

ABSTRACT

Levi Taylor Booker

My art practice primarily utilizes handmade paper to create works that are both alluring and repulsive in the ways they represent the human body. As a transmasculine nonbinary artist, I am challenging representation that can make people uncomfortable by being vulnerable with my body. Through video, handmade paper, and the process of making body casts, I embrace manipulating the image of my body to create monstrous or mythical hybrids to reflect the experience of being “othered” and living in a state of hyper awareness around gendered visibility.

In Akiko Busch’s book, *How to Disappear: Notes on Invisibility in a Time of Transparency*, Busch presents an argument that claims true liberation from the confines of societal structures and psychological exhaustion comes from re-evaluating the ways in which we connect to nature. Instead, she suggests defiantly detaching from the pressures to be completely understood or “seen” by society through ritualistically surrendering to the environment. The full bodily engagement, use of natural plant fibers, and meditative process inherent to hand papermaking can be likened to that notion of surrendering to the environment as it becomes a self-healing and liberating process to mediate the frustration and rage of being “unseen” in everyday life. My work acknowledges the internal effort put into that experience to find peace and comfort within the self through the process of making paper. At the same time, I categorize my usage of hybridity and unsettling bodily forms as an external, public method of processing negative experience. Therefore, my body of work blends the external and internal response to defying gender conformity: calling attention to the arbitrary yet confining structures around bodily normativity while simultaneously working in a process that functions as a ritualized act of healing and ownership of the body in communion with nature.

The physicality of making paper and sculptural body casts demands an intentional awareness and exploration of the body that confronts the uncomfortable and the intimate. In these processes of making, my body and handmade paper become a vessel for expressing a nonbinary transgender experience and radical reclamation of the self.

Flesh and Mud:
Bodily Deconstruction Through Handmade Paper

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My art practice is centered around engaging with my body physically and conceptually. The full body physicality of making paper and sculptural body casts demands an intentional awareness and exploration of the body that confronts the uncomfortable and the intimate. Through these processes of making, my body becomes a vessel for expressing my transmasculine nonbinary experience and radical reclamation of the self.

In making art, I strive to challenge and engage with representation that can make people uncomfortable by being vulnerable with my body. Through sculpture, I embrace manipulating the representation of my body to create monstrous hybrids to reflect the experience of being “othered” and living in a state of hyper awareness around visibility. I am categorizing my usage of hybridity and unsettling bodily forms as an external, public method of processing negative experience. At the same time, my work also acknowledges the internal effort put into that experience to find peace and comfort within the self through the meditative processes of working with natural plant fibers in papermaking. Therefore, my body of work blends the external and internal response to defying gender conformity: calling attention to the arbitrary yet confining structures around bodily normativity while simultaneously working in a process that functions as a ritualized act of healing and ownership of the body.

In Akiko Busch’s book, *How to Disappear: Notes on Invisibility in a Time of Transparency*, Busch presents an argument that claims true liberation from the confines of societal structures and psychological exhaustion around being perceived can come from re-evaluating the ways in which we connect to nature, and instead, defiantly detach from the pressures to be completely understood or “seen”. One of her suggested methods of detachment is to embrace being fully consumed in the natural world and to

build kinship with the landscape. She states: "Kinship with landscape can be a kinesthetic process, and about how it is possible for human beings to enter an emotional relationship with natural phenomena" (Busch 181). Influenced by my experience with the intense physical labor of working outside on vegetable farms and the start to finish process of making paper, I have conceptualized this experience of building emotional relationships with the landscape as surrendering to the environment. Surrendering to the environment is a direct physical relationship with the landscape--working the body to its extremity for hours on end while being completely immersed in a tactile experience-- and learning to spiritually revere and navigate the unpredictability of natural processes. In this way, given the need for time, patience, and adaptability required for working with different fibers, papermaking becomes my primary method of surrendering to the environment, connecting to the body, and providing the material foundation for my sculptural works.

In my video piece *indi(visible)*, I use a record of my body's actions as a means of expressing that individual connection to the environment through papermaking by presenting a non-linear progression of harvesting milkweed for fiber and creating a ritual out of the harvesting process. Initially, I was inspired by the engagement with the landscape and surreal world building of Allison Janae Hamilton's exhibition, *Pitch*, at Mass MoCA (March 2018-2019). *Pitch* combined sculpture, photography, and video installation to transform the gallery space into Hamilton's vision of a Floridian landscape full of esoteric mythologies and identity relations to that landscape. In an interview with Scalawag magazine, Hamilton stated: "I'm always using the materials of the physical land as a way to explore history, as a way to explore mysticism, to explore environmental justice and injustice and how people live and cope in, and on the land." This sentiment is a conceptual foundation of *indi(visible)*. The visual exertion of my

body combined with the intimate handling of both the stalks and seed pods of the milkweed expresses that kind of visceral and emotional relationship I am attempting to forge with the landscape and subsequently, the paper that would be created out of it. Therefore, I am demonstrating the utilization of handmade paper as a material of the landscape to explore a method of coping on the land that is reminiscent of surrendering to the environment.

Hamilton's 4-channel video installation, *FLORIDALAND (2017-2018)* combines fleeting clips of the landscape like rippling water and a disorienting, spinning view of treetops from the ground, along with overlaid shots of the artist, masked by a large, bird-like skull, riding a white horse. The audio is an amalgamation of nature sounds, traditional lining hymns, and sounds inspired by African American sacred harp and shape note singing from the Florida-Alabama coast that all together, create a cacophonous drone that is difficult to decipher. Combining this audio along with nature as a subject, not just a background, Hamilton posits her identity as a black woman in direct relationship with the landscape and references her ancestral ties to the rural south. The mysticism around concealing the identity of the only figure with an animal skull paired with a haunting, and loudly disorienting audio displaces the viewer into an unsettling yet captivating mythology.

Disconnecting the viewer from the world on the screen is something that I began working toward in *indi(visible)* through the older film style, jump-cut editing, repetitive yet accumulating audio, and presentation of myself as an iris-less, horned, faun-like creature performing ritualistic actions with unclear intentions. Doing so, with a similar effect to Hamilton's piece, makes a familiar world foreign, and creates a narrative both esoteric and vaguely unsettling. The one motif that deviates from the "natural" aesthetic in my video is the syringe--which I had used during the filming to administer my

weekly testosterone shot. This element nods at that common gender affirming experience as ritual and investigates the tension between “natural” and “unnatural”, especially in light of common rhetoric that contests trans bodies being “natural”. Embodying the faun persona also works towards that point in that it is embracing a state of hybridization, a being that is seen as almost human, but not quite. Especially with regard to non-binary identity, the idea of monstrous hybridization as a reclaimed metaphorical tool of representation is a key theme to my work as a whole.

The next component of my thesis project consists of several sculptural body casts—beginning with *Devoured*. *Devoured* utilized my body’s image directly in the process of casting my arm, shoulders, neck, and face in plaster wrap. This plaster cast was then used as a mold for the subsequent paper cast. The process of casting is one that is both vulnerable and intimate--both to confront the realities and tiny intricacies of the body in yourself as well as, in this case, having absolute trust and closeness with another person to assist in the cast’s construction. Completely exposing the body to feel the wet wrap slowly harden with myself inside, slowly losing mobility and the ability to see and speak, is a primal and visceral experience that forces a sort of surrendering to the self.

Conceptually, this sculpture reflects the all-consuming and sheer force of emotional frustration regarding not being understood in the queer identities I hold. *Devoured*, as a whole, highlights the disparity between an external “mask” of normalcy, and the reality of internal emotional wreckage and wildness that is a resulting repercussion of being entirely vulnerable in identity and still denied the privilege of being understood. The blank face, masked by the fibrous paper, emphasizes the rage of the monstrous mouth, as the chest overtakes the figure in a copper fog. Having to contain the surplus of volatile emotions around not being understood for the sake of

safety and conservation of self, results in an ultimately volcanic feeling that I am representing through the copper-painted paper as it erupts out of the chest and moves to consume the physical body. However, the fluidity of the copper fog creates a flexible illusion that is unclear whether it is originating from inside of the body and then consuming the figure, or if it is a pre-existing state where from the figure emerges. The uncertain perception and chaotic formation of this emotional copper form relates to the nature of identity as expressed by Busch in *How to Disappear*: "Identity becomes a vast and mysterious archipelago, surrounded by fog and with unknown currents and tides and indecipherable shorelines that are almost impossible to chart or navigate" (Busch 159).

To make a cast of oneself is an attempt to make a directly proportional copy that suggests that everything you see in the cast must exist elsewhere on the true body. In the process of making *Devoured*, I had to sculpt onto the face to make up for the features that got lost in the layering of the plaster wrap, as well as to sculpt the gnarly mouth in the chest and its transitions into the skin. Excited by the nuances of this process and its implications, I explore them further in the sculpture, *Unravel*. This time, the cast spans from my upper thighs to my shoulders and face. I not only fragmented the body cast, cutting it up to unravel into a contrapposto position, but I sculpted a flat chest in lieu of my breasts and a crocodile head that blends into my own face, making the entire form both reflect my body's shape and that of a crocodile emerging from the ground. Therefore, the form holds two different perceivable subjects in one hybrid. In the process, I moved through the stages of confrontation, replication, deconstruction, and finally reconstruction. This manipulation of my cast is violent yet divine in the remaking of myself in my own image.

The work of Hans Bellmer informs portions of *Unravel's* physical structure and process, as well as my overall conceptual understanding of empowerment through bodily deformation. Bellmer's surrealist photography of his massive dolls accentuates the disturbing nature of the ball joints, or where the body is expected to bend. Bellmer often presents the dolls as contorted and completely mutated into more mutilated bodily forms that are fused together. The gestural bending of the bodily form in Bellmer's piece, *Les jeux de la poupée* (ca. 1939), gives it a graceful and dance-like impression while simultaneously suggesting a very eerie feeling in how the body is fragmented and distorted. The doll's body is most distorted in the doubled representation of the lower body and genital area--mirrored and turned around on the doll's upper body and therefore replacing anticipated breasts with glutes. The sensual posing of the doll along the staircase with the doubled lower body accentuates the erotic and imposes a sense of disturbing sexuality.

Conceptually, Bellmer's work emerged in response to his experience within Nazi Germany. With his father being a member of the Nazi party, Bellmer developed a massive detestation for the state. He channeled this sentiment into his work--striving to "indulge in the perverse erotic desires deemed unacceptable by the regime, and (functionally) outrage the same regime" (Biles, p.135). In turn, his manipulations of bodily imagery through the dolls were politically driven in nature, challenging what was deemed acceptable through embracing a monstrous and erotic deformation of the figure. This directly correlates to my practice and is a foundational inspiration of my use of monstrous hybridization in my body casting and post-cast sculpture. In a similar spirit, especially in *Unravel*, my fragmentation, reconstruction, and hybridization subsequently are an enraged response to the taboo often around trans bodies. By embracing distortion, *Unravel* is both two beings at once-- disturbing in the

disembodiment of a cut up human form then fused with the inhuman, and magnificent in its compositional fluidity and texture.

Considering that Bellmer's dolls accentuate genitalia and sexuality, there is an inherent association to gender in his work as well. In *FIVE The Wounded Hands of Bataille: Hans Bellmer, Bataille, and the Art of Monstrosity*, author Jeremy Biles suggests Bellmer's work also engages with a complicated rendering of both the feminine and the masculine to further his rebellious stance against the normative ideals of the Nazi state:

By way of the bizarre articulations of the doll, a figure feminine in secondary sexual characteristics but phallic in posture, Bellmer engenders a mythical iconography of the hermaphrodite that arises not from an impulse toward synthetic unity, but rather lacerating contradiction...Such gender mixing, if less patent in the doll than in Bellmer's graphic corpus, nonetheless enhances the erotic reversibility that Bellmer actively pursued and exploited in his work...These sexually confused figures were, for him, emblems of transgression, of anerotic rage undercutting the either/or sexual normativity imposed by his father and the Nazi state (Bile, 143, 145).

In Bile's perspective, the ambiguity brought forth through distortion infuses political power into Bellmer's work. In reconstructing a flat chest onto my body cast that still maintains curvature associated with feminine form through constructing *Unravel*, I too am embracing ambiguity as an undercut to ideas of normativity. This ambiguity is present in my previous pieces as well. In *Devoured*, ambiguity comes through in the unidentifiable gender of my figure. In *indi(visible)*, it exists through the masculinity traditionally associated with the physicality of harvesting and femininity associated to wearing makeup. My intention is pointed at expression of nonbinary transgender experience where Bellmer's is not, however, the power of intentionally distorting the human body as an act of resistance is common between both of our practices.

What does it mean to break the body where it bends? Similar to the ball joints of Bellmer's dolls, the form of *Unravel* also visually manifests this kind of breaking of the body. Unlike my first cast for *Devoured*, this one I cast entirely on my own without

assistance, forcing there to be natural weaknesses in the cast at the points where I actually needed to bend and contort my own body to complete the casting. These are the points in which the figure is ultimately fragmented.

Responding to this sculpture during its initial development ultimately mutated the original form into the human-crocodile hybrid it is now. By making the piece on the floor, *Unravel* developed its own relationship to the environment, appearing as though it is emerging from the floor, or hovering in the way that a crocodile does in water. When crocodiles are semi-submerged in water, their hard, scaly backs are exposed and armor-like, while their soft, vulnerable underbellies are hidden and protected. Paradoxically, the “protected back” of the crocodile in *Unravel* is constructed from the casts of the most vulnerable parts of my body. By implying armor and strength through the exposition of my body’s vulnerability, I am expressing self-reclamation.

Regarding the paper material of *Unravel*, the foundational base is entirely made of cotton rag from the uniform shirts I wore every day of the summer working on a farm, mixed with bits of white cotton pulp to create the gradient of greens. Scattered within the cotton are the seed fluffs from the milkweed pods that I harvested on the same farm and were a part of the milkweed batch gathered in *indi(visible)*. The final component of the paper is the inclusion of several clippings of my own hair from various parts of my body including my face, legs, stomach, armpits, and pubic area. Therefore, the medium itself is intertwining materials that have a personal history and relationship to my body with fibers directly taken from the natural environment. The inherent process of making paper allows it to hold a history of the maker and material’s past. The textural properties of the finished paper then transforms the material to respond to an environment in a completely new context. With this in mind, my next

work, *Living Light*, begins to incorporate site specific installation to further develop the relationship between my paper and its situated environment.

When handmade overbeaten abaca paper is left to air dry freely, the fibers of the translucent paper shrink and cause the sheet to warp and curl unpredictably. The shrinkage creates a crisp, textured surface on the paper that intimately catches natural light in the many notches of the dried fibers. Stacking the uneven sheets on top of one another traps the light in the spaces in between, creating a golden glow. Inspired by this quality and the natural shifts of light occurring in the barn where I was making the paper, *Living Light* developed into a site-specific installation, transforming these stacked sheets of abaca paper into a body, paired with kozo arm casts, and dyed cheesecloth webs.

Site specificity is a component of installation art where location is inextricably important to the work's final impact and therefore removes the otherwise nomadic quality of artwork. To call a work site specific is to assert a direct dialogue and relationship between the development of a piece and its environment (Kwon 1). Making paper in an old, weathered barn, I was not only becoming aware of the architecture--in its rotting rafters and insecure floors--but taking inspiration in the energy of a space that is both decomposing and still full of life in the way the wind pushes stall windows open and closed, creaking and groaning, and manipulating floods of light in the process. In *Living Light*, the paper "body" is suspended from the rafters of the barn and situated in front of one of the windows of the building. As the space is otherwise fairly dark, the textured and translucent qualities of the backlit paper are called into attention. Wind periodically pushes its way into the barn, making the paper tremble and the cheesecloth sway. When witnessing the piece during a light shift, such as a cloud moving away from the sun, suddenly more light pours inward, and the body becomes "alive". The

piece's intense presence visually grows and recedes through the ever-shifting golden qualities of the paper body-- giving it a sense of lively animation, death, and ultimate re-animation. The sporadic movement inflicted by the wind also contributes to the liveliness as well as the unpredictable energy that defines *Living Light's* site specificity. The effects of light and movement not only emphasize my response to site specificity, but ultimately connect to the idea of monstrosity as well. Watching this disjointed body, a body that references my own in the arm casts, "come alive" in this manner, situates myself between metaphorical roles similar to both Dr. Frankenstein and his monster.

The implication of Frankenstein in this piece connects to another key text that has been informing my work: Susan Stryker's essay *My Words To Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage*. Stryker connects trans experience to that of Frankenstein's monster--referencing medicalized transitioning as a factor that posits trans bodies as othered, monstrous, constructed, and mutilated. However, she also argues in favor of embracing this idea of monstrosity as a source of power: "Stryker both claims and rechannels the rage that many transgender people feel over being made outcasts; she transforms a particular experience of suffering into a basis for self-affirmation, intellectual inquiry, moral agency, and political action" (Stryker 1). This idea has been the primary source of my exploration of hybridity and monstrosity in this body of work, but especially in *Living Light*. I reference my own body in the original plaster casts and intentionally deformed them by sculpting spikes and inhuman ridges that appear to be embedded in the paper "skin". In doing so, I am channeling Stryker's theory by metaphorically reflecting the way I have "become monstrous" in medically altering my own body through transitioning. Through combining these deformed arms with the golden, illuminated paper body, there is both monstrous rage and empowered celebration. To become monstrous, in this way, is also to hold light.

Considering Stryker's claim that a medicalized body is seen by society as separate from nature, *Living Light* also incorporates that theme through the usage of color. The color transition from the natural off-white pigmentation of the abaca and kozo paper into the evidently painted portions of the wrists and into the arms highlights the important difference between what is inherent to the papermaking process and what was intentionally transformed with a different material after the fact. The dyed cheesecloth that showers and entangles the body functions as a material bridge to the medical in its own resemblance of something intestinal or gauze-like. Embracing the tension between what can be considered natural versus the artificial further contributes to the piece as one of monstrosity.

As a final exploration of hybridity and artificiality, my last piece for this body of work, *Flesh and Mud*, consists of three abstract paper works that feature inclusions of human hair, testosterone syringes, and animal bones. In forgoing casting and sculptural reference to the body, this triptych deconstructs the bodily allusion into something more abstract. Three rectangular frames made from weathered wooden floorboards of the barn suspend textural paper units, resembling the shape of stretched animal hides. The base color of the paper is light tan from the natural pigmentation of kenaf fiber, and the accented blue, pink, and electric green colors are attributed to the hand pigmented cotton fiber. In the process of making this paper, I used water and mud from a nearby vernal pool to form the sheets. This ultimately resulted in the mud contributing to the texture and color of the pieces as well. The method of stretching animal hides in this way nods at the practice of parchment papermaking from animal skins—a traditional component of my medium's history. The hair and syringe inclusions, items that have direct relationship to the human body, combined with the animal hide formation and animal bones, creates an abstracted animal-human hybrid out of the triptych. Despite

the appearance of traditional parchment stretching, I actually manipulated the paper while wet to form the stretched shape and attached it to the frames to fabricate the stretched skin aesthetic, while in reality, there is the bare minimum amount of tension to keep it suspended at all. This fictional representation is inherently artificial, and ties to the concept of destabilizing perception in non-conformity.

As I move forward with my practice beyond this thesis, I will continue making paper similar to that of *Flesh and Mud*, pushing more exploration of intentionally using color as a way of studying artificiality. Continuing with abstract work, I will experiment with treating different paper fibers with colorfully saturated pigments to further define natural vs. artificial in my practice and bring that process into video work as well.

Concluding this body of work with *Flesh and Mud* refers back to where the project started—embracing hybridity and finding inspiration in the process and natural elements connected to papermaking as explored in *indi(visible)*. Through progressively casting different parts of my body, I have deconstructed the body representationally, and in such a way that the qualities of handmade paper become more pronounced. The sculptural works *Devoured*, *Unravel*, and *Living Light* use hybridity and monstrosity to destabilize perception of the human body, while chronologically becoming increasingly less solid as physical objects. This devolution of form accentuates the flexible and fibrous nature of handmade paper and brings those inherent qualities more into focus. The progression of these sculptural works into the *Flesh and Mud* triptych signifies a gradual deconstruction of representation into the abstract—embracing the undefinable, the monstrous, and the uncomfortable—and asserts that, in my art practice, handmade paper is a vehicle for representing reclamation of trans identity and the non-normative body.

APPENDIX



Allison Janae Hamilton
FLORDIALAND, 2017-2018
Four-Channel Video
7:46 min.

Installation view from 'Allison Janae Hamilton: *Pitch*,' on view at MASS MoCA, March 24, 2018 - March 17, 2019.

<http://www.allisonjanaehamilton.com/video>



Hans Bellmer
Les Jeux de la Poupée, 1939
Gelatin silver print with applied color
5 5/8 x 5 1/2 in.



Hans Bellmer
The Doll, 1934-1935
(published in *Les Jeux De La Poupée*, 1949)
Gelatin silver print with applied color
13.8 cm x 14.0 cm

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LIST OF ARTWORKS

- Booker01 *indi(visible)*, 2019
Video
3:08 minutes.
- Booker02 *Devoured*, 2020
Cotton paper and acrylic paint.
23 x 29 x 7 inches.
- Booker03 *Devoured*, 2020
Cotton paper and acrylic paint.
23 x 29 x 7 inches.
- Booker04 *Devoured*, 2020
Cotton paper and acrylic paint.
23 x 29 x 7 inches.
- Booker05 *Unravel*, 2020
Cotton rag paper, milkweed fluff, and body hair.
58 x 25 x 10 inches
- Booker06 *Unravel*, 2020
Cotton rag paper, milkweed fluff, and body hair.
58 x 25 x 10 inches
- Booker07 *Unravel*, 2020
Cotton rag paper, milkweed fluff, and body hair.
58 x 25 x 10 inches.
- Booker08 *Unravel*, 2020
Cotton rag paper, milkweed fluff, and body hair.
58 x 25 x 10 inches.
- Booker09 *Living Light*, 2020
Abaca and kozo paper, cheesecloth, natural dyes, watercolor paint,
and acrylic paint.
8 ft. 2in. x 2 ft. x 27 in.
- Booker10 *Living Light*, 2020
Abaca and kozo paper, cheesecloth, natural dyes, watercolor paint,
and acrylic paint.
8 ft. 2in. x 2 ft. x 27 in.
- Booker11 *Living Light*, 2020
Abaca and kozo paper, cheesecloth, natural dyes, watercolor paint,
and acrylic paint.

8 ft. 2in. x 2 ft. x 27 in.

Booker12

Living Light, 2020

Abaca and kozo paper, cheesecloth, natural dyes, watercolor paint, and acrylic paint.

8 ft. 2in. x 2 ft. x 27 in.

Booker13

Living Light, 2020

Abaca and kozo paper, cheesecloth, natural dyes, watercolor paint, and acrylic paint.

8 ft. 2in. x 2 ft. x 27 in.

Booker14

Flesh and Mud, 2020

Cotton, Kenaf, and Abaca paper, mud, hair, syringes, chicken bones, and recycled wood.

29 x 41.25 inches (each)

Booker15

Flesh and Mud, 2020

Cotton, Kenaf, and Abaca paper, mud, hair, syringes, chicken bones, and recycled wood.

29 x 41.25 inches (each)

Booker16

Flesh and Mud, 2020

Cotton, Kenaf, and Abaca paper, mud, hair, syringes, chicken bones, and recycled wood.

29 x 41.25 inches (each)

Booker17

Flesh and Mud, 2020

Cotton, Kenaf, and Abaca paper, mud, hair, syringes, chicken bones, and recycled wood.

29 x 41.25 inches (each)