

Good afternoon, thank you for coming to my thesis defense! My name is Grayson Dunn, my pronouns are they/them and I am a photography major. Before I begin I would like to say if you need to step out at any time please take care of yourselves, as I will be talking about transphobia and transphobic violence at certain points. The title of my project, "Speaking As Trans," I attribute to a speech that Susan Stryker gave when she presented a talk at our school two semesters ago. She was talking about speaking as a transgender person in academic and political contexts, and how her identity has not only informed her experiences but has also led her directly into her activism. I was so struck by how powerful and embodied she came across. There is something deeply moving to me about encountering trans people who are significantly older than me. It proves to me that what I feel isn't trivial, and it isn't just a phase—it's a lifelong way of being. [pause] I strongly believe that photographic documentation of trans people is a radical and historical act, and that especially when it comes to self portraiture it is also an act of preservation. To be visible and representative of my specific reality in the queer community is invaluable, and so I have undertaken this work not just for myself but also so that others may observe and learn from (or resonate with) my lived experiences. This work is something I have explored throughout my time at PNCA, and I believe it will continue to develop and unfold throughout my career. Themes of gender expression (and my subsequent changing feelings towards it), autonomy and self-determination, and the home as a place of sanctuary and self expression are the primary topics that informed my lines of inquiry.

I think middle school is when I first began to wonder if there was something wrong with me. I knew that I didn't feel like other girls. It felt like there was something innate or inherent about girlhood that I was missing. I felt like I was constantly on the outside looking in, or like there was an inside joke I was missing out on. I hated the color pink, it was too girly, and I was constantly uncomfortable with my body. I knew that something was off, but I didn't yet have the words to express it. I couldn't figure out what it was about other girls that I was envious of. Now looking back, I know that it wasn't envy. It was the realization that I could never be like them, and that I didn't want to be. Because the truth is that I wasn't a girl, and I'm not a woman. When I was nineteen I became familiar with the term non binary, and began to familiarize myself with the trans community. That was when the lightbulb moment happened. That was when I realized who I've always been. I wore button downs, slacks, ties, suspenders, and kept my hair short. I was thinner then, and servers, baristas, or strangers I encountered would greet me with "Sir? Ma'am?...Sir?" It made me giddy. I reveled in their confusion. I'm happy living in that inbetween space, an abstraction of what gender could be. As I aged, as I gained weight from medication, I began to grow my hair out and dress more traditionally feminine. At first I was displeased with being gendered incorrectly all the time. I was being seen as a woman, and it was upsetting. But as time went on, I realized that the only one whose opinion mattered about my gender was really myself. I made, and continue to make this work, for little me. The one who couldn't express into words how they felt. The one who felt alone and confused. This work feels liberating to me, it invites the audience a glimpse into my reality.

For this project I occupied the role of artist, subject and documentarian. There is a synergy between the self as artist and subject; it allows autonomy over myself which hasn't historically been the case for marginalized groups. I have also continued this work outside of self-portraiture, by creating a body of work that explores queer identity within the scope of answering the question "Where do you feel the most like yourself?"

The intent of this work is about the intersection of portraiture and domesticity. Within that realm is the freedom to dress, act, and be as one desires in the privacy of the home. My work in Sally's documentary photography class this term was a direct reflection of my thesis work; instead of taking pictures of myself I was exploring my relationships with other trans people in my life. Depending on the subject's relationship with their home of origin, creating a place of one's own can be a revelatory act. It is also the act of creating a home for oneself with decoration and community (having friends and loved ones over). One of the interviewees within the scope of this work even said that seeing gender as a performance allowed them to heal from their own dysphoria. I turned to the domestic sphere as the location for this project because for me, I see my apartment as a blank canvas. It is a place where I create, and explore!

I feel safe to be wholly myself there, free from societal judgment or expectations. I also felt it was easy to utilize (or manipulate) different types of lighting there. I was not bound by the limited hours we have in the lighting studio, and was able to incorporate natural lighting in my portraits; something I have seldom done before. I strongly agree that gender is a performance, gender is drag. It is something we all perform (consciously or not) each day to differing degrees through our posture, scent, clothing, gait, hair, and

general affect. Thinking of gender in this way is what has emboldened me to shift the way that I feel about gender expression. If gender is a construct, then who is anyone else to dictate the way that I experience it? [pause]

My project is directly tied to the field of representation of trans people in western media. From what I have gathered thus far from trans writers and artists within my community, there are some commonalities. A lot of what I have read boils down to this one truth: being trans is not a fixed experience. I don't believe there is a time where we need to settle into certain roles, or prescriptivist ways of being. Many outside the community see physical, medical transition as the ultimate goal of each of us, and surgeries and hormone replacement therapy as a necessity to feel content and safe (or be seen as valid by our peers). I feel this is a limiting belief. Physical transition is not the be all and end all for every single one of us, and it is a financial privilege to be able to access it. Therefore, what does it mean to safely exist as trans (both internally and externally) and how do we as a society come to understand the impermanence of trans bodies and shifting identities?

For many, being trans is a holistic experience; it is a mental and social transition as much as it is a physical one. While not everyone who is trans experiences body dysphoria, it is safe to say that everyone who is trans does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. However, when it comes to the question of safety it is a nuanced conversation. Trans women of color are at the highest rate of being murdered as compared to any other demographic in our country. This is due to the deadly combination of racism and misogyny. There is also a discussion to be had about passing as cis.

For some, such as myself, I dismiss passing entirely because I'm not transitioning in a binary sense one way or another. But not everyone has such a privilege. For those who do operate both within and without the gender binary in more visible ways than I do, passing can be about safety that is as serious as life and death. There are a lot of respectability politics that are often enforced on the trans community; this idea that to conform to gender norms and assimilate to as close to a cis way of being as possible is what is expected. As a non binary person, I have no interest in it. The act of passing also suggests that there is an end point or certain time in one's transition where they have achieved the ultimate goal of assimilating into presenting as cis, and that is simply not the case for all transgender individuals.

Physical and social safety aside, there is also the issue of feeling safe internally. How does one come to terms with these strong emotions? If one experiences dysphoria, how to quell that raging inner storm? My other interest is what trans joy looks like for me as a nonbinary transmasculine person—how joy manifests itself in my body, further, what creates a good gender day? Where do I feel it?

I've covered my conceptual approach, and now I would like to mention the aesthetic areas of my inquiry. Different types of light engender different moods in the viewer. There is a progression to more natural lighting versus my tendency for hyper stylized, artificial pinks and blues. I feel very comfortable with utilizing manufactured light but it also serves as the motif of the colors of the trans flag. There is also a consideration for how I brought in context to my physical spaces/thinking about the inclusion of items that are sentimental or that just exist in my space that are important to me, how to visually

signal exploration of my body, intimacy, and comfort. I enjoyed working with lens blur through experimentation by strategically placing my hand over part of the lens, as stated I work often in saturated color schemes, I also work in strong focal points and balanced compositions.

Now I will talk a little bit about some of the academic sources I consulted. The reference book *“Trans Bodies, Trans Selves”* edited by Laura Erickson-Schroth was a good starting point for me when I first began my research, and I believe it is a good illustrative point for anyone who either wants to learn more about the community or is just beginning their own journey into exploring their identity. Chief among the quotes from the book was an anonymous sentiment that really reflected my experience: “I’m not transitioning to another gender, but rather embracing a queered gender identity that defies categories.” When I first heard that, I immediately felt that that was a good summative way of expressing exactly how I feel about my own identity.

Kate Bornstein’s book, *“Gender Outlaw,”* has also been a resonant point of research for me. In it she talks about different sociological concepts that inform the way we think about gender, and also speaks to her own experiences of coming out as a trans woman. Of note, one of my favorite quotes of hers from the book is: “We’re so sure of our ability to categorize people as either men or women that we neglect to ask ourselves some very basic questions: What is a man? And what is a woman? And why do we need to be one or the other?” Within that quote, her wording of ‘why do we need to be one or the other?’ really spoke to me because I find that the idea of having to choose between one gender or the next wildly unnecessary and limiting, nor is it reflective of who I am.

To name some of my creative sources, I turn first to the photographer Paul Mpagi-Sepuya. He has had a recent significant impact on how I go about and conceptualize image-making. As a fellow queer artist, I find his content really inspiring and intriguing. His work in his studio is clearly so carefully composed, yet the execution of it feels so intimate and natural. I feel strongly that balancing those two realities is incredibly challenging, and a masterful thing to achieve. To have a photograph be so stylized and formal, but come across as easy as breathing is something I aspire to do in my own work. Sepuya, like myself, works a lot with the materiality of the body and nudity. He comfortably confronts the viewer with his nude form, and art critics have often compared his portraiture to that of famous painting and sculpture—his particular posing is intentionally supposed to evoke those similarities I'm sure. As a queer black man, Sepuya's work also discusses his race and the relationship (by intimacy) he has to those he invites into his studio and features in his portraits. Additionally, he plays with the formal elements of working in a studio (his camera, a black backdrop etc.) and subverts them by featuring them prominently within the frame and in that sense cluing the viewer into a behind the scenes look at how he makes an image.

The second artist I am citing is Canadian photographer Laurence Philomène. They are a non binary trans person who has created an ongoing series called *Puberty* about their life. It is an autobiographical account of Laurence's experiences being a nonbinary transgender individual as they document their body's physical changes on testosterone, their trans joy, the loved ones in their life, and the still life moments that informs their day to day routine. They also created a photo book physically documenting some of their

*Puberty* collection, from winter of 2019 to winter of 2021. Their work is important to me because the scope of it clearly demonstrated to me that my work doesn't only have to be about my struggles, it can also be about my joy and all my feelings in-between. I also admire their color choices and lighting elements in their photos, and looking at their photography I often wonder how much color and light was captured in the moment, and how much was rendered in photoshop through color grading and manipulation.

They also fearlessly put their naked body out for the world to see, and it never feels forced or uncomfortable on their part. They seem so at ease in their skin in a way that I wish I could be, and aim to explore through my work. One of my goals for my future work is to begin to heal my relationship with my body, and the stipulations I feel have been pushed on to it by society. I also love the linear narrative structure (a stylistic choice I have often utilized in my own art) that Laurence tells; a window into their day to day experiences that captures a dreamy, otherworldly version of the mundane. I feel their work shows the viewer that there is so much beauty to be found in quiet moments, and not every event in life will be grand and life changing. It seems rather that they are cultivating a passion for living from within and learning to express it outwardly through their art.

I feel my work is particularly important in our political climate, with our current regime trying to erase trans people from public life, making lifesaving health care harder to access, banning us from sports, creating unnecessarily gendered spaces, taking away driver's licenses, killing us with transphobic violence, and generally just trying to scare

us into invisibility. I refuse to be invisible. [pause] My art is the representation I wish I had when I was a child.

I chose to present my work here in the design corridor because I feel that physically it is a reflection of how I want the work to come across: unrestrained and celebratory. What I mean by this is that the physical space is large and open, with great natural lighting. I wanted it to mimic how I felt when I was creating this body of work, light, airy, receptive.

You'll notice that some of the prints are larger than others. I made this choice for a few reasons. This collection is not meant to be seen as chronological, but rather encompassing the thoughts I had when making this work: emboldened, embodied, and free to express myself and my environment however I want. I also wanted to emphasize some elements more than others. The difference in sizes is primarily so that the audience will spend time with each piece equally, rather than skimming through each one without regard for its content.

My primary audience is other trans people, it allows them to see aspects of their reality reflected in art. Non-trans people can still benefit from work as it gives them a look into the experience of trans people.

In my initial proposal I was going to include a lot of wall text that would give some sort of larger context for the images, and I also thought about including a basket where people could write their answers to the prompt: what does gender mean to you? The responses could be authored or anonymous, and I planned to read a few of them at the start of my talk. I was also going to create a photo book that was sort of indexical in

nature, charting some of my older work (and then up to present day) that I've made here at PNCA preceding my thesis, but all of this was scrapped due to time constraints. Along with the photo book I was also going to sell zines that were a replica of the photo book so that my audience could take a piece of my work with them, if they so chose. I also originally planned to include alternative darkroom processes (and the resulting prints) in my final work, but I'm glad I didn't because I think that doing so would have caused undue stress due to what a time consuming endeavor that can be. I was also going to focus more on my past discomfort with my body—I intended to talk about this alongside the safety aspects, but as the project progressed it became clear that this was no longer an element I wanted to focus on. It just didn't feel relevant anymore because my feelings towards my gender have so largely changed, and I wanted this project to be an expression of joy rather than upset.

Chief among my choices in my editing process is the quality and kind of light, I think this is important. There is a historical/societal expectation that documentary photography is shot in natural lighting but I have a preference for colorful lighting, as I have said. I want to blend the natural environment with the lived environment of the subject (in this case, myself). I also focused on creating at least one image that could be a transitional piece, that allowed for a blend of natural and constructed lighting (note the doorway of my bedroom photo). I used my own body (through my hand) to distort and abstract imagery, which brings up themes of abstracting or isolating my body—this is something that has been present throughout my work.

Beyond the self portraits, which are meant as quiet reflections of my emotional states, I also focused on environmental storytelling which is why there are pictures of rooms and objects around my space. I decided that the further I got into shooting for this project, those were the elements I wanted to focus on the most. Anything else became secondary. This is work that is about me and my space, so making images about those aspects felt like a natural progression. I also did my best not to get too perfectionistic about what was happening, or what was “acceptable” for my final choices. That was the hardest part in all of this. I had to keep reminding myself that this is a self-directed project, and that ultimately my opinions about what I wanted to include or steer away from were the final say. Earlier in the shooting there were some images that were more experimental both in the content and the way that I was playing with light, but I decided not to include them because tonally they just felt out of place with the other images. I learned from this process that I am, as I have always been, too hard on myself [pause]. Even now as I look at the final selection, I’m not entirely sure that I made the right choices for this work. So to answer the question of how do I know when a work or collection is complete, I think that’s something I’m honestly still figuring out for myself and I’m not afraid to admit that.

But I think I define the success of it first by how it reads technically: is the white balance okay, is it in focus, are the highlights and shadows balanced, is it under or over exposed, are the colors accurate to how it was shot, etc. Then I consider its conceptual impact. How does it make me feel? Does what I’m trying to say with each piece feel adequately communicated? How do the images work together, what relationships or

visual signals will the audience interpret through them? These are all things I considered in my image-making as it entered its final stages.

Now I'm going to talk about a few of my images displayed here. The vertical picture of my cat on her tree, simply called, "My love," felt necessary to include because Miss Moo is my only roommate, and anyone who knows me well knows how much I love this cat. She loves me without reservation or judgment, she doesn't care about lofty conventions of gender, all she wants to know is when the next meal is or when we can nap together. She is an integral part of my space. She has been incredibly healing to my mental health. Depression and chronic fatigue are both things that I deal with, and when she gently nudges me to get out of bed or when she tucks herself into my side, it is a reminder that I am loved for exactly who I am.

The two primarily pink vertical portraits (one with me shirtless with the night sky behind me, the other one with a blurred edge and completely saturated in pink) are meant to be in conversation with one another, that is why I have them facing each other. The shirtless photo is called "Pink, At Night" and the other is "Lost In Thought". They are two sides of a whole, the night photo being me in my most vulnerable state and the other experimenting with lens blur and abstraction. I came across that blurred edge by placing my hand over part of the lens just to see what would happen, so in that sense I was using my body to abstract myself.

The photo of me sitting down and laughing is "Untitled" and was a candid I captured of myself. I can't remember what I thought was so funny, but seeing as the project ethos is about joy and comfort, it felt necessary to include! The photo of the books is called

“Research” and it felt like vital environmental storytelling by including some references I was consulting in primary research. Among some of the titles are: “To Survive On This Shore” by Jess T. Dugan and Vanessa Fabbre, “Puberty” by Laurence Philomene, “Gender Outlaw” by Kate Bornstein, and “Welcome To Second Puberty” by Jinx Leonard, a friend of mine—shoutout Jinx! The vertical self portrait of me in natural light next to the window is called “Me” and I wanted to include this one as a focal point for the project itself, which is why it’s in the middle. It employs the natural lighting tactic that a lot of traditional documentary photography uses, and it feels like me at my most natural. There is no saturated colorful light that I often use to embellish my photos, so I feel like a layer has been shed.

This work is made to be presented in a gallery exhibition, ideally alongside other queer artists. I choose this as the location for this work because my larger goal is about demystifying my trans experience. I am just a person. I deserve the same rights and comfort as my cis peers. There is so much fear and misinformation that the general public consumes daily about trans people, and often when we are in the news it is to report on someone’s suicide or murder. Therefore I think it is important to make it clear that I am simply human, and all I want is to exist in peace. It is the same reality I want for my community. After speaking with Shaleigh recently, she made me aware of the Oregon Historical Societies. They partner with queer activist groups to do talks, and I think this is also a place I could display my work. I do feel that in its own right the work I am doing is historic, as I am recording my reality in real time.

This project has shown me that my long term career goal is to build a large body of work collaborating with other queer people, and I will not only seek out other trans people but also people of different sexualities. I think gender and sexuality are a large facet of each person's identity, and being able to give a space where people can express themselves without shame is so important. In the future I would also create some sort of photo book and it would include interviews with my subjects. Hearing their stories in their own voices would really enhance and amplify the experience.

Lastly, I want to thank my mentor Teresa for helping guide me through this process, Sally for providing me with valuable input about the content of my photos, and my other photography teachers and peers for helping me grow. And thank you to my friends and family for always supporting me. You have all my love. Thank you!