

Shaun Crabb
4/25/25
Thesis Speech

Hello, my name is Shaun Crabb, and welcome to my thesis oral defense!

Before I begin, I wanted to make an acknowledgment that the themes I will be discussing today are deeply rooted in racism, as well as other intersecting systemic issues. I also wanted to make a disclaimer that I will be using the terms “fat” and “fatness” frequently, not in a derogatory way but instead as a neutral statement.

What is a “true self”? What does it mean to live authentically? While exploring identity in our puritan society has always been difficult, and although the doors to acceptance have been opened, it feels like we stray further and further from the answer. There are movements all over America and the world demanding recognition and acceptance for all marginalized groups as tensions over Trans rights rise astronomically. Today I will be relating these themes with my own personal story of how I have begun the journey towards self acceptance and liberation through pursuing my gender identity.

For a long time, I hardly felt close to what I would consider my “true self”. I came out as transgender at the age of 12, seeking a place within my family to explore this identity and what it could possibly mean for me as an individual. But, the drastic change in who I became tipped my support system too far, and that told me a very clear message about experimentation and where my place was as a woman in my family's eyes. I had nowhere to go, and I receded into myself. Art became my only outlet, and over time, what I had to say got bigger and bigger, and so did my canvases. Now, as a

public artist, I use my mural work as a platform to give people the support they need and the recognition they deserve. For me, I use muraling as a means to alert, rally, and educate those within and adjacent to the queer community on queer history, trans and fat liberation. My murals seek to be a safe place for folks within these communities to feel validated and heard.

Gender Fluid is the title of my most recent mural that is central to my thesis work. As we see here in this image, an oceanscape full of tumultuous waves abounds throughout the piece, with an ambiguous yet self referential figure in the bottom left as the sun sets from behind. But why the ocean? Why is a body of water relevant to the very personal journey of my sexual and gender identity? For me, this is because water is more than just a tidal landscape, it is intrinsically woven into us as humans. We cannot survive without it. We are largely comprised of it. In a literal sense, water keeps us alive, keeping our organs and cells functioning, as well as our skin hydrated and glowing. But beyond that, water is a means of liberation, which in itself is a multi-faceted statement. It accommodates all body types, it doesn't discriminate, and it's everywhere. While things like pools and beaches were made public, they were still restricted from marginalized people, especially through social and cultural norms. In a 2022 study, It's found that an estimated 43% of the fat population have experienced harassment while attending a pool or a beach. Despite these exclusionary tactics, my work suggests that water might still remain accessible to all, no matter what their identity may be.

The initial approach to this mural admittedly fluctuated quite a bit. I had toiled over my original design for months, refining it and re-refining it until I was sure that it was something I was ready to paint and establish on a wall. This mockup resonated

greatly with my studio painting practice, bridging both concept and aesthetic with my newfound endeavor as a muralist. However, after I had signed all the forms and gotten a hold of the keyfob to access the mural's worksite, I found myself stalling on my design. The wall was bigger than I had imagined, standing at approximately 17 x 14 feet! I had pondered my design and eventually took to redesigning it on my first day of painting. Instead of the submissive, intimate design that lacked the message I was looking to deliver, I reworked it into something powerful. Previously, my work took a passive form, the figure was relaxed and posed with a gentle and inviting expression, with soft unified waves curling around them. This initial approach however fell short to represent the actual fight for equality and acceptance I was so invested in, and the last minute change not only felt more affirming, but also reflected the chaotic nature of change.

Inquiry

In this mural we see a figure engulfed in the volatile waves of a stormy sea, and its seemingly endless abyss continues off the frame on either side. Our figure is miles away from land, and despite that, here they are perched in the composition's forefront, amongst the roar of the waves. But in this piece, there is more than this potentially destructive ocean power, and off to the right hand side we see a break with gentle rocking waves. There's duality in the water here, where volatility and stillness can coexist. I found inspiration from that same kind of duality within myself, by beginning hormone replacement therapy 6 months ago. Soon after, I felt a spiritual change deep

inside. Wherever I looked in nature, I saw myself looking back. Standing on the sandy beach dunes of the California coast, something clicked inside my brain. Here I was, alone on the edge of the coming tide, and all I could see or think about was how that lapping water was *me*. Here, in this moment, the ocean and I were connected; the water was my transition, the turmoil I was going through, the joy and bliss of finally having what I wanted all, were now wrapped up in one.

I believe a malady upon the human psyche is its tendency to gender everything around it, beyond the human body, which of course includes the sea. However, in order to explore the spectrum of gender, one must break down the gender binary by temporarily suspending the very concept itself. In citing Stephen Helmreich's *The Genders of Waves*, "To think about our identity, one must unsettle the presumption that discussions of gender must ultimately refer back to gender". In order for me to stop in this moment and feel open to the exploration of my identity, I needed to stop looking at the ocean and myself as male or female, but instead along an indefinite spectrum. With the ocean's rippling waves and endless curves I turn to my own body and see the exact same ripples, it being an ever changing and fluid landscape. Water is in a constant state of transition—rotating tides, hundred foot walls, doldrums—its very nature is meant to change. Water allows for growth and progress within an ecosystem, like the ecosystem within our bodies. As water cycles and transitions through my body, its fluidity shifts through me, and I too become more fluid as well.

While water in this context is used as a platform to allow for self discovery and exploration of identity, there seems to be another duality within the mural. With the current governmental administration, it's evident that a portion of the world strives to

perpetuate hate and oppression. Left and right, with each new bill, human rights are stripped away, day by day, largely for marginalized communities. This especially affects the rights of Transgender people, being targeted, debased, and/or disappeared. This is where the violent ocean takes form in my work. It embodies our pressing world, our corrupt legislation, and dire circumstances. However, we've been here before, we've seen advocates fight for our basic human rights, for recognition, and for acceptance. In the mural, the figure crouches strongly against a wall of water that pummels their body, with fists clenched tight in a braced position. They push against the water with a force of perseverance that says, "I'm not going anywhere". While our world can be turbulent, succumbing to its power is not always an option, and resistance is crucial now more than ever. It's important to look to the future with ambition, and to join in solidarity with marginalized groups to defend and fight for our existence. No one is free until everyone is free.

Breaking out of the confined walls of who I was expected to be by experimenting with gender, the exploration of my sexuality soon began to further reveal itself. Kissing girls was no longer a simple fantasy that I would repress, as a lesbian, it now felt like a well deserved right. But of course, when I would insist on my newfound identity to my family, I was met with comments that invalidated my existence as a lesbian, such as "Don't rule out men too soon", or "you're probably just bisexual". Something that stood out to me here was how my sexual orientation was up for debate; men were still considered when discussing future plans and goals, and the blatant ignoring of my being gay was quite referential of how lesbianism has been treated generationally.

Historically, Lesbianism has been silenced, invalidated, and repressed due to its “lesser-sin-like lifestyle”, as quoted by Judith M. Bennett. It was simply seen as a “childish” phase that would soon die off once a woman found her place with a man, so themes of lesbian relationships were hidden in literature and through stories written by authors such as Sappho. It was easy to write off gay relationships by tying to narratives of “sisterhood” or “friendship”, with deep intense bonds between women. There are also hidden sapphic themes in religious pieces as well, such as the nuns licking the wounds of Christ in *Saint Catherine of Siena*, engraved by artist Salimbeni. Lesbian sex was seen as “lesser, more passive, and secondary players in reproduction”, which has made the transition into a modern society difficult for queer folks, because these narratives still haunt the lesbian community.

Expectations for women inside and outside the queer community have kept a hold of them for centuries, reducing them down to objects of desire, and historically, women have been related to oceanic themes due to the tenuous relationship between them and patriarchal standards. Like an ocean, women are seen as things to be “conquered”; an unruly tide, violent and wild, of self-securing independence. Men have used various methods beyond violence to “tame” the nature of women, taking place in literature and art. A clear example of this is the painting *Ophelia*, done by artist John Everett Millais. *Ophelia*, the woman in this painting, lies in a gentle stream just moments before she drowns; she is incapable of saving herself, and her greed of making chains of wildflowers has led to her demise. This painting is one of many made by men in order to spin a narrative of women's “lack” of power and inability to be strong enough to be independently viable. This has manifested into an expectation and

standard for women, but as society modernises, so does this portrayal of women in art. A piece that directly juxtaposes this mindset is Sasha Gordons *Like Froth*. Gordon paints herself nude hovering above a stormy seascape, her exposed body and eyes turned towards the viewer with a confrontation, as she puts, “bluntly and perceptively staring back, creating an unnerving loop of looking.” Gordon’s piece directly contradicts typical traditions of women positioned as objects to be consumed, and rather takes the female form and subjects it as a protagonist, unapologetic in their rage. In my own personal work, I have explored these similar themes by creating work like *Saturdays are Pool Days*, and *Salvation*. These two pieces of work take a lighthearted approach on traditional painting narratives on the female body, and instead contradict them by showcasing water as not something to perpetuate the “weakness” of women, but instead uplift them.

Expectations and standards of women go beyond their capability, and intersect into a realm of bodily oppression. I’ve often said that a big enemy against patriarchy is the fat female body, and that is because it intersects women's issues with the broader narrative of fatphobia. Growing up, I was no stranger to the daily afflictions from my peers for my fat body. I was sexualized and fetishied for my bigger hips and thighs, I felt the pressure to fall into eating disorders through my family, and I “struggled” with body weight and the fluctuations that came from it. I use quotations around the word struggle, because it also denotes my family's perception on the struggle of weight loss. The cognitive dissonance this created throughout my upbringing made me increasingly self aware of the regulations that were being placed on my body, and began to resist them by wearing less modest clothing despite my “obvious and unappealing spillage”.

Fatphobia manifests itself in different ways, through anti-obesity campaigns, diet and gym culture, and medical power imbalances. This push to erase and restrict fat bodies through humiliation and “medical concern” are rooted in racist and misogynistic ideologies, further suppressing these groups. Fatphobia mainly targets women, as it represents objective historical standards of their bodies and a means for control. Fatness is deemed an “epidemic” like a disease that needs to be wiped out from society. But fatness is natural, and fatness is power. The fat female body directly attacks and contradicts the fragility of patriarchal standards, because it showcases a means of living authentically, despite the insurmountable standards on women's bodies. Society's attempt to “wipe” clean the slate of diversity among humanity should be met with the same fight and resistance that is evident in the takeover of LGBTQ+ rights, and a world where all are liberated is a possibility, despite our current administration and legislation pointing towards the opposite. This sentiment greatly underlies my work as an artist.

For the last few years I had aspired to be considered as a traditional painter, starting with oils and then moving into more budget-friendly and “healthier options”, such as water soluble oil paint. I worked exclusively on large canvases that towered over me, painting larger than life-size self portraits of my naked body in monochromatic cool tones. Through this practice of working larger, I had found that I began to struggle with the confines of my substrate; my large canvases were too small to accommodate the immensely proportioned ideas that I had. The inevitable path of scaling up substantially brought me to muraling, and was no longer a distant dream. It wasn't until I had met other artists who were successful muralists, that told me this dream inside me wasn't a distant one at all, and in fact was achievable. Beyond that, I had seen how

much of an impact my fellow muralists had on the community with their work; this is the kind of outreach I was looking for as an activist. From there, I began the shift from my studio practice into the public realm.

A couple of final elements I'd like to highlight in my mural are the eventual ebbing of the ocean's tides, as well as the sunset. While there are many areas of the work that show the volatility of the ocean, there are some spots that suggest respite, quietude and safety from oppressive forces, such as in the distance the water exudes a placidity. Even further towards the horizon, we see a sun setting off in the upper left hand corner, a patchy and streaky gradient cascades onto the evening sky, like the hope of a day of an obtainable future where all minorities and marginalized groups have the freedom to exist and live authentically and joyfully.

It represents the closing of a long-standing battle between an oppressive society riddled with unrealistic standards and expectations. Dotted in the night sky is an infinite abyss of stars, like the form of our community unifying together, lighting up the darkness. We fight against oppression through the intersection of fat, gay, and trans narratives, reinforcing the strength of diverse communities.

Conclusion

In creating this mural, I believe that I inherently began to fill a deep rooted hole in my heart; I had unearthed something so suppressed and hidden I didn't think I'd ever come around to finding it again, and that was my identity as a queer person. Identity is more than what we wear, how we do our hair, or express ourselves in our bodies. It is something given to us as we're born, and expected to adhere to, but freedom and liberation from these guidelines must be explored, interrogated, and unpacked in order to live authentically and survive. By breaking down and expanding identity beyond the mold that I once assumed, I finally took a step towards my own liberation. This is a process I will honestly continue throughout my life, and is mirrored in my relationship to being an artist. Painting this mural was more than just an opportunity to relate personal themes with community narratives— it was also a gateway into enjoying living authentically. I wanted to thank my mentor Adam for everything I could have ever asked for as a mentee. You have guided me through the first steps of my career as a muralist, and was the first person to put words to the racket going on in my brain when it comes to my gender identity. Your intelligence as an artist has struck confidence in me and because of you, the world seems a little less scary. Thank you everyone!