Into the Realm of Dykesthetics

BY

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Queer people have to make their own maps because the ones that exist lead us to nowhere. Our bodies become these maps, vessels telling our reimagining of the skin sack we reside within. This is our time to define who we are. To Make ourselves. How powerful is that?
This is for Alison who survived and found Olly

and

To my Chicago Queers, Dykes, Faggots, Sluts, and Slimewads….there is no other community like you. Ya’ll nasty. Ya’ll bring it. And Ya’ll are one of my deep dyke roots. Chicago is where I came out and where I chose my family. I am on my knees for ya’ll. You will always be home.

ACAB. Burn it down and start over.
Dyke is expansive. It allows. Summons. Shifts. Slides. It is an entry point leading to the vast surging waters of dykesthetics. Dyke opens doors, gives room, and is beyond lesbian identity rooted in second wave feminism. Dykesthetics thrive in warm wet caves of deep touch and soft shag in a dankcave lathered in waxy, slippery language that is like raw clay waiting to be squished. In dankcaves there is bending, squeezing, remaking, trash collecting, world making, botanical traces, candle light, house lamps, shag carpets, fat rolls, and a shit ton of care.

Dankcaves hold, fold, and warp the materials of dykesthetics; the candle wax, macrame ropes, door knockers, Liz the herbalist's night stand, clay, my ex’s pillowcases and underpants, clothespins, ceramic candles, Rachel’s chair and lace, wallpaper, house lamps, Peggy’s little stools, frat column from 1912 covered in glitched/collaged vintage wallpaper and wheatpaste, shadows, ceramic egg taper candle holder, tincture of healing herbs concocted by Liz, found vintage decals, wheatpaste, kitchen flooring, cinderblock, Sue’s rug runner, garage sale pillows, resin, rotary phone, screen printed wallpaper by Guen, ceramic shell of community donated underwear and yarn, footprints, the stroller I pushed my Cabbage Patch Dolls in circa 1990, pepper grass, shag rugs, one tiny homemade taper candle, end table, my mother’s wedding headband from her time in a cult, a pink sand hourglass, and upholstery nails. The cave is full.

Dankcaves are experiences, installations of fat loaves and bone-like bisque fired underpants broken from the top of a ladder when the artist Autumn Knight asks if you’ve ever thought of breaking them and I say “Everyday!” There is breaking within the cave, cleaving, forming new stalactites of dykey drip-drop slip-slop. In the first iteration of Fat Holds and Folds in a dankcave, the audience was able to break ceramic underpants, putting the broken shards in a baby bath on a library cart or in their pocket. There are takeaways, things to rub between your fingers. Little bits and bobs leave the gallery to remind the audience of their time in that warm hole of wonder.
A dankcave is a container for fat folds of wallpaper tongues lapping from the ceiling onto the floor to be walked on, sounds of trans poetry being read out loud on a flower farm, bees buzzing, piss careening into the earth, sobs, and comfort. There is laughter, and the sound of my fat body getting into and out of a swimming hole. The mud and muck sounds surround us. Dankcaves are vases, vessels for the waxy fluid to congeal while bouquets of clay eggs cascade onto the floor from a shag carpeted wall. The floor becomes the wall, there is a disorientation through material curation; it’s all topsy turvy as the precarity of the slanted objects reminds the viewer of falling down the Alice in Wonderland rabbit hole. I never thought of this movie while making but the viewers bring it up constantly. The levitating furniture, precarious placing, and lamps on the floor do make for a tumble down that hole.

Dykesthetics is a sensibility begging for a fresh way of seeing while experiencing the world through a porous dyke identity. Dykesthetics is going to the Dyke March instead of the white gay pride parade sponsored by Skyy vodka cloaked in rainbow-washing tactics that are so far from our roots at Stonewall. There is rage at the core of dykesthetics, a screaming need to hold men accountable as the earth burns in their hands. But this rage is swaddled by softness and toughness; plaid, floral, pattern clashing, this and that, always questioning, always seeking more. There is a decadence and excess in the realm of dykesthetics. There is giving in to deep slow time, creating wave pools, radiating out rippling surfaces of cum and wax, of homemade compote, and layered wallpaper with stories to tell. Dyke is homemade, or foraged, or garage sale-hounded.

Dykesthetics boasts steadfast doers, craftspeople, homesteaders, earth-worshippers, sex workers, fatties, fisters, gender fuckers, protest makers, flower foragers, roadside piss takers, salamander sliding sluts, candlelight stewards, all swimming in moon baths and whipped honey. It is the hose soaked slip n’ slide grey area between normative black and white thinking as dykesthetics
traverses the land of cosmos and stardust, creating tornados of space wonder to glitch the binary. Dykesthetics is community based, grassroots, down-home, a comfy couch, a potluck where everybody takes home leftovers. There is always enough to share as we fill the holes of each other's hearts, stomachs, and cunts--or whatever they want their hole to be called. Dykes are sheets. Like a fresh-from-the-line bedcloth that got wet in the backyard under the Conifer pine tree. I fisted Kim under that pine in the moonlight on a long, low, floral, 1970’s couch I had put in the backyard after my cat Simone had peed on it. That entire last sentence is dykesthetics.

Dykes can be faggots and faggots can be dykes. These are words men have hurled with hate; now their power is ours to dance with and define. A clit is a cock and a girl is a boy, or both, and all of it melds together. Our genitals don’t define us. They find new ways of pulsating through meadows full of picnic baskets filled with fruit and molasses like time. (What's in our pants? Magic! Stop asking.) Trans narratives are windows into fields full of wildflowers. Trans stories are tethered to a creaking wooden ship rocking in a vibrant sea that causes the earth to flood and be renewed.
Dykes are stewards of care and sourdough, fermented cabbage and talks about gut biomes. Through our symbiotic bubbling we find new depths of our own multitudes, but together we create syzygy as we align our suns and moons and pull tarot cards as the day breaks. Dykesthetics is a rhizome, stretching with intention and gusto to break through the dry archaic soil of old systems. Dyke is an embodied state, a place, an arrival, a refusal. It's deep listening and flow. Dykes are shedding shame, giving into pleasure as a form of powerful resistance. It’s a flow that never ends as the cup runneth over...over and over and over again as linear time disappears or slows. This slow time is the timescale inhabited by freshwater mussels forming pearls in their shell homes. These slimewads make pearls as a natural defense against irritants and parasites, secreting layers of aragonite and conchiolin, the materials that also make up its exterior. This whole, slow act of pearl cooking is dykesthetics.

Lora Mathis unravels our power stating “To work against a patriarchal system is to tear down the stigma which binds us and separates us. To embrace our vulnerability, our pain, our wide-range of emotions; to recognize the power in communities of care and support; to see the strength in healing; to view others in their hurt; to hold our own pain without pushing it away; this is to know our power.”¹ Feelings are on our sleeves and off the cuff in the realm of dykesthetics, an ocean of emotions as buoys of admittance sway, acknowledging where we come from and who

¹ Genderfail. P 60
we want to make ourselves into outside of the confines of traumas past. The sand of our hearts mix with the water creating new forms of geological mass. There is deep power in the making of our bodies, our heart’s core, and our community. We have to make everything in the realm of dykeesthetics because what has been created doesn’t suit our expansive reality, our vastness, our depths. Dykeesthetics becomes a tongue that comes over and over like waterfall waves. Remember, nothing is fixed: it’s a slope in that meadow of prairie grass where we spoke in queer tongues, a hill to scoot down on your backside, the swishing of salt foam waves colliding in and out of each other, sediment bursting from rock fat.

Geologically, dykes are cracks, protrusions, slits, and wetfalls birthing from an already existing formation. Sabrina Imbler explains, “A dyke, according to geology, is a sheet of magma born in a fracture. Dykes are best understood as the veins of a volcano, coursing hot and varicose towards the surface to erupt. Because of this dykes are always younger than the body of rock in which they’ve made their home. Born differently than the mother rock, they make their presence known in rebel coloration: black against white, striped against mottled, crystal against sand. Geologists consider dykes intrusive formations, in part because they were formed underground until exposed.”

Dykes muster to the surface to make their way out of the dark. Like the geological formation, I too grew underground. My parents speak in tongues, the evangelical type. Now I speak in tongues like geological dykes do when they cum forth from the skin of a fat ass rock. I had to find my way to Dyke. I crawled, blacked-out over and over, tried, wanted to die, but eventually I erupted! Dykes don’t burst out of rocks in the blink of an eye. Good things take time as my dyke-magma energy spews forth, bubbling from every pore with fists that feel like a heartbeat, filling the core with a fire to be stoked.

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2 Imbler. P 5
Slimebodies

Eggs are trans slimey orbs of sustenance. They can be cracked, peeled, hard or soft, runny or rubbery, eggs can transform before your eyes. Crack an egg and watch it pour onto hot cast iron, bubbly lacey hard edges appear that were once pure mucus. There is a transformation of matter occurring before your eyes. Our bodies are not far from this slime. Eggs are trans as each day another mucus wad becomes something else based on the choice of the maker. When we make ourselves we are engaging our possibilities for more, for something different. We cannot conform. Fuck me, trans people are magical beings as some embody dykesthetics in cosmic collisions while others are homemade bread slathered in foraged ramp butter that I made at midnight. Trans people make themselves, resist the blandness of falling in line and being like everyone else. Transdykes are interruptions worth bathing in, splitting the fat into separate parts. Making room for more. For imperfections and outbursts.

I started making eggs out of clay during covid isolation. Slapping slabs of kneaded fat earth onto a dirty canvas table. That's how I talk about clay. The language of this material feels sloppier than everyday speech. Deep touch is required in this process of making; it's slippery. Its ancient methods ground me in the basics of using my body to manifest something outside of me. This art form knows more than me. In the studio I am in conversation with the clay, using my strength to
wedge the mud while knowing that anything I make could blow up in the fire. This foundational medium involves my body, the clay and water. Ceramics are a kind of technology, albeit ancient, that is far from screens, pixels, and digital devices, and in this I find deep pleasure. I throw clay like a frisbee onto a table, whatever shape appears becomes the white of the egg. The edges are pressed by my thumbs or cut cleaner in a cartoony, organic way. When cut, the tool follows the line of the slab that has been thrown.

The yolks are made individually in my wet hand. Imagine making cookies and getting the dough ready for the sheet pan, only wetter. When throwing clay eggs I am dancing alone in my ceramics studio and thinking about our cosmic trans selves in these slimey, dragged-out, slippery bodies that have all the potential for becoming something more: fried, scrambled, frittataed, deviled, poached, baked, whipped, omeletted. The best part is, we get to pick how we are prepared. Eggs remind me of queer bodies, all unique, splat onto the heated surface, giving life and nutrients through their mucilaginous form that is transformed. Eggs are universal, genderless in the pan, slippery daily rituals that bring us back to center. Crack, splat, fry, repeat. These eggs mimic the queer slimewads I miss congealing with, the dykes and fags who stroke my edges to a perfect ruffle.

I have bought my eggs from Craigslist for the last eight years. When I started, it was a magical excuse to leave Chicago’s buzzing hive for an afternoon, to see green, and come home with yolks as orange as the sunset. This interaction with strangers also provided stories to tell people. I met a few characters, but usually just kind-hearted folks with too many eggs! I went to some very random places hunting for the slime in a shell and along the way I always found places to piss into the earth.

I kept buying eggs from Craigslist while the pandemic lingered. I know my egg dealers now as friends whom I meet in a driveway or a gas station parking lot, depending if I am buying from Chris or Karl. Having a local egg supplier feels like bridge-building in an everyday manner; it feels radical to know where my food comes from in the Anthropocene. This ritual links me to people I would have never met had I not searched for “farm fresh eggs" in the FOR SALE section of Craigslist. This act of care supports actual families directly, outside of factories, and I enjoy recycling the packaging back to the land the chickens run upon. There is power in this autonomy and neighborly support. This interaction was needed during deep isolation, I didn’t know how deep I could miss something until the lockdown became reality. The longing festered as I live in a monocrop cornhole where human and geological dykes are hard to come by.

During covid my egg journey was a ritual that provided needed contemplation space. I would drive and cry and think of my Chicago chosen family that I couldn’t touch. That ritual of solitude brought me back to the days when we all found joy through and in each other. I remembered that one day we will taste each other again. There will be another time when we will put little gourds
up our pussies in the moonlight while the fairies we see, thanks to the earth's mushrooms, make fires in the sky. We will cook backyard cuddle puddles as our bodies become eggs; slime wadding all over each other. We will congeal again! There will be fisting and making out again at a summoned slumber party for dykes and queers. We will share sunrises again. There will be bodies on bodies until it becomes a big soup pot to feed the hungry. There is no shame when we are seeking pleasure; our pleasure is a deep well of resistance in this repressed world.

_Pissdisco_

I crave the dance floor like I crave sweet tea in the summer heat. There is not a space in the cornhole for disco balls, folly and flirtation. These floors of Chicago are our church, a place where we feel most alive because we can see ourselves in each other. There is grimey, sexy House music all night long and giving into the drugs that expand our rib cages and tickle our insides leading us to the gay beach at sunset to keep the love fest going. To be honest I miss the after party more than the bar dance floor or the overproduced queer dance party that costs sixty bucks at the door and isn’t accessible to all. I yearn for that basement where we are with our closest queerwads. Puddles of bodies form and at this point most of us don’t know where our edges begin and end as we melt into each other.
When I began making candles out of clay I saw them as bodies on a dance floor grinding at the pissdisco. I saw my queer family in the wonky rainbow pillars. The way they leaned into each other, each unique but all celebrating and crying at the same time as the colorful drippy glaze made a kaleidoscope of wonder. These candles are hand-formed. The clay dictates the height, weight, and level of wiggle. My hand squeezes, pulls, folds, and warps the minerals that will be fired, transforming something that was wet and gooey to something firm and forever. Each candle is one-of-a-kind in shape, but it’s the crying color that reveals their queer decadence. When held, these candles of rainbow drip reveal my hand, the fingerprints that squeezed the taper candle into a crooked beautiful mess. The squish and squash is evident, not hidden. These runny, mucky, radiant candle messes became those sparkly bodies I long for.

I find candles at the local art recyclery, thrift stores, and junk shops in smaller towns just a truck drive away. The candles that have been burned and blown out are my favorite as I give them new life energy through reburning the wax tapers to make candle wax paintings on carpet, but it’s more like naked dancing and table top taper candle fucking. I make the candles fuck by leaning them into each other, burning them close together until their heat makes the other melt into
lusicious, delicious dykey goop. The long, fluid, puddles of candle wax dripping from tables to rugs making wax portals archiving three months of wax fucking.

There is a sweeping motion in what I make, a pull, a clothes line that is one huge singular rope creating messes on the floor, taut and tangling. Shadows make ghost drawings witnessing the mess I’ve made. The work is never perfect, it's skewed, cockeyed, just off in a way that makes you want to clean it up. The crooked moment is key. Within the need to be off, perverse, askew, lies a magical resistance. Memory and symbolism pull us back, there is a heavy hanging, a tug of elasticity as the past haunts the present. Carpets on walls melding into checkered kitchen flooring creates sensorial overload. Our brains are tested by the act of looking at the maximal intervention of material curation. There is always something to discover, another thing to find just when you thought you had seen it all. Using domestic objects and house lamps creates a space of familiarity and nesting that envelops the viewer in tender comfort and care. All senses are engaged as the candle mess smells of the sweet nest of a homo home.
Fat Holds and Folds
The community has been donating their underpants for the sake of my art for the last decade, the same amount of time I have been out of the closet. My dipping of undies into wet soupy clay is a practice I have been honing and these decaled ceramic ghost shells are a testament to what long, thorough research can cook up. I am in awe of these fragile-yet-hard items that would have been landfill remains. These underwear phantomly take up space for a body that once wore them. They are hollow and empty of the body, but the presence of what once resided in their cloth can be seen. Each pair hangs to dry on a dirty clothesline and their guts are stuffed with plants or paper to burn out in the kiln along with the cotton of the once worn pair. Underpants hold our undercarriages, protect our folds, catch our fluids as we wear them ‘til they birth their own holes of wear and tear.
In the long process of making the underwear, I elevate them to a maximalist dykesthetic space of floral on floral, pushing the femme aesthetic as mode for comfort. Each pair goes through three kiln fires, melting and burning out occurs as the fire holds each pair in hot, hot heat transforming the material into something harder, something new. I wish you were here to hold a pair. To feel the sweet soft whispers of the dykes who came before us. There is a potent sweet-yet-sour energy in these underpants vibrating outwards when held by hand. There are stories in these undergarments that I cannot tell so I will hold space for the pain, the grief, the celebration, the untold truths that live in our guts. I believe our guts house our trauma and each day our underpants swaddle those precious parts we are told to hide from the world outside.

I collage found vintage decals meant for china pottery onto the underpants, my old femme attire seeping off them; patterns clashing, floral on floral, velvet flower couch aesthetic. Alison, the femme I used to be, is there in each pair. She used to wear every pattern on any pattern. The decals are a slippery medium as they slide from the paper to the clay. The domestic comfort of these patterns allowed me to perform an exorcism for that femme that survived and brought me to my faggot flower butch side. There is room and space for femme power to soften what we know to be hard.

I sat in the Krannert Art Museum every day during my thesis show Dykesthetics: Another Dank Cave. Through my presence I was able to activate the space as I allowed for touch, holding, and caressing of the materials by the viewer. I was there to give permission to do an act that is not allowed in museum settings, breaking the normative ways of taking up space in this kind of institution. I answered questions about process, time, and eggs as trans slime. Most people had never touched wax puddles on carpet. This engagement makes little fires. When I tell people they can touch the work, the whole mood changes. There are sparks in people’s eyes, gasps when people lay down on the shag rug to look up at my ex’s raw clay pillowcase decaying in the air. When we bend and break rules, we can engage transness, igniting our multiplicity.
Through making dankcaves, by creating an experience, I am interested in how queer people make use of space. Queer use needs deviation, room to grow, to rhizomatically stretch sideways to pursue circuitous, previously unimagined paths and places. We have to create our own dwellings, our own nests, since queerness is wrung out of most spaces. These possibilities of another world are what keep me deep in the materiality of my studio research. Dykesthetics is all over these underwear, floral on floral with a lot of labor and love baked into in each pair. Three trips through the kiln harkens to alchemical slow cooking. Slow time invites the viewer to take a step back and wonder. To ask. To look closer. This slow time resonates with everything I make, whether it is sculpture, embroidery or clay multiples.

I yearn to fill my dankcaves to the brim with softness and hardness, to create a space for internal contemplation around the binary bleakness we wade through everyday. If nothing else I want Dykesthetics to soften the blow of this brutal-ass world. If I could sit with you on the shag and hold you in my arms, I would. May the dyke roots that found us lead us into the expansiveness of what dykesthetics can be and is: a world of fat ass loud resistance while giving in to slow, deep time. I imagine a world where gender is cosmic and fluid while trans bodies are worshipped for their magical existence. Dykesthetics ushers in a new time centered on pleasure and fisting fire that burns down the systems created by the men to keep us from knowing our power. May we always fill each other to the brim and dance freely as it all falls around us.

Deep Dyke Roots of some Queers I love:

Ruby: Alison Bechdel cartoon strips in the paper and Lorelai Gilmore. A woman in a t-shirt ad from 2002 that I found in a magazine--hid it under the recliner in the living room so I could look at it. Oh, and Lindsay Lohan.

E: The tomboy character from Little Giants and the hot gelfling in the Dark Crystal.

Ally: Julie Andrews for me, like age nine Sound of Music be still my heart. I didn’t realize this till much later in life.

Ricky: Jessica Rabbit, Julia Roberts in Pretty Woman, Shania Twain, Goldie Hawn, Madonna. I was also v obsessed with Audrey Hepburn as a teen.

Maya: My dyke root was Pam from Total. And just my general belief in my own gaydar. I was certain Pam was gay. I was not correct, it was just me who was extremely gay.
Gigi: I had a picture of Sandra Bernhardt in my room and I was 10. Even I didn’t know what that was about until I was an adult.

Mick: My mom only dates dykes. So my roots are dyke filled. LOL

Tera: I was obsessed with Jennifer Gray and Dirty Dancing (maybe more faggy roots?) I also had a lot of crushes on older women in the mormon church.

Brenna: The dance staff in Dirty Dancing. I loved those fast, been through some shit, working class humans. I wanted to be the girls and bone them too.

Hilary: My boyfriend in high school had the famous “Kiss” poster by Photographer Tanya Chalkins above his bed. It was confusing.

Gabriel: I had that poster on my wall in college. The goblin king from the Labyrinth was a dyke root for me. My deep dyke root is embedded in serious granola/nature dyke energy. I am almost always prepared and ready to help. All of my shoes are ready for running, just in case. I appreciate pockets, especially deep ones. You could no longer call me a dyke. However, I’ve never let go of the north woods dyke upbringing I had. I will never let go of what my nature dykes did for me.

Femmily: My third grade student teacher Mrs. Lavette. The movie But I’m a Cheerleader. Sarah Jessica Parker. Hocus Pocus.

Hunter: My roots run back to ten year old me. The ten year old tomboy who refused to wear anything but construction boots, long jean shorts, and two braids wound tightly down my back. I first set eyes on her when I visited my grandpa’s house. His new girlfriend Liz was considerably younger than him but at least five times my age. She had a head of wild blonde curls, always wore ruffled off the shoulder blouses, which revealed her smooth bronze skin that glowed beneath, and spoke with a deep Texan drawl that made me feel warm inside. She would look into my little freckled face and say, “you know what those freckles are? They’re angel kisses.” I was mesmerized. For my birthday she gave me a giant teddy bear nearly twice my size, who I aptly
named Liz in adoration. I would cuddle Liz at night—sometimes more than cuddle—replay her beautiful voice in my mind, and imagine those angels kissing my face as I dozed off to sleep in the teddy bears arms. I didn’t have the words for it then, but I think I was in love.

M: When I was playing with my girl cousins as a young kid, I always wanted to be the dad of the little house. When I was 14 I had a best friend who I thought was so hot and I called it a passionate friendship but now I see it was rooted in desire.


Chris: My mom is queer so I grew up knowing that women could love women and that kind of attraction was always an option. I remember being preschool age and having a little crew of 4 that I toddled around with in Montessori school. We had a leader of sorts named Caitlin, she had blonde curly hair and I had a huge crush on her. I have always loved a bossy femme. I also remember in the first grade having a crush on this girl in my class who had childhood arthritis. When we would sit on the carpet for stories she would always sit in a chair and I remember thinking she looked like a princess and I dreamt about her being Cinderella.
References:


Photos were generously taken by two badass trans artists: M Ospina-López and Elloit Reza