

Research Summary

Transcendence: An exploration of collage as a voice for non-binary gender identity - a short form summary

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This Master's thesis constituted a practice-led, artistic inquiry into the potential of queer collage as a visual communication device for expressing the identity and perspectives of a non-binary person navigating a world of gender conformity. The study was framed as an autoethnographic inquiry that employed heuristic methods to explore collage as a queer process of building and unbuilding (Halberstam, 2011). This process was actualised by reflective self-dialogue, iterative practice, and reflection on external feedback. The thesis sought to contribute to emerging discourses and artistic practices related to contemporary non-binary gender identity and expression.

Central to the focus of the inquiry was an investigation into non-binary rebuildings of mythological iconography, such that they might engage with a softening of classical masculinities, a reorienting of the masculine gaze, and the creation of harmonic compositions that elevate ideas like sensitivity, sensuality, and affection. Of the collages created in the project, four serve to illustrate the study: *Eros and Ludus* (2022), *Reclining Colossus* (2023), *The Younger Self* (2023), and *Haircut* (2023).



Figure 1: *Eros and Ludus* - from fraternal solidarity to queer affection (2022).

Eros and Ludus combined a section of Aimé-Jules Dalou's *La Fraternité des Peuples* with a corporeal landscape and flesh-coloured petals. The sculpture fragment was sampled from a plaster haut-relief carved for the city hall of the Xth Arrondissement in Paris in 1833.

The collage depicts a 'fraternal kiss on the mouth', which in the 1830s was a politicised form of greeting between socialist leaders who considered themselves ideologically intimate (Belton & Citron, 2016). However, as a queer collage, the work suggests a greater level of sensual intimacy.

The title *Eros and Ludus*, draws on Lee's (1973) psychological taxonomy of the primary types of love (Eros, Ludus and Storge). In the work, I combined Eros (romantic, passionate love that pursues physical ideals), and Ludus (love that is uncommitted and game-playing), as a way of connecting romantic and playful physical sexual expression. Here, masculinity is subverted and softened, transferred from a socialist expression of fraternal solidarity to an expression of affection, tissue, and muscle. Through a queer lens, we encounter

a heightening of emotion and affection, encased in the transitioning colours of dawn and dusk. This collage expresses how we might want to be loved- combining Eros' romantic passion and Ludus' playfulness. Such love combines delicacy, beauty and a fusion of classical strength with intimate possibility.



Figure 2: Reclining Colossus - the internal gaze (2023).

Reclining Colossus draws its figurative iconography from two sculptures; the *Sleeping Satyr* (sculptor unknown, c. 220 BC) and the *Dying Gladiator* (Pierre Julien, 1799). These works were combined in the collage because their languid expressions and reclined positions could create a composite cohesion that suggested lovers, their gazes being serene rather than stoic.

This work deliberately steered away from the hyper-sexualisation that often occurs when depicting queer and transgender identities. While celebrating the sexuality and erotic nature of queer and trans bodies is valid (when addressed respectfully), it is often used to minimise and fetishise the community. In contrast, this work connected desire to love, affection and interiority. It proposed a rich intensity of emotion that extends beyond romantic cliché because the collage is concurrently “unsettled”, “forging unique navigations”, and by its nature, “evading fixed definitions” and order (Darwin, 2017).

Reclining Colossus communicated my hope for the future. Much like Eros and Ludus, the collage expressed my wish to share love with another person in a way that is both vulnerable and tender. Here, love transcends constructed fetishization, rejecting outside expectations and obligations. Intimacy and care occur behind closed doors, away from the politicising and judging public eye.



Figure 3: Younger Self – compassionate care (2023).

The Younger Self combined a nebulous environment with part of the statue Silenus bearing the child Dionysus, created by Praxiteles (c. 400 BC).

The myth of Dionysus's birth, death and resurrection is complex, and Mark (2022) observes that the myth has diverse accounts. However, they all share a consistent feature; that either Dionysus or his pregnant mother was killed before he regenerated or completed gestating inside the body of a second parent. Accordingly, as a deity, Dionysus is often associated with survival and rebirth.

In this collage, an affectionate relationship between a child and an adult is positioned inside an ethereal environment to suggest a moment of meditation, reflection and insight. Here, I looked back at my younger self with the nurturing kindness of a parent embracing their inner child.

we understand these two phases of the self (the child as Ishtar and the adult as Ezra), we encounter a compassionate bridge of support and understanding within the gaze. In mythology, both Ishtar and Dionysus are transitional beings. Burton (2017) notes that Ishtar epitomised gender fluidity, queerness and binary disruption. He also records that this goddess of fertility, love, war and sex, “was sometimes represented with a beard to emphasise her more bellicose side. She could change a man into a woman, and the assinnu, kurgarru, and kuku’u who performed her cult had both male and female features” (Burton, 2017, para. 8).

The collage reflects the story of my name, ‘Ezra’ (that replaces my old name, Ishtar). ‘Ezra’ comes from the Hebrew word ‘azar’, meaning ‘help’, ‘aid’ or ‘protect’. If

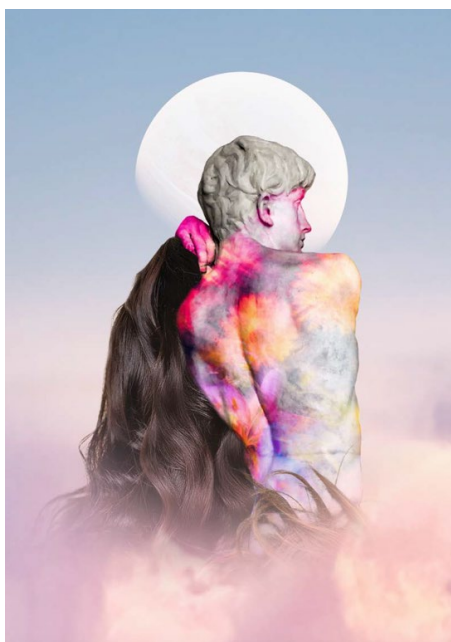


Figure 4: Haircut – revealing beauty and inner truth (2023).

Haircut explored the transformative qualities of a trans person’s first gender-affirming haircut. The shroud of long hair hanging from the shoulder represents the literal and emotional weight being lifted as the beauty and inner truth of the person is revealed. Combined with the overlay of flowers on the skin and the halo of the planet Venus behind the head, the collage spoke to physical transformation and the emergence of joy.

My first haircut was a profound and deliberate assertion of my identity, reshaping the self by ‘cutting away’ the constraint of gender compliance. Captivated, I watched as, physically, a closer presence of my identity was revealed as my hair fell to the floor.

The placement of the halo alludes to both the planet Venus and holiness. In this collage, it highlights the sanctity and beauty of an individual's quest for self-truth. The halo is a reoccurring trope in the work of a number of queer collage artists, including Gabriel García Román, who in describing his series *Queer Icons* (2011) states,

My images are visually giving power to a group of people that are generally disempowered. I want young people to see these images and see them as an example of someone powerful and noble that they can become. (Rivas, 2015, para. 3)

Across the spectrum of my collage work, one often encounters the illumination of holy light (not in a religious sense, because I am not religious). Instead, luminosity is ethereal, a form of spiritual enlightenment where holiness refers to reverence, love, and respect for a person who pursues inner truth.

This pursuit of my true self, I see as non-linear and evolutionary. My understanding of 'transgender' is a journey between genders that do not follow a directional route. I understand identity as fluid, and destinations can fluctuate. My gender as a non-binary transgender person is an identity outside of being a man or a woman, and the intimacy and aspirations of this journey of building and unbuilding is ever-evolving.

In overview, these four artworks formed part of a larger body of work that also considered issues like the trans body as a reimagining of classical representations of Hermaphrodite/Hermaphroditus. As a queer study, the thesis built on Webb & O'Brien's, (2008) presupposition that knowledge is personal and the belief that autoethnographic research might display "multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). In doing so, the study constituted a contribution to a greater whole; that the lives of non-binary people that currently exist within quantitative studies or conflict-oriented media reporting might be supplemented with other forms of intellectual discourse that are personal, embodied, and humane.

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Biography

Ezra Baldwin (they/them) is completing a Master's thesis after graduating with a Bachelor of Communication Design in 2021. Their research interests include queer, trans and non-binary identity and ways in which lived experience can influence mental health advocacy and design for social good.

Between 2021 and 2022, Ezra was an executive board member for Out@AUT, AUT's Rainbow student club, and in 2023 they became the Rainbow Representative for AUT's branch of the Tertiary Education Union. They also work as a teaching assistant with undergraduate students in the School of Art and Design / Te Kura Toi a Hoahoa.