

mother / me

Gray Swartzel

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by

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[Abstract]

mother / me is a visual exploration and analysis of the biological and constructed maternal realms of artist Gray Swartzel's life. Orienting and navigating childhood influences, Swartzel explains his desire to use Craigslist to seek out surrogates, or mother figures. Interrogating his queer body within the psychological space between himself and his biological and surrogate mothers, he challenges and interrogates conceptions of the nuclear family, critiquing heteronormative assumptions of family. Swartzel tasks himself as an agent to inspect family as a social construct within a larger Lacanian orientation, while seeking out the *objet petit a*, or cause of desire in such relationships. He details the influences of early twentieth century glamour photography and maternal theory and outlines how they manifest in performances of the self. *mother / me* is an experiment to investigate the queer relationship between camp and the twenty-first century dandy through the collaboration of a mother and a child to construct visual images.

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mother / me is dedicated to Peggy Swartzel

*mother / me***I [Another Mother]**

In 2014, I posted an ad to Craigslist seeking a woman to claim me as her child. The gesture of pursuing a mother functioned as the inverse of adoption. The parent did not seek the child; rather, the child sought the parent. And for that matter, the child, actually a grown man, already had two parents—a mother, a father, and a backyard with an actual white picket fence—an emblem of the heteronormative nuclear family. So why search for another mother?

At that time, I had been photographing my biological mother for three years. This work began after a conversation we had about *blood harmonizing*. Mother described *blood harmonizing* as the impromptu bluegrass melodies played by her father and extended family in the living room amidst gentle wafts of pipe smoke. She described their seamless voices and instruments as a calming environment producing mental oblivion and recounted how they would harmonize to escape the struggles of a dysfunctional family in the American South, riddled by alcoholism and lack of education. The Appalachian phenomenon of *blood harmonizing* was a romantic concept to me. It stoked a desire to construct a series of performed gestures between Mother and me. Shifting from a family's collaboration to construct music, I wished to make visual the harmony brought about by a collaboration between a mother and a son to construct still images.

In constructing photographs with her, the interior of the house became a domestic stage where we could reinterpret the often-untold history of matrilineage, focusing on our relationship in particular. Conversations we had regarding her life as well as my experiences navigating the southern realm of Bible pushers, country clubs, cotillion, and boy scouts as a closeted queer male informed the images I made. Inspired by the work of Judith Lorber and Adrienne Rich, they

were ingrained in feminist discourse from the start and gradually adopted the language of maternal theory, with discussions of gender construction and maternal ambivalence, respectively.¹ After exhibiting the *Blood Harmony* series, subconscious urges propelled me to continue working in the maternal realm. I began making self-portraits with a long-term muse, Rachel Stuart Fesperman, in which I would cast both of us as my mother (See Appendix 3). Soon after, I assumed both roles, propelled by the photographic work of Anthony Goicolea, who was my employer at the time (See Appendix 3). Eventually I decided to continue my visual research, but anew, with a complete stranger. To better understand the social constructions of mother/child relationships, I searched for another mother—a surrogate—to involve in my practice. I wanted to find and establish unconditional love with another person on a strictly platonic foundation, driven by my desire to engage in contemporary family formation. This drive adheres to the queer tradition of ascertaining a “chosen family”—in stark contrast to the hetero-dominant traditions of marriage and child rearing. The queer notion of selecting one’s family has become a radical gesture aimed at both finding acceptance and restructuring the dominant social system of the nuclear family.

Although my wish to find a surrogate was tenacious, it was not until I moved away from home and established distance that I realized the full extent of my motivation. One of the final works of *Blood Harmony*, *Self-Portrait with Father and Dying Mother* (See Appendix 2) depicts the fantastically constructed death of Mother, as well as the incorporation of my father, subconsciously alluding to Mother’s alcoholism and failing health. Stimulated by bell hooks’ call for men’s “full participation” in parenting, I became intrigued with the idea of my father’s “full participation” in my art practice, which I later realized was an effort to depend less on

¹ Buller, Rachel E. "Introduction." *Reconciling Art and Mothering*. Ed. Rachel E. Buller. Farnham: Ashgate, 2002. 1-6. Print.

Mother.² The distance I began to feel from my biological family served as the subliminal catalyst that beckoned me to find another family. In his essay, *Mark Morrisroe's Photographic Masquerade*, art historian David Joselit posits that:

Perhaps the epitome of masquerade among gay men now is not the cliché of the drag queen, but the often intense effort to project or detect health or illness in the bodies of one's self and others.³

Clearly influenced by the AIDs crisis, Joselit undermines the frivolity of the stereotypical gay persona with his understanding of a vastly more ominous characterization—one based on survival. This resonated with me as I was able to project Joselit's notion upon my own situation involving my mother's heath. Analogously, my project *Blood Harmony* developed out of themes of familial love and vulnerability, but ultimately, its purpose was to help me to comprehend Mother's nearness to death. It was the only way I knew how to cope.

Preparing for my search for another mother, I returned to the early identity formation of my childhood. As a pre-adolescent, I could not point out other queer people in my conservative southern community, but I knew from viewing the personal ads of Craigslist that they existed. The few ads I saw that did not include violent language objectifying the body helped me to realize my potential beyond the distorted image of gays gleaned from *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex: But Were Afraid to Ask*. This bestselling book, written by David Reubens, M.D. in 1969, suggested that a normal weekend for gay men consisted of going to the

² Buller 3

³ Joselit, David. "Mark Morrisroe's Photographic Masquerade." *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*. Ed. Deborah Bright. London: Routledge, 1998. 195-201. Print.

bowling alley for anonymous sex, inevitably ending with a trip to the E.R. to have a light bulb or beer bottle removed from one's backside. Such a future seemed bleak. The silent queer community represented by the blue text of Craigslist subtitles sustained me until I earned the rank of Eagle Scout, distanced myself from the conservative organization, and outwardly became my true self. Craigslist helped me understand myself then and has extended into the current social facet of my practice. It is where I would find another mother.

II [The Ad]

The ad for a surrogate mother that I posed to Craigslist (See Appendix 1) presented my image, *Self-Portrait as Olympia with Mother* (See Appendix 2), as it visually articulated my interests in the maternal realm, constructed photography, power dynamics, and art historical appropriation. Further, the artistic dialogue between the original *Olympia* and all of its contemporary iterations exist in relation to surrogation, a concept in performance studies by which a society reproduces itself, while considering "current ideas and concerns," similar to history repeating itself, but with hindsight.⁴ Yasumasa Morimura's *Portrait (Twin)* (See Appendix 2 and 3) photographically recreates Manet's iconic painting of Olympia, casting himself as both the reclining white female prostitute in a platinum blonde wig and as her African servant bearing flowers. The characters in Morimura's iteration exist at the intersection of gender, class, and race as he uses his body as a tool for proclaiming his queer political presence. It is a blank page upon which to transcribe a revisionist art history, using an actor's body to portray multiple and transgressive identities.⁵ Critical commentary on Manet's *Olympia* revolved around the prostitute's physical appearance and the claim that she was too

⁴ Kershaw, Baz, and Helen Nicholson. *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*. Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

⁵ Franklin, Paul B. "Orienting the Asian Male Body in the Photography of Yasumasa Morimura." *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*. Ed. Deborah Bright. London: Routledge, 1998. 233-46. Print.

“masculinized,” “boyish,” and “androgynous.”⁶ Further investigation reveals that many were concerned with the placement of her left hand over her genitals. These invariably male critics may have worried about what was beneath her hand, for the strong forward gaze and confident demeanor of Olympia defied the passivity that was expected of her as a woman, and even more so as a “kept woman.”⁷ The black “pussycat” in Morimura’s version of *Olympia* draws further attention to the genitals in question. In an interview, Morimura explains the power of “Pussy Envy,” through his life story of growing up as a small gay boy with seven sisters and being taunted as a “pussy boy” (failed man) by neighborhood bullies. Morimura describes tucking his “little peepee” between his legs post shower in order to envision himself as the true girl the rest of his effeminate body resembled, an action I have called *phallic rejection*.⁸ I have coined the term phallic rejection as the queer phenomenon by which sociologically mindful biological males interpret their phallus as an emblem of privilege at the expense of females and consequently feel shame. Shame can also be brought about, in Morimura’s case, by failing to meet personal or societal ideals of masculine performance.

In *Self-Portrait as Olympia with Mother* (See Appendix 2), I embody phallic rejection as I cast myself in the art historical role of the prostitute and Mother as the slave. Because of our similar hair and makeup, I depict our relationship as fluctuating between that of Mother and her daughter or Mother and her younger self. In either case, the power dynamic presents me as the dominant figure with a submissive Mother approaching with flowers—both a servant and potentially an admirer. She is a slave to the patriarchal institution of motherhood, bound by cultural expectations that prescribe a life of dedicated service to her children. According to Elżbieta Korolczuk, in much of Western culture, “a good mother is supposed to teach a female

⁶ Franklin 237

⁷ Franklin 237

⁸ Franklin 237

child how to be pretty and attract attention.”⁹ *Self-Portrait as Olympia with Mother* presents the viewer with an almost literal passing of the generational torch as “daughters ‘replace’ their mothers.”¹⁰ However, “the myth of the all-loving, all-forgiving and all-sacrificing mother” is an impossible patriarchal ideal given that no one is or should be entirely selfless.¹¹ *Self-Portrait as Olympia with Mother* was a critical component of the Craigslist ad, conveying the politics of mothering that pervades my work, but in fewer words.

III [Ad Reception]

After moving from North Carolina to New York and posting the ad on Craigslist in Manhattan, numerous women responded and agreed to claim me as their child, as well as participate in images of our experiences together. I first met Erin, a master yoga instructor who also worked as a Pro-Domme prostitute—typically a woman who will dominate a man for a fee (See Appendix 4). Upon exchanging numbers, I realized that we shared an area code and grew up within fifteen miles of each other! Erin spoke the language of the south—she knew the culture, the neighborhoods, and societal tendencies. For that reason, she was the perfect person to simplify the shift from a biological to a surrogate mother. In getting to know her and becoming her family, I became versed in diet, exercise, and spirituality. In working with her, I became competent in interpersonal and monetary exchange (See Appendix 4). She lived with little, and what she did have, she did not want. I was baptized in her name by a priest in a river outside of Woodstock (See Appendix 4).

Erin introduced me to her friend, Verónica, an artist Chile who lived in New York. She was also a yogi, but unlike Erin, Verónica felt more stable surrounded by things—her father’s

⁹ Korolczuk, Elżbieta. "I've Got It From My Mother: Exploring the Figure of the Mother in Contemporary Polish Art." *Reconciling Art and Mothering*. Ed. Rachel E. Buller. Farnham: Ashgate, 2002. 110-121. Print.

¹⁰ Korolczuk 112

¹¹ Buller 3

swords, piles of books, and towers of porcelain plates. I was immediately interested in the material dichotomies experienced in her apartment. The chance diptychs—a threadbare dishtowel and a lavish shoe peeking out of the small but bloated closet. The disparate textures killed me. Like Erin, Verónica had varied interests and was knowledgeable about many things, but her attention and time investments seemed less transient. I enjoyed working with her.

After moving to Pittsburgh for graduate school and posting an identical ad, I met Laura. She had studied at Columbia University and considered herself a scholar. She lived about an hour from me, so the times that we met usually involved me staying over in her 19th century home—a Victorian that appeared to have been midway through a renovation for years. One weekend the county fair was in town, and I got an airbrush “MOM” tattoo with her prior to riding the Ferris wheel (See Appendix 5). That night, we reconstituted *Olympia* in her kitchen (See Appendix 5). Although I had just moved to Pittsburgh and was looking for family, we stopped seeing each other after she insisted on teaching me to shoot firearms, as she handed me a shirt that read, “Armed and Feminine.”

During this time, I was constantly on the Amtrak between Pittsburgh and Penn Station. Consequently, Verónica and I were spending more and more time together. I had been accepted by her husband and her teenage daughter, and was feeling like part of her family. Eventually we decided that Verónica would be my sole surrogate and we became a collaborative partnership, titled *Welcome To My Faith In You*. Despite the lack of a biological link, we consider our meeting to have been a cyber birth brought about by unconscious powers of need and desire. Verónica had recently lost her father, a prominent political and military figure in Chile and our relationship helped fill the void of her mourning process. Stemming from the fluid potential of human interaction, our union constituted a “social sculpture” (Joseph Beuys’ notion of human

activity aimed at restructuring society) by focusing on queer family formation as the key to radical social reform.¹² Together, we met our mutual needs as we set about forging a relationship based upon unconditional love, and ultimately, faith in a complete stranger. Interrogating my queer body within the psychological space between myself and my biological and surrogate mothers, I challenge and interrogate conceptions of the nuclear family. Like all bodies, mine serves as a political agent to either support or protest the current governmental environment and its impact on society. I task myself as an agent to inspect family as a social construct within a larger Lacanian orientation, the location of *objet petit a*, or cause of desire.

IV [objet petit a]

Jacques Lacan's *objet petit a* is described as the inherent motivation to "restore a lost link in [an] unsymbolized real."¹³ "Unsymbolized" is used here to mean all that cannot be described through our systems of language. Lacan's discussion of the *objet petit a* changed over time, but the notion of fantasy is steadfastly associated with the concept. It has been used as a semi-variable to speak for the unknown and transient quality of an object that makes it desirable.¹⁴ I recognize this indefinable desire to instill meaning and wonder within objects as similar to endowing tchotchkes or religious relics with spiritual power or significance. An enormous amount of energy can be invested in an inanimate object, such as a crucifix, as we yearn for meaning, cope with loss, and "bridge the impossible gap between biological and psychological existence."¹⁵ Speaking about this gap, Lacan introduced the binary of the Symbolic and the Real. The Symbolic register represents everything that can be described with language whereas

¹² Beuys, Joseph, and Volker Harlan. *What Is Art?: Conversation with Joseph Beuys*. Clairview Books, 2010.

¹³ Kirshner, LA. Rethinking Desire: The objet petit a in Lacanian Theory.

¹⁴ Kirshner 85

¹⁵ Ibid

the Real is outside language and resists symbolization.¹⁶

Lacan described this perpetual desire for ‘total satisfaction’ existing within this Real as *jouissance*. This constant yearning for *jouissance* in adulthood is due to the infantile trauma of physically becoming a separate being. Obtaining *jouissance* is not possible; it is the equivalent of a paradise lost, used here as a metaphor for something lost, but highly desired. Further, *jouissance* “lies outside of the pleasure principle” and is not considered to be classically pleasant, and could be the desire for both fetishism and masochism.¹⁷ The pleasure principle dictates that people instinctually and simultaneously seek pleasure while avoiding pain. Considering that *jouissance* does not exist within the pleasure principle and is not classically pleasant, it embraces the possibility of pleasure existing alongside pain. Both fetishism and masochism can produce pronounced degrees of pleasure, but potentially with the expense of pain and humiliation. *Jouissance* is considered potentially deadly and I regard Lacan’s concept as heavily inspired by Freud’s Thanatos—his psychoanalytic notion of the death drive by which individuals are drawn towards acts of self-destruction.

Like *jouissance*, Lacan’s *objet petit a* is indescribable as a physical entity, but exists as the fantasized imaginary connection between the infant body and the mother—“the breast, for example.”¹⁸ The *objet petit a* does not exist as a part of the body or as a memory. It is the “fantasy of a loss established retrospectively,” after the child has become a subject that is capable of both using language and observing one’s separateness from the mother. This loss is attributed to the completion of the mirror phase, or the developmental moment when one becomes able to recognize their own image.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

The ultimate loss is attributed to the father and potentially influences all thought processes for the rest of one's life. Further, it "stimulates a fantasy of absolute love that is the true cause of desire," perpetually affecting one's motivations.¹⁹ This obsession with the impossible task of reestablishing the missing link between mother and child constitutes the physical manifestation of *absolute love*, a concept that I find ever present in the work of French photographer Pierre Molinier.

V [Pierre Molinier]

Influenced by their feelings of *absolute love* for their mother, I assert that French photographer Pierre Molinier's thought processes, work, and career were motivated by their desire to both reestablish the *objet petit a* as well as transcend gender. They sought to accomplish this through becoming a chimera, defined in genetics as an organism that is partly male and partly female. Born in 1900, Molinier lived through a tumultuous time in European history, but the driving force that informed their image making never deviated from their self-internalized practice of exploring their "pliable structures of gender and sexuality."²⁰ As seen in Molinier's *Le Chaman* (See Appendix 5), their work subverted deeply rooted binaries (at least in Western cultures) of male/female, homo/heterosexual and old/young. Although known primarily as a painter, my interest in Molinier is based on their genderqueer performative identity that began at age eighteen, the year of their sister's death. At this time, they were known to publicly masquerade in the stockings and shoes of their mother and sister. Molinier's sister, Julienne, was their idea of androgynous perfection with her "masculine features, high cheekbones, and large fleshy lips," and Molinier yearned after her long legs and face. Molinier's mother and sister are considered to be the primary influences on Molinier's motifs of "androgyny, stockinged legs,

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Durant, Mark A. "Lost (and Found) in a Masquerade: The Photographs of Pierre Molinier." *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*. Ed. Deborah Bright. London: Routledge, 1998. 103. Print.

high heels and obsessive autoeroticism” (See Appendix 5).²¹

I am attracted to Molinier’s performative photography and the influence they placed on their matrilineage. Molinier was a member of an unorthodox Masonic group that was likely responsible for kindling the fire of their performative and ritualistic needs.²² Although Masonic rituals are highly secretive, they are thought of as being highly elaborate in their perverse decadence. Like Molinier, I was also exposed to the elegantly orchestrated rituals associated with compulsory masculine performance through my advancement in Boy Scouts of America and to feminine performance through working for my mother who was a wedding planner. From flag processions and ceremonial garb to custom event lighting, contrasting realms informed my earliest understanding of gender binaries and performance conditioned to align with our sex. The fussiness of such polarities deeply influence my life and my work.

Molinier’s resolution to bridge the artificial (but socially mandated) gender gap was to become sexually autonomous by becoming both “the giver and receiver of penetration.”²³ Mark Durant describes how this “travesty of manhood” was made possible through Molinier’s crafting of the fetishistic assemblage of a black high heel. Its protruding phallus bound to its back with leather straps could be easily inserted by bending their knee (See Appendix 6).²⁴ In her discussion of fetishism in *L'Amour Fou: Photography & Surrealism*, art historian, critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss situates the fetish object in a foundation of “refusal to accept sexual difference,” and the consequential need to replace “the natural for the unnatural.”²⁵ Krauss offers a Freudian interpretation in which the “fetish is the substitute for the woman’s (mother’s)

²¹ Durant 106

²² Durant 106

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Krauss, Rosalind E., Jane Livingston, and Dawn Ades. *L'Amour Fou: Photography & Surrealism*. New York: Abbeville, 1985. 9. Print.

phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego.” Further, Krauss discusses Freud’s understanding that women’s clothing offered the transvestite a tool with which to “remember and imagine the phallic mother.”²⁶ For Molinier, a simulated phallus serves as both a symbol for their childhood maternal relationship and as an autoerotic portal through which to transcend gender and become a chimera, while simultaneously reestablishing the fantastical link with their mother.

VI [Chimeral States]

In our attempt to complete the impossible task of making visual the fantastical link between us in our constructed mother/child relationship, Verónica and I felt that it was crucial to subvert the traditional associations of the “all-sacrificing mother” who is subservient to her child.²⁷ In setting the terms of our relationship, we turned to Adrienne Rich, who discussed discrepancies between the notions of motherhood and mothering—motherhood represents the oppressive nature of childrearing in an androcentric society and mothering represents a “female-defined and potentially empowering experience.”²⁸ Aiming to create an empowering experience for both of us, we set about making performative work that involved role-play as we each assumed the character of numerous constructed identities, largely influenced by Pierre Molinier and the parallel photographers of the glamour generation.

Coming about at the end of World War I during the cultural explosions of jazz, Art Deco, cinema and the Great Depression, glamour followed the period of photographic eroticism championed by Wilhelm von Gloedon and F. Holland Day.²⁹ Characterized by veils of

²⁶ Krauss 95

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Buller 3

²⁹ Waugh, Thomas. "Posing and Performance: Glamour and Desire in Homoerotic Art Photography, 1920-1945." *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*. Ed. Deborah Bright. London: Routledge, 1998. 58-65. Print.

“decorative and applied arts, stylized melancholy, and high Bohemian Camp,” glamour photography was categorized by John Berger as a modern phenomenon in a society that was increasingly becoming a spectacle. Berger defined glamour as “the happiness of being envied,” existing as a fabrication of the advertising industry that serves as a mechanism for people to recognize and perhaps superficially offset socioeconomic powerlessness.³⁰ Thomas Waugh describes the glamour photographer's goal as making the viewer/spectator both desire the subject and desire to *be* the subject.

Arguably one of the most famous photographs of the genre is Man Ray's portrait of Marcel Duchamp as his alter ego, Rose Sélavy (a French homonym that loosely translates as “Eros, such is life”) from 1921 (see Appendix 6).³¹ It is clear that Duchamp understood that “identity is only produced by the representation of alterity.”³² In a conversation with Pierre Cabanne, Duchamp expressed his desire to change his identity and posed the question, “why not change sex?” When looking at the image of Duchamp as his female alter ego, it is not immediately apparent why he decided to depict himself as a “melancholy old dear... whose wishes had not been fulfilled.”³³ Drag personas typically emphasize youth, but perhaps Duchamp desired transitioning into the “old dear” as an escape from being “one of the most eligible men in New York,” and therefore crafted an identity that would accentuate the actual power and dominance he possessed as a man.³⁴

Utilizing notions of spectacle, desire, and melancholy, Verónica and I created the *Chimeral States (Collodion Stills)*, a series of wet-plate collodion photographs that engage with the full

³⁰ Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin, 2008. 129-48. Print.

³¹ Diederichsen, Diedrich. "Pose vs. Excess." *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*. Ed. Deborah Bright. London: Routledge, 1998. 163. Print.

³² Friedrich, Julia. "Everything Doubled." *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*. Ed. Deborah Bright. London: Routledge, 1998. 96-105. Print.

³³ Friedrich 97

³⁴ Friedrich 97

metamorphic potential of the human being, in terms of both psychic and physical identity. Serving as the guide or gatekeeper to secret worlds associated with sensuality and vision, the chimera stands at the threshold between the historical and the mythological. Morphing from a heterosexual couple on date night to a queer female couple at a wedding, we performed twenty pairs of constructed identities (See Appendix 6-8). Serving as Verónica's mother, her husband, as well as her child, we aimed to locate the *objet petit a* through multiple role shifts within our actual relationship. The use of the historical wet-plate collodion process to make physical iterations of actions performed for digital video both accentuates and contrasts the schisms between the classical and the contemporary, the corporeal and the deific, and the astonishing and the monotonous.

Commenting on vanity and shallowness, the glamour generation seemed to foreshadow the banality and emptiness of selfie culture, which arose about a century later. Originating as selfies, the *Chimeral States (Collodion Stills)* function as contemporary *memento mori*, as the characters are quick to snap photos of themselves—records of their own existence.

With the exception of one plate that depicts an iPhone (See Appendix 8), the other nineteen depict us looking outward at viewers, who find themselves in the position of the front-facing selfie camera. The gaze becomes charged—not when the viewer looks at the subjects, but when we look back. When viewers look at the subjects, they symbolically experience the phenomenon of the Lacanian mirror phase.³⁵ This mastery over their physical body for the first time and the perceived mastery through the gaze extends to viewers looking at art. However, when Verónica and I turn our gaze back to the viewer, we “involve the spectator in the image,

³⁵ McGowan, Todd. “Looking for the Gaze: Lacanian Film Theory and Its Vicissitudes”. *Cinema Journal* 42.3 (2003): 27–47. Web.

disrupting their ability to remain all-perceiving.”³⁶ This breakdown potentially leads to a “traumatic encounter with the Real,” where the viewer is able to imagine the *jouissance* of our individual and collective dreams and desires. Lacan believes that “desire is merely a vain detour with the aim of catching the *jouissance* of the other.” He proposes that all acts of personal desire stem from a larger psychological system that dictates the need to understand others to the depth of their most real desires, devoid of symbolic order.³⁷ Therefore, desire stems from the need to experience the *jouissance* of the other and the concept of absolute love seems inextricably linked to the impossible potential of experiencing one’s *jouissance*. It is a notion tied to romantic ideals, and exists purely as a fantasy, like the *objet petit a*.

From the beginning, the relationship Verónica and I established, like nearly every relationship, was built upon idealized projections upon the other—fantasy. Our desire to establish and cultivate absolute and unconditional love with a stranger aimed to produce perfect synchronicity between two people—two bodies. Similarly, this phenomenon occurs in *"Untitled" (Perfect Lovers)* by Félix González-Torres, featuring two identical clocks (See Appendix 8). A once perfect synchronicity progressively lapses as time passes, made physically manifest as each clock’s hands no longer occupy the same positions. Initially wholeheartedly invested in the other, our interest, desires, and motivations began to vary. Prompted by both physical and emotional separation, we decided to give each other time and space to individually reestablish our individual lives—the biological mothering of Verónica’s daughter and my singular art practice involving my biological mother.

³⁶ McGowan 29

³⁷ McGowan 32

VII [Prodigal Return]

Having taken a break from the work with Verónica and because Mother's health had improved, I decided to return home to make the first body of work outside of a surrogate collaboration in years. Working collaboratively with Verónica had launched a love of video. Returning home returned me to my foundation in photography, but not singularly. I decided to merge the two through single-vantage-point, slow moving video, influenced by the photographic work of George Platt Lynes. Lynes' invented a subgenre of portraiture of the queer artist as a character in a narrative dream tableau. I wanted to make fantastical still-life self-portraits with Mother, in and around her house (See Appendix 9). Prior to making the videos, I looked at art historical and cultural imagery and remembered an Easter present from Mother when I was twenty-one. It was a stapled print out of Susan Sontag's *Notes on "Camp."* As one of my favorite gestures of my lifetime, I wanted the text to inform and manifest itself within my new work.

Camp constitutes a conceptual and aesthetic tradition that "exaggerates the trivial, not out of contempt but out of love, even if this is often a love of irony."³⁸ However, the extravagant exaggerations of style must be met with passion in order to truly be camp.³⁹ Traditionally celebrated by homosexuals, camp places emphasis on reinventing through appropriation. Sontag describes camp as being a sensibility focused on "seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon" that has evolved to being a "badge of identity" for some.⁴⁰ Those claiming this identity are often "an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats

³⁸ Friedrich, Julia. "Everything Doubled." *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*. Ed. Deborah Bright. London: Routledge, 1998. 96-105. Print.

³⁹ Sontag, Susan. "Notes On "Camp"" *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Ed. Susan Sontag. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966. Georgetown University. Georgetown. Web.

⁴⁰ Sontag 1966

of taste.”⁴¹ They emphasize the intensity and theatricality of their lived and documented exaggerations of character.

This self-proclaimed membership largely encompasses contemporary dandyism—“a man who gives exaggerated attention to personal appearance” through fine attire and outward demeanor.⁴² This new generation prides itself on progressing from the *overbred* dandies of the nineteenth century. Unlike those who could find pleasure only in objects and experiences “undefiled by mass appreciation,” the contemporary dandy’s camp influence dictates an acknowledgement of the potential for the “equivalence of all objects.”⁴³ From this perspective, a doorknob can be as impressive as a fine oil painting and mass-produced objects can be as, if not more so, revered as those that are one-off. For the contemporary dandy, living with a camp sentiment supersedes mere snobbish materialism and attention to aestheticism—it is a lived political identity with a propagandistic queer oriented lens.⁴⁴ While “the [nineteenth century] dandy held a perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils and was liable to swoon; the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves.”⁴⁵ The contemporary dandy utilizes a lived political identity that orients androgyny at the forefront of both activism and taste. Queer performativity has long utilized aesthetic sensibilities as a means of acquiring both visibility and power in heteronormative society.⁴⁶ A campy photographic portrait or lived identity is inherently hyper-stylized, and thus creates a doubled identity—like an actor and their character.

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² "Dandy." Def. 1. *Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web.

⁴³ Sontag 1966

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

VIII [mother / me]

Skimming the line between this doubled identity, Mother and I cast ourselves as nine variant transgressive identities, loosely based on southern American archetypes. From a young American boy working out in an attempt to impress his disillusioned mother to a dinner for two, each tableau is representative of a passionate exaggeration of the trivial (See Appendix 9). If I am going to make a bath scene, I am going to flood a tub wrapped in black leather, drape it in rose petals, and surround it with fire (See Appendix 10). It is the manic adornment of the commonplace that drives my work and my desire for perfection. Mother and I planned and executed each of the nine images in the same way that we used to plan weddings. Location, budget, theme, wardrobe, lighting, guest (viewer) experience, sound (or lack thereof), transportation and sometimes food were critical components of each scene. Like some events, some of the pictures were born from a single source image. Mike Glier's *Jeremy Vacuuming* from 1984 served as the catalyst for *Self-Portrait with Mother (Immaculate)* (See Appendix 10). As an image already existing within the realm of queer performativity, I wanted to adopt the raw physicality of his painting and bring it into the maternal realm. Designing a composition that consisted of two separate but coupled spaces, Mother and I were each able to perform an archetypal version of ourselves, but in a close proximity that suggests a likeness.

The nine tableaux invent and reinterpret the factual and fabricated happenings of my life with Mother as we conflate the real with the ideal. This conflation drives and defines the majority of my work, but is especially apparent in *mother / me*. Declaring whether a trophy belongs to me or to my older brother becomes of little consequence—they are just props to set a stage. Considering the area within the viewfinder to be a stage, we materialized conceptions of connectedness and isolation in the image, idea, and construction of our mother / child

relationship through lingering, performative gestures. The lingering forced us to strongly consider facial expressions and our relation to each other throughout the duration of each performance because cuts were not possible. This meant that we had to rely upon both careful choreography and the chemistry we possess as a collaborative unit. Beyond our gaze in each performative tableau, it was critical to consider the experience of the viewer when looking at the work, as well as the differing ways each tableau informed the others.

Positioning the nine screens along the perimeter of the gallery, the viewer becomes an active agent through the performance of the gaze (See Appendix 11). The act of looking defines an individual and particular experience of the work, allowing for a non-linear journey from tableau to tableau. Although the suicide that takes place in *Self-Portrait with Mother (Transfiguration)* (See Appendix 11) would give the impression of a linear timeline in relation to the other tableaux, the fact that it was made as a performance equalizes time and does not necessarily delineate itself as *the end*. This is critical as I classify the tableaux as chapters running concurrently. As Mother and I die in one video, we are nourishing our bodies in another—constantly cycling—like the earth. *mother / me* uses the body as material as it navigates campy lived performativity through humor, sensuality and excess. *Self-Portrait with Mother (Serve)* (See Appendix 9) casts strawberry cake and a live lobster as genitals, asserting the lobster as the aggressive phallus. Its writhing movements ultimately elicit sympathy as it dies before the viewer. *Self-Portrait with Mother (Twins)* (See Appendix 12) depicts the two of us as a single body, the embodiment of a chimera. Each body completes the other. Together, the nine tableaux that comprise *mother / me* were designed to work in unison as they tell the constructed story of a mother and her son as they attempt to reestablish the *objet petit a*.


IX [Conclusion]

From working with my biological mother to finding and working with multiple surrogates and then returning home to make *mother / me*, I have completed a full cycle within the maternal realm of my own creation. My desire to craft a “chosen family” and the process of finding and establishing unconditional love with another person on a strictly platonic foundation has dramatically shifted the means by which I go about making work and expressing my individual personhood. My inherently queer desire to construct my own family as well as its fantastical representation serves as a radically critical interrogation of the heteronormative nuclear family. Albeit critical, I use camp as a tool to establish a slight humor to the images that I create. I am the product of both a nuclear family and a family of my own construction and I do not intend to place one above the other. They are equal, discrete, and inform my lived political identity, sensibility, and production as an artist. Since the installation of *mother / me*, new legislation in the United States has forced Craigslist to remove its “personals” section. Because of this, any surrogate relationship that I might seek out in the future would have to be actualized through a new method to be determined. The closing of the cyber portal that was so influential upon my childhood development as well as the establishment of my constructed family serves as a turning point in my practice. Perhaps I have already found all that I need and the future of my work will focus more on merging my families, rather than continuing to search for something that I might not find.

X [Appendix 1]

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☆ **Queer Male Artist Seeking Mother - m4w**



body: athletic
 height: 6'2" (187cm)
 age: 23

To Whom this May Concern,

Who am I?

I am a queer male artist/photographer who recently moved to Brooklyn from North Carolina after graduating with highest honors and distinction with a BFA from UNC-CH. I also have a minor in Women and Gender Studies. I am honored to work for curator Diego Cortez and for artist Anthony Goicolea.

As an artist and a feminist, I have conducted extensive photographic studies exploring familial history, gender construction, and sexuality with regard to identity fabrication through masquerade.

Okay, so what do I want?

I am interested in maternal art, but no longer live in the same state as my parents. I am looking for a "mother" or "mothers" that will pose alone and with me in photographs for my current "Surrogates" collection of images.

What will this entail?

I hope to establish a friendship with those that I decide to work with. Ideally, you will be of an age where it is biologically possible for you to be my mother- I'm twenty-two. Also, as I am interested in maternal spaces, we will be working out of your home for the photographs. Hopefully, these photo sessions will occur multiple times.

As bizarre as this sounds, I'd love for you to reach out and maybe we could have some fun and make stunning images together!

Please check out my site if you want to know more about what I do and get a better sense for my aesthetic considerations. My incredibly supportive parents are in many of the images and will give you an idea of the kind of work that I do.

If you are interested in working with me, please provide a brief description of yourself and a couple pictures of your home- they don't have to be elaborate. I will help you to get your home back to its original state before I leave for the day.

Thanks so much!

Best,

Gray

- do NOT contact me with unsolicited services or offers

post id: 5804340331
 posted: less than a minute ago
 [email to friend](#)
[best of](#)

The Craigslist Ad

Appendix 2



Self-Portrait with Father and Dying Mother
Gray Swartzel
2014
Color Archival Metallic Inkjet Print
32 x 32 Inches



Olympia
Édouard Manet
1863
Oil On Canvas
51.4 x 74.8 inches



Self-Portrait as Olympia with Mother
Gray Swartzel
2013
Color Archival Metallic Inkjet Print
40 x 60 Inches

Appendix 3



Portrait (Twin)
Yasumasa Morimura
1988
C-Print



Twins (After Lyle Ashton Harris)
Gray Swartzel
2014
Archival Pigment Print
From an edition of 8 and 2 artist's proofs
33 x 50 inches



Self-Portrait as Mother and Deceased Self
Gray Swartzel
2014
Archival Pigment Print
From an edition of 8 and 2 artist's proofs
35.5 x 50 inches

Appendix 4



*Self-Portrait with Mother in the Living Room
(After Gluck)*
Gray Swartzel
2014
Archival Pigment Print
From an edition of 8 and 2 artist's proofs
40 x 50 inches



Mother's Puppy
Gray Swartzel
2014
Archival Pigment Print
From an edition of 8 and 2 artist's proofs
33 x 50 inches



Baptism in Mother's Name
Gray Swartzel
2014
Archival Pigment Print
From an edition of 8 and 2 artist's proofs
15 x 22.5 inches

Appendix 5



Ferris Wheel with Mother

Gray Swartzel

2015

Archival Pigment Print

From an edition of 8 and 2 artist's proofs

20 x 25 inches



Self-Portrait as Olympia with Mother No. II

Gray Swartzel

2015

Archival Pigment Print

40 x 50 Inches



Le Chaman (The Shaman)

Pierre Molinier

ca. 1967

Vintage silver print on baryta paper

7 x 4 9/10 in

Appendix 6



Mon fétiche des jambes
Pierre Molinier
1966
Silver Gelatin Print



Rose Selavy (Marcel Duchamp)
Man Ray
1921
Silver Gelatin Print



Chimeral States (Collodion Still No. 12)
Gray Swartzel & Verónica Vega
2018
Wet-Plate Collodion & Cast Acrylic
Frame
3 x 4 inches

Appendix 7



Chimeral States (Collodion Still No. 5)
Gray Swartzel & Verónica Vega
2018
Wet-Plate Collodion & Cast Acrylic
Frame
3 x 4 inches

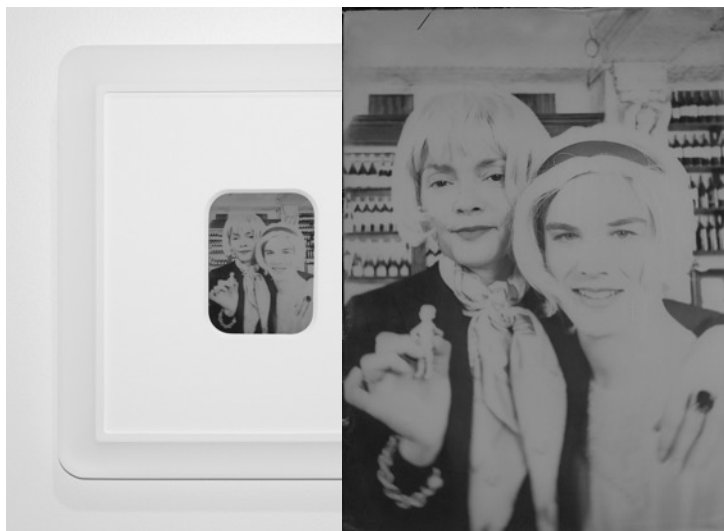


Chimeral States (Collodion Still No. 7)
Gray Swartzel & Verónica Vega
2018
Wet-Plate Collodion & Cast Acrylic
Frame
3 x 4 inches



Chimeral States (Collodion Still No. 19)
Gray Swartzel & Verónica Vega
2018
Wet-Plate Collodion & Cast Acrylic
Frame
3 x 4 inches

Appendix 8



Chimeral States (Collodion Still No. 6)
Gray Swartzel & Verónica Vega
2018
Wet-Plate Collodion & Cast Acrylic
Frame
3 x 4 inches



Chimeral States (Collodion Still No. 1)
Gray Swartzel & Verónica Vega
2018
Wet-Plate Collodion & Cast Acrylic
Frame
3 x 4 inches



Untitled (Perfect Lovers)
Félix González-Torres
1991
Clocks, paint on wall
14 x 28 x 2.75 inches

Appendix 9



Orpheus (Lev Christian and Marie Jeanne)
George Platt Lynes
1936
Silver Gelatin Print
8 x 10 inches



Self-Portrait with Mother (Swell)
Gray Swartzel
2018
Single-Channel 4K Video
3:02
Dimensions Variable



Self-Portrait with Mother (Serve)
Gray Swartzel
2018
Single-Channel 4K Video
3:02
Dimensions Variable

Appendix 10



Self-Portrait with Mother (Sacrament)
Gray Swartzel
2018
Single-Channel 4K Video
3:02
Dimensions Variable



Jeremy Vacuuming
Mike Glier
1984
Oil on Canvas



Self-Portrait with Mother (Immaculate)
Gray Swartzel
2018
Single-Channel 4K Video
3:02
Dimensions Variable

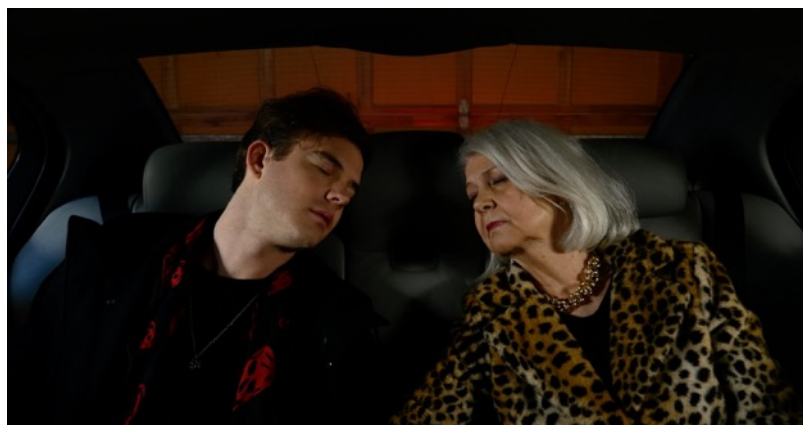
Appendix 11



Gray Swartzel, *mother / me*
Immutable Stage: CMU 2018
MFA Thesis, exhibition at the
Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon
University. Photo by Tom Little,
2018



Gray Swartzel, *mother / me*
Immutable Stage: CMU 2018
MFA Thesis, exhibition at the
Miller Gallery at Carnegie Mellon
University. Photo by Tom Little,
2018



Self-Portrait with Mother (Transfiguration)
Gray Swartzel
2018
Single-Channel 4K Video
5:36
Dimensions Variable

Appendix 12



Self-Portrait with Mother (Twins)

Gray Swartzel

2018

Single-Channel 4K Video

3:00

Dimensions Variable



Self-Portrait with Mother (Eucharist)

Gray Swartzel

2018

Single-Channel 4K Video

2:33

Dimensions Variable



Self-Portrait with Mother (Dusk)

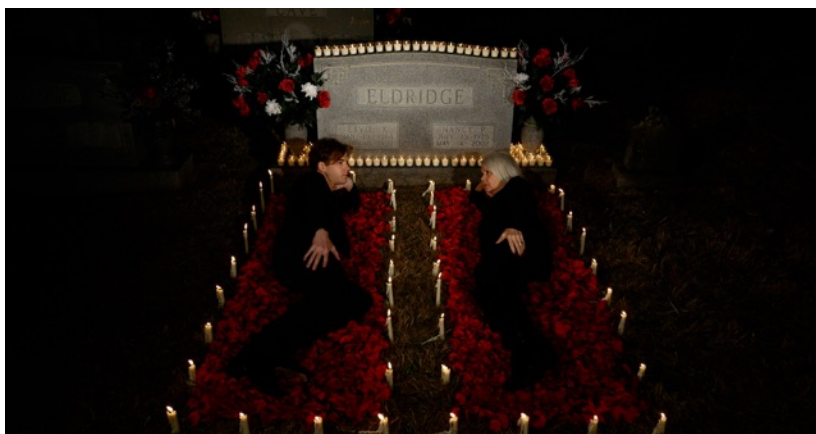
Gray Swartzel

2018

Single-Channel 4K Video

3:42

Dimensions Variable



Self-Portrait with Mother (Offering)

Gray Swartzel

2018

Single-Channel 4K Video

3:24

Dimensions Variable