

# A QUEER POLITICS OF PLEASURE

Andy Johnson, Apprentice Curator

*Queer(ing) Pleasure* is a play on both the notion of a pleasure that is queer, and the act of queering pleasure – one a noun, the other a verb. The title implies the endless multiplicities of pleasure and the countless ways one can experience it. The show is concerned with not only how pleasure is represented but how it is used, practiced, and deployed. In her groundbreaking text, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Audre Lorde defines the erotic, which I equate in some respects to pleasure, as an unexpressed and unrecognized feeling.<sup>1</sup> Pleasure and the erotic have the potential to be sources of healing, acceptance, release, excitement, playfulness, wholeness, defiance, subversion, and freedom. However, it is such a refusal to recognize the endless potential of the erotic that, according to Lorde, reinforces and values white, heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive pleasure above all else.

Pleasure is often limited to a set of conditions, a checklist of sorts that determines the legitimacy of pleasure and the erotic. These conditions are in general an illusion, a cultural fable of morality and respectability created to police, surveil, and shame certain bodies, while simultaneously reaffirming and privileging others. Who is free or deemed worthy enough to feel pleasure? When is one allowed to feel pleasure or pleased? With whom can one experience pleasure? What kind of pleasure is accessible? What limits one from accessing their full erotic and pleased potential? These questions reveal the fact that pleasure and the erotic are deeply interrelated to race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and disability.

*Queer(ing) Pleasure* points to both the policing of pleasure and the radical, liberating potential of embracing a queer politics of

pleasure. Since the terms pleasure, desire, and the erotic are most often equated with sex, sexuality, and sexual expression, it's important to contend with and identify the sources of their relationship. Gayle Rubin in her essay, “Thinking Sex,” notes, “Modern Western societies appraise sex acts [and pleasure] according to a hierarchical system of value. Individuals whose behaviour stands high in this hierarchy are rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits.”<sup>2</sup> At the pinnacle of this hierarchy stands monogamous, coupled and/or married, white, heterosexual, reproductively-focused individuals. At the bottom stand individuals whose identities often justify their policing -- non-white, queer, BDSM, polygamous, non-reproductive, sex work, trans\*, poor, disabled. For these individuals, their reward is just the opposite -- mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions. *Queer(ing) Pleasure* is a resistance to the narrow logic of pleasure and eroticism. It's an homage to a politics of radical sexuality and a signal of ways in which a politics of pleasure is actively queer.

Jade Yumang's bodies of work *Ooze* and *Thumb Through* are developed from a collection of archival images and fabric. *Ooze* is (de)constructed from gay porn magazines purchased in New York City. Published in the 1980s and 90s, the height of the AIDS crisis, the work “culls a moment of searching for intimacy during a time when the body of gay men was used as a political tool.” Yumang's process of cutting through layers of pages is an investigation into how HIV/AIDS has shaped and redefined our culture, particularly how bodies marked “other” are

negotiated. The three works from the series *Thumb Through* contain images from the 1960s and 70s gay porn magazine *My-O-My*. The publication was involved in a legal scandal in 1972 in which, as Yumang writes, “police officers, without warrant, entered a bookstore owned by Edward Shapiro and Milton Nerenberg and seized various curiosa that were deemed obscene.” Yumang abstracts the scanned images through sculptural forms in order to trouble the notion of a queer object's relationship to the body.

Monique ‘Muse’ Dodd's photographic and videographic work questions the role of pleasure and desire throughout the journey of self-healing and autonomy. Trauma, healing, pleasure, the erotic, and desire, as Dodd illustrates, are not mutually exclusive, but in fact share space. Thus, how do narratives of trauma and the work of healing, particularly for black femmes, exclude the role and experience of pleasure? In what way does such exclusion perpetuate harmful narratives that limit the complex process of healing?

Antonius Bui's recent papercut work is a step towards reconciling and resisting a rhetoric of violent colonialism and fetishization. Their papercut work, depicting the queer Viet community, seeks a pleasure in divestment. On the left shoulder of the sitter, a scene of bondage is paired with the phrase “I LUV BROKE NBOIS.” On the right forearm a figure is in the act of self-pleasure and another restricted by a snake. The work is literally and metaphorically comprised of depictions of both pleasure and pain, blurring the lines of respectability.

John Paradiso's work roughly spans the length of his artistic career. From self-portrait photographs of the artist in bed to recent, textile-based works, the work is “a statement about my experiences navigating a sex-positive lifestyle among a prevalence of sex-negative messages.” “Seductive”

depicts the artist, erotically positioned on a mattress, with caution tape wrapped around his eyes, his midsection, and down his leg. Produced in 1991, the work is a searing critique of government, mass media, and public opinion of queer bodies, particularly the perceived dangers present in searching for pleasure.

Tsedaye Makonnen's performance work is deeply informed and influenced by her hyphenated identity and the work of Audre Lorde. Challenging the uses of the erotic in relationship to black femmes, the performance and subsequent installation illustrate the role of power within discourses of pleasure – both the power to suppress and the power to rise above. The pelvic bone – a symbol of motherhood, deeply erogenous, yet highly contested and legislated – becomes a site of resistance, of power, and pleasure.

*Queer(ing) Pleasure* marks the 40th anniversary of the publishing of “Uses of the Erotic.” The text undergirds the motivation for the majority of this show. Lorde's work, whether recognized or not, has shaped the foundation and evolution of queer, feminist, and black feminist theory. It has provided the framework to recognize the power of our bodies and minds, fully.

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1. Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Out & Out Books, 1978).

2. Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Culture, Society, and Sexuality*, ed. Peter Aggleton and Richard Parker (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2006).

# ANTONIUS BUI

**Antonius Bui** (they/them) identifies as a queer, gender non-binary, first-generation Vietnamese American artist who recently graduated from the Maryland Institute College of Art. They are currently using performance, photography, and textile techniques to investigate Vietnamese American history.



*Vanguard*, 2018  
Hand-cut paper,  
Dimensions Vary.



*La Negra de Nadie*, 2017  
Photograph  
21" x 27"

**Monique Muse Dodd** (b. 1994) is an NYC based artist working in photography, video, installation and sound-scape. Through the use of multimedia, Dodd creates a visual vernacular that is heavily influenced by her African Ancestry and Spiritual practice. Drawing from her personal history, actual and imagined, her work explores what it means to be black and free, and how blackness exists in the near future. Obsessed with how America consumes black and gay culture Muse interrogates how she contributes to this further commodification of black and queer identities. Muse holds a BA in Film Production from Howard University and was a 2017-2018 Artist-in-Residence at the Flux Factory. She was also selected as a 2018 artist-in-residence at the AROs Public Museum in Denmark. Muse has exhibited work at the Prince George's African American Museum, DC Arts Center, The Flux Factory, Local Project and Mabou Mines Theater. Through her work, Muse hopes to create space for black bodies to be free, even if only for a frame.

# MONIQUE MUSE DODD





(L-R)

## JADE YUMANG

**Jade Yumang** was named after his mother's beauty salon and from an early age has been obsessed with beautiful, yet slightly off, things. His work primarily focuses on the concept of queer form through sculptural abstraction, installation, and performance. He received his MFA at Parsons School of Design with Departmental Honors in 2012 and his BFA Honors in University of British Columbia as the top graduate in 2008. He was born in Quezon City, Philippines, grew up in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, immigrated to unceded Coast Salish territories in Vancouver, BC, Canada, and lives in Chicago, IL, USA. He is part of a New York-based collaborative duo, Tatlo, with Sara Jimenez and an Assistant Professor in the department of Fiber and Material Studies at School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

*Page 30, 2015*

Scanned gay erotic page printed with archival ink on cotton, polyurethane foam, and striped rib knit (for bomber jackets)  
32" x 23" x 5"

*Page 17, 2013*

Scanned gay erotic page printed with archival ink on cotton, polyurethane foam, chicken wire, hand cut tea-soaked rag paper, dress pins, and fringe  
34" x 16" x 3.5"

*Page 2, 2015*

Scanned gay erotic page printed with archival ink on cotton, polyurethane foam, and striped rib knit (for bomber jackets)  
60" x 20" x 3"

# JOHN PARADISO



*The Crowning Series: Nigeria Edition*, 2018  
Photo by Emeka Eguibe and Eze Chineye

## TSEDAYE MAKONNEN

**Tsedaye Makonnen** is the 2018 DC Public Library Maker-in-Residence, recipient of the 2018 DCCA Arts Fellowship grant and in April, an Artist-in-Residence at Artist Mother Studio. In February she co-curated a multidisciplinary exhibit titled *Hyphen American* at Gallery 102 featuring 20 artists. In the past she has performed at Art Basel Miami, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, El Museo del Barrio, Pratt Film Institute, Queens Museum, Festival International d'Art Performance in Martinique, Chale Wote Street Art Festival and more. This summer, through the support of her residency with DCPL, she completed a residency at El Anatsui Studios in Nsukka, Nigeria and traveled to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia for a cross-cultural exchange among artists and institutions. During her travels in Africa, she continued her *Crowning Series* through photography, sculpture and performance in both the streets of Nigeria and at the Fendika Cultural Center in Ethiopia.

**John Paradiso** earned a BFA at the State University of New York (Purchase) and his MFA at the State University of New York (Buffalo). He is a mixed media artist and describes his work as metaphorical and based upon such issues as identity, sexuality, health, and love.

He has work in private and public collections including the Kinsey Institute, the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, Stamp Collection at the University of Maryland, College Park, and a portfolio of seven photographs in the National Picture Collection at the Library of Congress, (AIDS portfolio). John has served as a health educator and caregiver in the HIV/AIDS community for over twenty years where he developed educational programs and provided peer-based counseling. More recently he was an Artist-in-Residence at the Washington Hospital Center working with adult cancer patients, their families and caregivers. For the last 12 years John worked as the Gateway Community Development Corporation's, Curator of Programs at the 39th Street Gallery, Gateway Arts Center and is currently the lead Art Consultant for Landex Development, LLC with their new Studio 3807 mixed use property, and will be the Resident Artist/Curator at Portico Gallery and Studios opening July 2018.



*Seductive*, 1991  
Silver gelatin print  
4.5x6"





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## CURATORIAL INITIATIVE

The Curatorial Initiative reflects DCAC's commitment to curatorial practice as an integral part of supporting emerging and under-recognized artists. Each year an apprentice curator is selected to gain experience in the process of planning and mounting an exhibition by working with an experienced mentor curator. The program results in two exhibitions each year: in the spring the mentor curator selects artists and plans the exhibition and accompanying catalogue with the assistance of the apprentice; in the autumn, the roles are reversed and the apprentice plans and executes an exhibition with the assistance and advice of the mentor.

By nurturing new curators DCAC hopes to bring fresh perspectives into our own programming while assisting a new generation of curators who will take the knowledge they gain into our arts community and beyond.

## DC ARTS CENTER

The District of Columbia Arts Center (DCAC) serves the Washington, DC area by presenting high-caliber, challenging works, by encouraging professionalism among artists, and by providing a forum for education and cultural exchange. DCAC was founded in 1989 as an alternative arts center for local artists in response to eroding support for local artists. Since then, our 800 square foot gallery and 42 seat black box theater have been a hub of creativity in the visual and performing arts, receiving local, national, and international attention for its programming. Artists of all types, including poets, painters, actors, storytellers, sculptors, and performance artists have been drawn to DCAC from as close as around the corner and as far as other continents.

Our gallery promotes emerging and under-recognized artists by exhibiting their work and aims to inspire fresh approaches to artistic development by showing work that other galleries might shun. Gallery applications are reviewed on an ongoing basis. Our theater encourages work at all levels, of all types, and is open to all forms of presentation. One night shows, readings, screenings, concerts, and long running plays are all welcome. Theater applications are accepted year-round. Our Sparkplug artists' collective and Curatorial Initiative programs have individual application processes. All of our programs are open to all; DCAC does not discriminate based on gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation.

The DC Arts Center is funded in part by the White Family Trust, DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, Sam Gilliam, Jr., T.L.L. Temple Foundation, Clark-Winchcole Foundation, Clark Construction Group, LLC, Maxwell C. Weaver Foundation, Kogod Family Foundation, Artery Capital Group, Adams Morgan Business and Professional Association, Bridge Street Books, Maga Design Inc., Maisel Development Co., LLC, and the members of DC Arts Center.

## MENTOR CURATORS

**Zoë Charlton** was born in Tallahassee, Florida, in 1973, and lives and works in Baltimore, Maryland. Charlton received her MFA degree from the University of Texas at Austin and her BFA from Florida State University in painting and drawing. She has participated in residencies at the Skowhegan School of Painting and at The Creative Alliance in Baltimore, MD. Her work has been included in national and international group exhibitions including the Contemporary Art Museum (Houston, TX), the Studio Museum of Harlem (NYC, NY), the Zacheta National Gallery of Art (Warsaw, Poland), Haas & Fischer Gallery (Zurich, Switzerland), Clementine Gallery (NYC, NY) and Wendy Cooper Gallery (Chicago, IL). Charlton's work has been reviewed in ARTnews and Art in America. Previous experiences range from being an animator for Flat Black Films in Austin, Texas to teaching positions at Missouri State University (MO) and Southwestern University (TX). She is an Associate Professor of Art at American University in Washington, DC.

[zoearchlton.com](http://zoearchlton.com)

**Tim Doud**'s paintings and drawings address two seemingly distinct bodies of work, one figurative and one abstract. These bodies of works serve as a backdrop to broader discussions around constructed identities, branding and commodity culture. He graduated from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago with an M.F.A in Painting and Drawing. He attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine. Recent exhibitions include Curator's Office, Washington, DC, New Bedford Museum of Art, Tacoma Art Museum, Kemper Contemporary Art Museum and the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC. His work has been included in exhibitions at PS1 (MOMA) in New York City, The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, Artists Space in New York City and the Frye Art Gallery in Seattle, Washington, Art Basel, Basel, Switzerland, Galerie Brusberg, Berlin and MC Magma, Milan, Italy. He has received grants from The National Endowment for the Arts (Arts Midwest), The Pollock Krasner Art Foundation, DC Commission for the Arts and Humanities and participated in residencies at The Banff Centre, Alberta, Canada, the Marie Sharpe Foundation's "Space" Program in Brooklyn, NY and the Golden Foundation. Collaborative projects include 'sindikit in Baltimore, MD and STABLE in Washington, DC.

[timdoud.net](http://timdoud.net)

## APPRENTICE CURATOR

**Andy Johnson** is a DC-based art historian, curator, and arts writer. He is Director of Gallery 102 at the Corcoran School of the Arts & Design; contributing editor for DIRT; serves on the curatorial and sales team for Art on the Vine, hosted by the Agora Culture; and serves on ArtWorks for Freedom's Artist Activist Advisory Council. His academic and curatorial practice centers on queer/queer of color critique, feminist/black feminist theories, critical race theory, cultural studies, sexuality studies, photography, video, installation, performance art, and visual culture. He has presented research and spoken on panels at universities, galleries, and museums including Rutgers University, UC Santa Barbara, Urban Institute for Contemporary Arts, GW Museum, DuPont Underground, and others. He has published articles, exhibition reviews, and catalogue essays with DIRT, The Chart, Common Field's Field Perspectives, The Rib, Pelican Bomb, and more. He holds a M.A. in Art History from The George Washington University.

[andyjohnson.com](http://andyjohnson.com)

Front Image: Jade Yumang, *Torso Floret*,  
Cut out on gay pornographic magazine  
19" x 13"