

On Queer Verticality

Amie Corry: Both of your practices reference the language of minimalism, but that language is sort of queried or troubled. How does queerness play into that troubling? It's worth noting that there's some anxiety surrounding the idea of a queer abstraction. It's perceived as a problem that you have to 'read into' a work in order to draw out its politics, people worry about getting it wrong, or projecting.

Garth Gratrix: Yes. Working through queerness is slippery. But if you're making art from core attributes – looking at surface, object, objecthood, and what that can mean to different people – then a 'reading into' the materials is already occurring. If you are living as LGBTQIA+ or working with a queer sensitivity to material, that presence is immediately politicised because it's non-normative.

James William Murray: It's rare that an art object is divorced from the context surrounding the maker. On first impression, my work appears objective, formal or minimal, but that's destabilised by context.

AC: So in that vein – I'm interested in the choice of verticality as a theme for this collaboration. Orienting oneself vertically along a straight line bears implications of linearity or normativity – 'on the straight and narrow' – which, on first glance, seems to contradict the queer project. But again, that's layered: the horizontal could denote sameness, in terms of same-sex attraction, but also assimilation with the mainstream. James, why verticality?

JWM: My interest in an upright form stems from Ancient Greek statuary. The Archaic Greek kouros (male youth) sculptures exhibit a great deal of tension, they're ramrod straight, closer to Egyptian sculpture, whereas later Classical statuary is more excessive and fluid. There's something sexually charged and a bit kinky about the kouros for me – this standing to attention – it feels like something's about to happen. There's an eroticism there that I wanted to explore. The kouros was also a way into thinking about the one-size-fits-all pattern of Western canonical beauty, which is based on the bodily proportions of an upright white male body.

AC: So verticality opens up ways of thinking about the relationship between the body and the art object? Garth, your beach towels are things to be draped over or around the body, or to be sat on. You're playing with that relationship as well, with the minimalist form? The vertical stripes on the towels are interrupted by the peep of pink triangles.

GG: Yes. I often refer to my work as a sort of playful, joyous, slipperiness and I think there's a parallel there in my use of stripes. There's an ego to the stripe, a confidence. They're not blurred, it's two definitives having polar opposite conversations.

I became interested in the body as separate from the object, but there's also that beautiful marriage that happens in minimalism – when things come off the wall and you're invited to become part of them spatially, to walk around them. You're navigating something with a level of curiosity, ambiguity, uncertainty.

AC: Can we talk about the evolution of both of your engagements with abstraction? The discourse of queer abstraction, the work of David Getsy among others, acknowledges the importance of the fight for queer visibility, and that visibility is a privilege not available to all. But it posits abstraction as a brilliant complication of the idea that seeing is knowing, that we can determine something about a person or object just by looking at them. Instead, abstraction becomes a means of recognising the mutability of the body and states of personhood.

JWM: There was a point for me when abstraction was about concealment, a strategy to sidestep the ways in which bodies are read and codified and categorised in figurative art, especially in depictions of same-sex sex.

AC: Which risks conflating sexuality solely with sexual acts.

JWM: Exactly. Our sex is really the tip of the iceberg in terms of the richness and complexity of queer lives. Abstraction seemed to offer more open possibilities for considering questions of gender and sexuality, race, class, religion, nationality etcetera – queerness manifests differently for different people.

GG: For me, it's the inbetweenness – it's partly about the body and partly it isn't. The reveal/conceal that James mentioned. It's only in the last three years – 50 years since partial same-sex decriminalisation in England – that I decided to make my queerness visible. I'm now working more with forms that have the quality of emblem or motif, the pink triangle for example, which was 'put on the body', to announce or denounce marginalised groups. So there's a way of talking about the body without talking about self – an invitation to be congregational around ideas as opposed to offering a single, vertical stance.

AC: So your interest in verticality is more in a thing that can be bent?

GG: Well I used to think about verticality in a nonphysical sense: the glass ceiling, hierarchies, class divides... how far you can reach or stretch in your bodily posture or in your ambitions. But then I started thinking about it in a personal capacity. I was looking at artists like Ron Haselden, whose neon-pink ladder was installed on the church in Blackpool town centre in 2016. It's the same church that held my grandfather's funeral. My grandfather was a legendary player for Blackpool FC, in their heyday in the fifties and sixties. His team's original kit was blue and white stripes and later became tangerine. I couldn't help but bring my own bodily references to the stripe: something that I'd previously thought of in terms of a minimal engagement with shape and line.

AC: And what about in relation to the yellow florist blocks that you're showing at Gallery DODO, *Pursuit of Happiness*?

GG: I've previously used breezeblocks and the aesthetics of DIY construction, which makes you think about verticality in an architectural sense. But with the florist block, it's more about ways of creating bodily traces in this sandlike, crushable material that still visually references labour, but for ornamental and

decorative purposes – for flower arrangements and funerals. I'm thinking about the distance between bodies – there's a sort of friendly tribute to people who aren't with us anymore – to family. But also loss on a wider scale, genocide, some indirect politics.

AC: That's interesting about the Ron Haselden piece and its play with the vertical orientation of the church tower, and your own engagement with the architectural implications of the brick. In the Western canon, verticality can act as a sort of self-authorising framework; a pedestal pretty successfully communicates imperialist power structures for example. Whereas both of you seem invested in queering received ideas of power relations. I'm thinking of your interest in kink James?

JWM: Yes. You can talk about verticality in terms of normative expectation, its bodily uprightness, but there's also an awkwardness to a vertical art object. Most of the time a floor-standing sculpture doesn't fit neatly into an interior space.

AC: And that awkwardness derives from its coming away from the wall, which is what happened with the kouros – a literal stepping out and away from a support. How linked is your interest in canonical beauty, with the emphasis on physical perfection that abounds in many male gay spaces?

JWM: I have certainly felt great pressure, at certain points in my life, to measure up to homonormative beauty standards. I think this has informed my interest in the fragility of canonical beauty formulas... And yet I can't deny that the way I became sexualised was bound up with certain images of 'perfection'. So there's always a push/pull between the desire for a less rigid, queer relationality, and the enduring allure of violent homoeroticism. I think this tension has been productive for my work.

AC: That plays out in the *Object Q* series that you're showing with Garth's florist blocks – where T-shirt hems and inner trouser seams bind vertical arrangements of stretcher bars. The fabric has been ripped from the source, but embalmed. That gesture could be read as tender or violent or both.

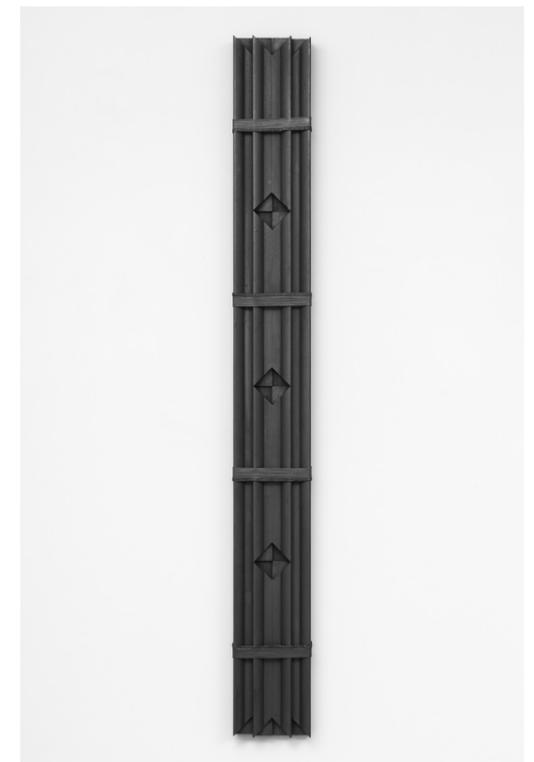
JWM: Yes, there are questions of ownership and agency here – a violent implication... But also a desire to hold on to a person through tender means. The hems and seams come from the clothing of people that I've known intimately. There's an element of mourning to them. But also a kinky undertone to the binding, which wasn't intentional, but it pleased me. The cotton is sort of mummified by a graphite and gel medium solution so they're no longer pliable and stretchy. They're fixed. I think I'm always looking for a point that is fixed, something that I can hold onto, something snatched from the experience of time and sensuality, materiality and tactility, to take all of that excess and put it into an object. And it's fucking hard to do, but when it works it's a transformative thing, for me personally.

AC: How did you arrive at that point with the *Object Q* sculptures?

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Gratrix, *Pursuit of Happiness*, 2020, oasis block, household emulsion (dimensions variable)



Murray, *Object Q III*, 2020, graphite on stretcher bars with T-shirt hems (16 × 120 × 4 cm)

JWM: I was ordering stretcher bars in increments of 120, 60 and 30 centimetres. And I noticed that when they arrived they were stacked in such a way to create these diamond or bow-tie shapes – it was an arbitrary thing, a found formalism.

AC: That play between the soft and hard – in the materials, and the openness of the intention – seems to relate to the florist block bearing the indents of knees Garth?

GG: I don't come from an angle of eroticism with my work, except perhaps when there's a campness attached to it in a tongue-in-cheek, Kenneth Williams-esq, by-the-sea-on-holiday-in-your-Breton-stripes way. But there's something about playing with who owns the idea of eroticism in a homonormative space, versus a heteronormative perception of what erotics are in gay or queer culture. I like camp for its knowingness because it willingly subverts expectations, which again I think is a way of softening or hardening perspectives.

AC: Looking at the florist blocks, I was thinking about negation, because the body is implied through negative space. Eve Sedgwick claims shame as the primary queer affect because it embraces its own negation from the sphere of ordinary culture. That negation potentially ties to what you were talking about with the homoerotic violence James, and seemingly negative emotions being invested and directed toward pleasurable activities? Garth, is there anything in the idea of negation for you?

GG: Negation yes, but also potential. I'm interested in the brick as an idea, with its connotations of Carl Andre's Equivalent series, these yellow-toned fire bricks. My florist blocks are titled after the colour specification 'Pursuit of Happiness' – this bright yellow tone, which relates to the culture of happiness, the yellow brick road. I guess there's a negation or refusal of reality.

These two blocks that I'm presenting with James are probably the most minimal intervention in a space that I'm yet to do. There's something I like about the implication that it can be expanded upon, because we understand the language of the brick. But there's a machismo and ego surrounding certain materials used by male artists like Andre and I think there's something different about how a queer body politicises those materials. But again it comes back to camp for me – that wilful intention to jar with the past, a level of homage but it's not mimicry, because we should be thinking differently. I like the implications of kneeling at something that's already been made in art history. Am I kneeling at it in prayer? Am I sexually charging it? Is it about 'gnoshing someone off'? A proposal? A love gesture? Taking the knee as a political act...

JWM: ...or a crushing.

AC: It relies on relations, as all minimal objects do.

GG: Yes. If someone was to be knelt in front of you, what are you assuming is going to happen and because it's an artist working with queer concerns, does that eroticise the notion of kneeling or not and whose decision is that – the artist or viewer? I like that open-endedness in terms of the invitation of desire, based on the placement of an object and the trace of a knee.

AC: You're looking at how content is transmitted, coded? I'm thinking of your use of motifs – the dropped handkerchief, the pink triangle, but also language: innuendo, these gorgeous, indulgent colour specification titles. How interested are you in the legibility of your codes?

GG: It's queer tactics. Tactical ways to communicate, historically, safely. A refusal to accept an erasure of identity. I'm fascinated in Polari. The notion of slapping paint on these floristry blocks and 'slap' being a Polari word for make-up, needing to cover up or half-masking something.

AC: Coming back to the politics of visibility in terms of assimilation then, and the idea that assimilation challenges a lot of the dynamism and mutability of queerness. How do the two of you feel about that in your respective locations, Garth in Blackpool, and James in Brighton?

GG: I think about privilege and visibility in terms of the proud and problematic, because I'm a white man, who is also queer, and we have to try and level up the opportunities for others who are marginalised – trans, non-binary, bi, Black and Asian artists, and queer women. That rubs off in my curatorial and collaborative approach with other artists; with queer coastal residencies and larger group exhibitions. Because there still aren't many queer artists in the archives or included in anything other than queer art shows.

JWM: I'm suspicious of the term 'queer artist' because there's a particular cultural capital around being queer at the moment. If we show purely in the context of queer art practices, what happens when that currency depreciates or is no longer part of a mainstream strategy? But it's easy for me to flirt with anti-assimilationist positions as a cis gendered white man who has grown up in Brighton, the 'gay capital of Europe'.

GG: So we're in these two coastal locations, North and South, and attitudes are very different. Queer's proximity to acceptability is different where I am.

AC: This collaboration has developed over the course of the pandemic – how has the inability to physically see the objects in relation to one another constrained or moulded the process?

GG: Minimalism asks you to look at core attributes, so not being able to test those in a modular way is difficult. But there's an assertion in James's work and a confidence that I admire and that has helped me make decisions in a very minimal way. The technicolour inclusion of *Pursuit of Happiness* in a very monochrome space, and the silver of the graphite, I think will work well, will have a dialogue.

JWM: Yes. We decided quite early on that we wanted to produce a very, very minimal show. I sort of thought, if you're playing chess you want to win in as few moves as possible...! But unlike Garth, I generally work on my own, day in, day out, which I think comes partly from a working class sensibility around self-sufficiency. When we were in the early stages of discussion I was already plotting out this slick,

aesthetically pleasing duo-show and then Garth told me very bluntly that wasn't what he was interested in! It's more of an experimental process, and that's completely opened things up for me. I'm even looking at all the colours we can see behind Garth in his studio now and thinking, 'maybe I should explore that'.

GG: We're in a climate where we're only ever talking about 'self-care' and the need for 'space'. My collaborative projects are about establishing my collaborators' needs, as much as mine, and supporting queer artists, beyond art and critique. It's relational dynamics and cognitive behaviours, and just breathing into someone else breathing differently to you. It's fascinating for me, collaboration, in terms of taking a breath out of your own fears of failure.

JWM: Yeah, I'm converted!

AC: I love that. 'Failure', and testing what that means, being another key queer concept. Both of you employ systems and codes. Garth, you often apply a 'nine-inch rule' when deciding the scale or distance of an object, which refers to inevitable questions about cock size on Grindr. I like how that plays with minimalism's interest in removing decision-making elements.

GG: My nine-inch rule is about the interference of apps, which take over the idea of finding relationships and force ideas of tribes and anatomical ideologies. On apps, there's an overwhelming disregard for one another in a space that is meant to be about shared safety and care. The notion of cruising and flirting before the Internet was a physical, performative thing in space. In Blackpool, there's a beautiful ornate part of the promenade called Middlewalk, where people cruise, stopping and starting on this horizontal plane, looking for relationships, testing their desires or intrigues. I like installation work or interventions as they invite a body to cruise around an object and navigate it.

AC: Jack Halberstam recently bemoaned the decline of cruising and said that Grindr transforms 'all gay interactions to money'. There's something about cruising as an anti-capitalist gesture, a sort of wandering in space, sometimes frustrating.

JWM: ... and while Grindr may just be another way of commodifying gay sex, there are still as many ways to cruise as there are to look at art. It's important to explore different contexts and find what works for you. Be curious!

This conversation took place on the occasion of a two-person exhibition at Gallery DODO, Brighton, UK: Garth Gratrix and James William Murray, 'Object Q / Pursuit of Happiness' (29th May – 27th June 2021).



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