 which records to cassette. Wren Tian-Morris’ work explores relationships between pleasure and the body as a trans, non-binary person of colour navigating the world of (online) sex work. In these intimate vignettes, we see a hitachi magic wand, a playful bitten lip, and the artist's hands caressing their body. While this work is seen as a personal exploration by the artist, there is also an element of healing and affirmation in their performance. Through the 8 minute video work, the artist is the only one present and active within the frame, centering their own pleasure as a queer and trans person of colour. Often looking at the lens as they put on latex gloves, apply lube to a dildo, wear a leather face mask, or jerk off. There is a playful nature in how Wren touches their body that teases the audience and dares us to be turned on.

A circular ‘peephole’ - resembling an eye, watching - is layered on the video work on a self-directed course, allowing the audience limited access where the concealed sections of the frame are left to our imagination. The self-directed peephole allows focus on the pixelated details of the work and demands more consideration to Wren’s intentions through their movement. *If Every #Trans Had a Diary* makes us question, as an audience, what our own preconceived ideas of what belongs in private spaces and what

is allowed in public spaces. In particular when it comes to queer and trans desire, and how often historically and in contemporary culture, queer people have been characterized as deviant or obscene for expressing or speaking about desire in public spaces.

behind the curtain offers several video works in which the artists use their body to present, acknowledge, or question what is in front of them and the anticipation of their audience. In each of these works, Maddie Alexander, B.G-Osborne and Wren Tian-Morris are striking with their active participation: they remain in control of how they present themselves to us. In both the letting in and the refusal — what we are allowed to see and what we are not — the works do not exist without our participation as viewers.

“1994. Fell off small bridge in my backyard while gathering flowers, fell face first into a log. Received 16 stitches inside of lip and mouth.”

B.G-Osborne narrates, and a photograph flashes, imprinting a lingering image in your eye of a small child looking at the camera. Osborne’s work, *Trans Body with Scars*, is an homage to Lisa Steele’s *Birthday Suit With Scars and Defects* (1974) through a trans butch lens. In this video, Osborne unpacks a selection of scars and their respective origins, in presumed chronological order. After each scar is presented, an image appears for a fraction of a second. Osborne allows the audience brief access to the photographs, while refusing to provide full entry. This refusal asserts the artists agency over their performance of their body and the presentation of their memories.

Thinking through how trans bodies are often examined to the point of dehumanization by mainstream cisgender and heteronormative society, Osborne maintains control over their childhood photographs and does not allow that process of examination to begin. Only the artist is granted full access to these images, their examination, and their meaning. *Trans Body with Scars*, in the context of this exhibition, is a work that signifies refusal and measured access. Beck’s work allows ambiguity in

their recollections, and an entry point for queer and trans viewers to understand how their refusal provides them a sense of agency over their memories and image.

As Dana Buzzee has said to me before, her work is often *soft* censored— that is, gentle suggestions to hide her work from view, hang a curtain, or include signs explaining it is for a mature audience. These are suggestions that are made discreetly, involving her participation in censoring her own work. Dana Buzzee's work *High Visibility* acts as a physical anchor for the video work, one that holds it together symbolically through a web design, and one that presents a deconstructed harness material, imagery similarly referenced in both Wren Tian-Morris and Maddie Alexander's work. In the gallery, the web hangs from a large pillar to the adjacent wall, measuring 8.5' long, obstructing the way in which audience members enter and navigate their path through the exhibition. *High Visibility* creates a physical form in which suggests a curtain or wall, something that obscures, yet is constructed of clear plastic vinyl. There is a humour that Dana is hinting at with her title *High Visibility* and calling on her experiences of curators suggesting to hide her work from view.

The physical labour involved in the construction of the web cannot go unnoticed. The work is ambiguous and non-representational, while speaking to queer sex and BDSM through material and construction. The materials honour fetish such as latex, rubber, leather and vinyl and long for sweaty bodies that can turn this object into an activation of queer desire. *Highly Visible*, and Buzzee's studio outcomes in general, actively resist pandering to heteronormative sensibilities. In self-aware and pro-active obscenity, they focus deviant desires as a source of resistance to the hegemonic force of heteronormative sensibilities, centering and mirroring queer pleasure.

While at times *behind the curtain* feels as a response - to larger oppressive structures that can feel out of our control - it is also an offering to honour queer and trans makers, desires and embodied experiences. Maddie Alexander, Wren Tian-Morris,

Dana Buzzee and B.G-Osborne all use dynamic entry points materially and conceptually, providing an understanding of the overt and covert censorship of 2SLGBTQIA+ artists. Calling on historical, contemporary as well as visceral lived experiences, the exhibition exudes an intentional, experimental and deeply personal atmosphere. *behind the curtain* is an experiment, stemmed from my personal experience, but one that has brought me to a grounding place. *behind the curtain* is the colour lavender, it is unapologetically queer desire and self determination, it is beyond belonging, enfolding us into an embrace.

- Morgan Sears-Williams