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Yours Always, Always yours

Emery Kate tillman

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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YOURS ALWAYS, ALWAYS YOURS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Emery Kate Tillman
B.A. College of Charleston '16
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For my parents for showing me what love looks like.

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Abstract

The body of artwork discussed in this paper deals with the navigational process of the actualization of my own desires and needs in an intimate capacity specifically relating to my own queer identity. In this paper I will address the use of certain forms throughout the work as well as color and material choices. *Yours Always, Always Yours* is a thesis project produced as the final requirement of Louisiana State University's Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art program.

Essay

“How do you like to be touched,” she asked. I froze. No one had ever asked me that question before. This was the first time I had ever been with a woman. In all of my previous intimate moments, my desire and need were never the focus of the experience. When asked this question, I simply did not respond; I was not aware that I even should have a response.

Growing up female there is a social standard of what is an “acceptable” amount of desire. The pressure of societal norms is especially skewed when discussing virginity. A female is labeled a slut for “losing” it while the male is rewarded for this act.¹ This example begins to expose the confusing dichotomy of having desire when, as a female, one is not supposed to have these desires at all. When you add in being a queer female the notion of navigating one’s own desires becomes even more complicated since you are now dealing with aspects of trauma and shame.² As a queer person, you often don’t grow up as your true self. Instead, you wear a mask and shape your choices in a manner that allows you to minimize potential shame and rejection. As I became an adult, I had the massive task of

¹ Tanenbaum, Leora. *Slut!: Growing up Female with a Bad Reputation*. HarperCollins, 2000.

² Butler, Judith. “Critically Queer.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1993, pp. 17–32..

unlearning and differentiating which parts of myself are true and authentically mine compared to aspects I created to protect myself.

This body of work is the navigational process of the actualization of my own desires and needs in an intimate capacity. The title of the show “Yours Always, Always Yours” references letter writing and text as a way to communicate about desire and intimacy. My fascination with love letters can be partially traced to my own parents. In the early days of their marriage, they regularly communicated via love letters since my dad often traveled for work. Letters have historically shown parts of relationships between same sex partners, such as Eleanor Roosevelt and her partner Lorena Hickock³. These historic texts informed my own notion of what it means to be queer and what a relationship can look like. Letter-writing allows for more thoughtful ways to communicate because there is no immediate response.⁴ The writer and the reader must sit with the words for an extended time. The letter, in turn, makes a more meaningful connection. There are no set rules for what a relationship should look like as a queer individual. While one could argue this is the same in a heteronormative relationship. Due to this notion of flexibility and fluidity in queer relationships, one gets to evolve and figure out their own needs

³ Over the course of their 30-year relationship the couple exchanged over 3,500 letters totaling over 16,000 pages.

⁴ Turkle, Sherry. *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. Penguin Books, 2016.

and wants.⁵ My work depicts this idea of variability with several large-scale sculptures that are continuous looped forms. The navigational process of figuring out oneself is a never-ending experience. The open and the closed-off curves and loops in my pieces reference this ongoing discovery process. To express this more vividly, some of the pieces such as *Reading to be Touched* (Figure 1), will have embroidered language throughout the seams of the sculpture. I utilize text from my own letters and thoughts as well as text from: *Bluets* by Maggie Nelson, my parents love letters, song lyrics, and Eleanor and Lorena's correspondences. These text items allow the viewer to acknowledge the language and experiences I am trying to convey through this work. They provide insight into the process behind my work as well as the language I use to express my own desires and needs. For this piece, the viewer's body must mimic the curves throughout the sculpture in order to be able to effectively read the text and fully experience the work. This creates a dynamic where the viewer has to physically move to see the entire work which helps relate directly back to my own body and trauma. Controlling the movement of the viewer not only acts as a choreographed dance but also allows for the need of stability and acceptance when being vulnerable with someone. These

⁵ Better, A. Redefining Queer: Women's Relationships and Identity in an Age of Sexual Fluidity. *Sexuality & Culture* **18**, 16–38 (2014).

sculptures, while large, are all made with my size in mind. Each curve and loop are hand bent; the size is in direct relation to my own body,⁶ because of this the viewer must come into the space of the sculptures. The forms itself invite different interpretations of bodies tangled up in one another as well as a knotted up visceral feeling that is felt deep inside one selves.



⁶ These forms can also be seen as intestinal in nature

Reading to be touched, 2020, Foam, velvet thread 6'X'6'X3'

The color pink has a large presence throughout the exhibit. Pink is a color that, depending on the shade and connotation, expresses conflicting meanings. Overall, the color can be viewed as a representative of love and romance. Since the 1940s, pink has been associated with femininity and can be viewed as soft and kind.⁷ Yet, continued and extensive exposure to the color can instead make one angry and agitated. In the United State we often delegates pink to be a girl color and blue, a boy color. Even into adulthood pink has an effect in regard to buying products that are marketed to women such as razors, toothbrushes, and other general care items for women. For a long time, I hated pink due to this artificial association. When I was a professional whitewater kayaker, I was forced to wear pink if I wanted equipment that fit. Now that pink is not forced upon me, I have realized I enjoy the color pink for all of its diverse properties and have reclaimed what pink means to me. Instead of allowing the color to be oppressive in nature I am in turn utilizing pink as a symbol of power and strength.

There are elements of pink in every piece I am making for this exhibition. This makes the work more cohesive but allows the pieces to play off of each other and take up more space. The pink, instead of being soft and inviting,

⁷ Clair, Kassia St. *The Secret Lives of Colour*. John Murray Publishers, 2018.

overpowers the space and commands attention and demands to be thought of as a bigger notion rather than the fragility that can come with the color. Being queer often times means you are taking a stand personally and politically. My sculptures are meant to take up space and demand the viewer's presence in a similar way. My use of glitter throughout these pieces reference growing up in New Orleans with Mardi Gras as well as being part of queer culture. There is a

Throughout this body of work, I utilize a loose loopy knot form that has no end point. How tight or loose the loops are among different pieces symbolize continual momentum and hesitations. Such as in the piece *am I open enough for you (Figure 2)* I often need more time in terms of processing thoughts and emotions. These twisted, connected forms are visualizations of the ups and downs of coming to conclusions about my wants and desires. Trauma affects my ability to process certain aspects of emotion and how I deal with intimate personal relationships. My history with trauma and grief can be directly related to the water. As a teenager, I not only saw where I lived get destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, but as a whitewater kayaker, numerous close friends were either severely injured or killed in kayaking related accidents including the person I was in my first relationship with. Before the age of eighteen, I had been to more funerals of

close friends than my parents had. It has taken me quite some time to come to terms with my on-going grieving process and how these past traumas affect me today. In *am I open enough for you* is precarious it is unstable. With the line weight of the piece being so thin it is almost over looked until you get to one of the bumps that interrupts the movement of the piece.



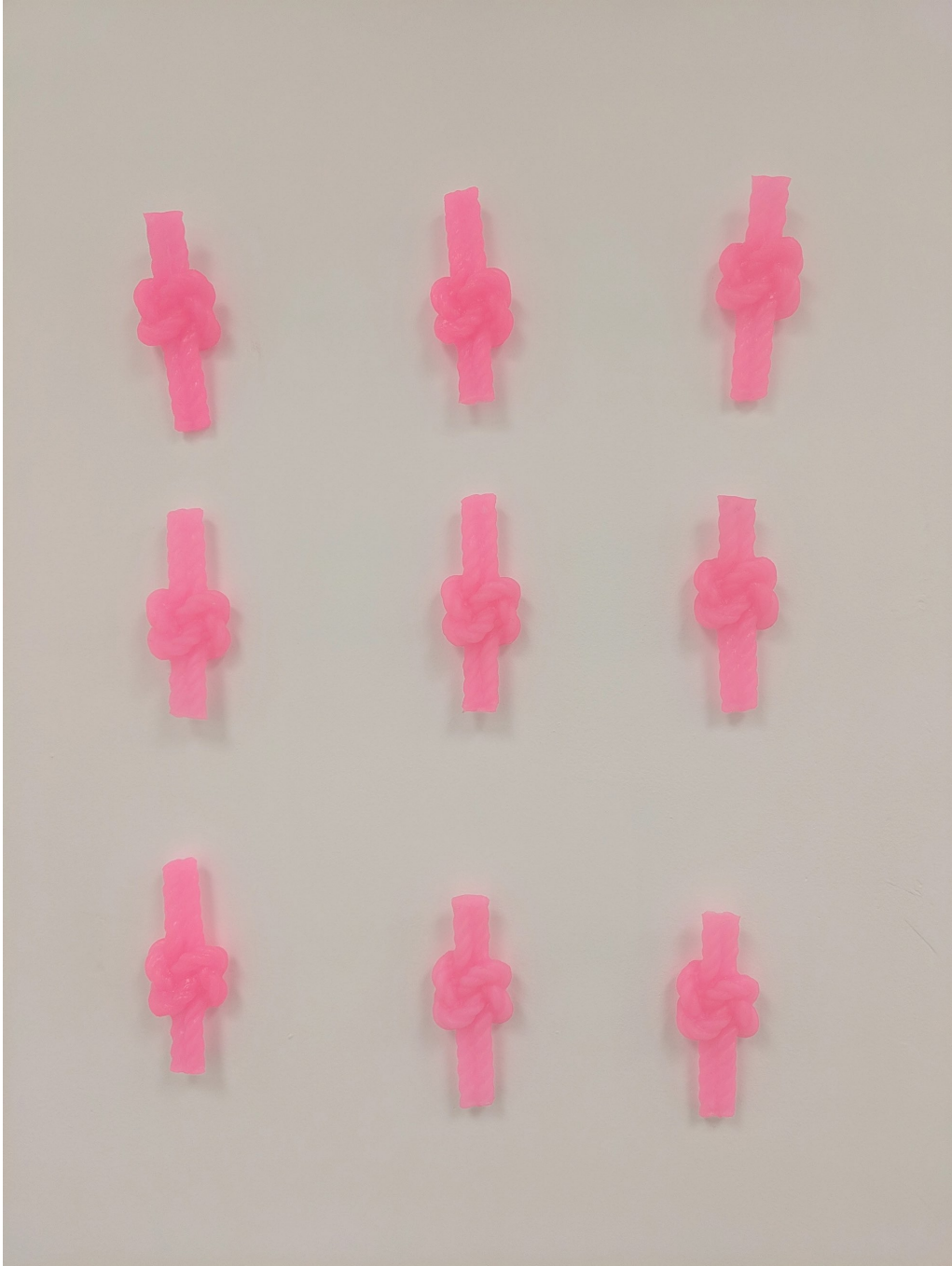
am i open enough for you, 2020, steel, paint 18'X8'X5'

I have previously discussed the larger works in the show; but smaller, handheld pieces will be included as well. These pieces which are blown glass caged forms (Figure 3) symbolize the fragility of these intimate relationships we craft for ourselves as well as the struggle to break out.



Caged in #1, Blown Glass, glitter 3"X4"X2"

Allowing myself to be vulnerable with others has been a struggle for me. I often feel closed-off and guarded. I reference this in the use of rope throughout my work. Rope has the ability to connect things as well as strengthen bonds. For me, there is something meaningful in using a common material that the average person has interacted with before. In the installation *Love Knots* (figure 4) I have used what is a traditional love knot cast in pink silicone to demonstrate the flexibility of my desire. The love knot is an unstable knot, meaning it is not used to secure anything. If used with tension, the knot will fail. I use rope in one of the other large-scale pieces *Trying to not be tied up* (figure 5) as a sign of being grounded and secure. Using rope further references my childhood, growing up on the water sailing, as well as kayaking once I got older.

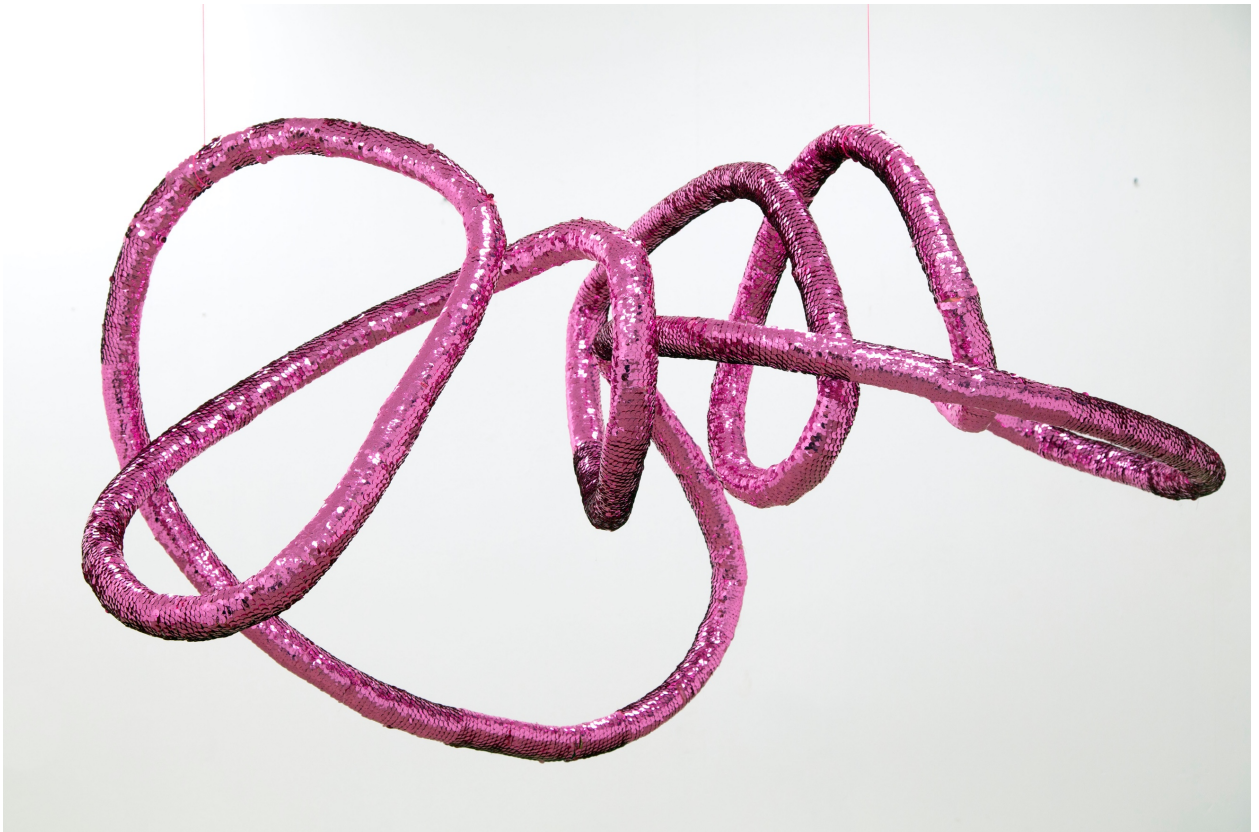


Love Knots, 2020, cast silicone and pigment, 4"X3"X1"



Trying to not be tied up, 2020, Foam, dyed rope, sequins, paint. 5'X6'X4'

My plan for the show was to have all the smaller scale pieces be placed where they can be seen through some of the bigger loop pieces, as well as the love knots being around the perimeter of the gallery eye level. You would enter the space and be greeted with the largest piece in the middle of the gallery. For the title it would be a neon sign that will be animated to flash yours always, always yours. For the piece *Am I showing you enough of my true colors* (figure 6) it will be hung just above eye level.



Am I showing you enough of my true colors, 2020, foam, sequins, adhesive 6.5'X 4'X2'

Figuring out one's desires and needs in an intimate capacity is not an easy task. This body of work helped me realize the navigational process of my wants and wishes through a queer lens. These sculptures, because of their size, take up space and demand to be seen. In this way, they tie into to the idea of claiming your own space and accepting your needs. The textual inlays force the viewer to become involved in the work and grapple with their experiences with desire.

I crave stability more than I care to admit. I would rather close off parts of myself or deny an individual from getting to see the vulnerable parts of myself then have to deal with the possibility of another loss. I repeat the same movements shown in these closed off forms, I fall back onto myself so to speak, while there are moments of bigger growth the cycle just starts over once I start to feel insecure. In *I just can't do this anymore* (figure 7) which is last piece I made for the show doesn't continue the cycle there is a break. This piece which is made of glass that has been mirrored is also the smallest piece in the show. I chose to use a mirror finish to reflect inwards. While the scale of this piece might make some viewers to overlook the break of the continuous movement compared to the other forms it allows myself to take pause to investigate how I can make sure my needs and desires get met.



*I just can't do this anymore, 2020, Glass and silver nitrate
2"X2"X2*

For me, making work about desire and intimacy is something that is going to keep on evolving. Figuring out my wants and needs is not something that has been easy and has taken a lot of work. The idea of a typical love story has always been quite foreign to me. However, learning about queer culture, as well as other relationships, has helped me shape my own version of what intimacy means. Expressing these feelings requires introspective reflection of oneself. In order for this to happen, you have to be willing to dig underneath the surface and prioritize yourself and be willing to change and adapt as time goes on. This body of work is

the start for exploring these ideas as well as the materials and forms that I have been using. The work will evolve as I evolve as an individual.

Vita

Emery Kate Tillman is an artist from New Orleans, Louisiana. They have a degree in communications as well as studio arts from the College of Charleston. Their work has been shown throughout the country as well as in the Czech Republic and Thailand. Tillman anticipates completing their Masters in Fine Arts from Louisiana State University in August, 2020