

**Interview with Garth Gratrix and James William Murray by Amie Corry  
for the exhibition *Object Q / The Pursuit of Happiness* at Gallery DODO  
June 2021**

**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?

**JMW:** 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. I began transposing those rules onto the proportions of actual people in my life; I took the median average height and shoulder widths of several people I know intimately, and made work according to the measurements.

**AC:** The results are both austere and playful, abstract but replete with particularities. I'm thinking of *Trio*, in which three, six-millimetre brass rods stand erect in an oak block, spaced according to those median measurements (fig. 1). The rods quiver if they encounter the slightest movement. Elsewhere, that troubling is introduced by way of titles; the brass and graphite 'screens' bear the names of friends and lovers.

**JWM:** The titling was a way of pulling focus on the underlining subjectivities of the practice. You mention the ‘screen’ works, which are also based around human proportions. The titles are not dedications as such, but rather, the art object is given a name that points towards a person who has touched my life somehow. They become markers of time and material intimacy. The act of naming is a cathartic process for me; a way of memorialising, and deferring desire on to something material and inert that I can touch. I refer to them as ‘screens’ because there is a lot of projection going on here.

**AC:** Similarly Garth, there’s a playful worrying at minimalist forms in your draped beach towels, their vertical stripes interrupted by the peeping pink triangles (fig. 2). Or in the tactile form of a dropped handkerchief – a nod to the handkerchief code, historically used by queer men to safely signal their preferences – on a triangle of bevelled glass. Always in this vivid palette: pastels and acid yellows. Then there’s your use of language: innuendo, these gorgeous, indulgent colour specification titles. You’re looking at how content is transmitted, coded?

**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. And they’re only stripes when seen in context, alongside their neighbouring stripes.

**AC:** Yes. They’re definitive, but interrupted by the half-masked triangle, which is quite a subtle signal. The largely US-based discourse of queer abstraction, the work of David Getsy among others, acknowledges the importance of the fight for visibility, as well as the fact that visibility is a privilege, not available to everyone. 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. Can we talk about the evolution of both of your engagements with abstraction?

**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. I get that it’s important for people to feel visible and that their sex matters, but 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. 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.

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 an ethereal sense, the nonphysical: 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* (fig. 3)?

**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 interested 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, or morality – in Christianity there's a relation between literal uprightness and strength of faith (no slouching, stand to pray, standing firm) – 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 the kouros, and canonical beauty, with the emphasis on physical perfection that abounds in many male gay spaces?

**JWM:** I have certainly felt a 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, how they ultimately fail us... 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 (fig. 4). The fabric has been ripped from the source, but embalmed. That gesture could be read as tender or violent or both.

**JMW:** 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. 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?

**JWM:** I was ordering stretcher bars in increments of 120, 60 and 30 centimetres, because I was working on this 2:1 ratio for my 'screen' works. 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. They appear like sculptures but they're also painterly because of the stretcher bars, and the graphite is a medium for drawing. Like most of my work, they sit at the intersection between media.

**GG:** I was thinking that there's a potential link to the term 'faggoting' there, in that it loosely relates to binding, bundling sticks together, which is the etymology of faggot. Artist and academic Daniel Fountain extends that link to those whose identities and beliefs might appear non-normative – historically, faggots were used to burn heretics.

**JMW:** I hadn't made that connection. That's both interesting and disturbing... There is a kinky undertone to that binding, which wasn't intentional, but it pleased me.

**AC:** That play between the soft and hard 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, whether you're looking at bodies or objecthood or performance.

**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.

**JWM:** Yes, to be modular. I wonder how our approaches to subjectivity have changed as we've become increasingly absorbed in identity politics? Andre's work was made within the context of modernist minimalism, which for the most part was about a detachment to subjectivity, arts autonomy, but within that we can read subjectivities relating to post-Industrial America – 'the working man'. The railway sleepers are very loaded as materials.

**GG:** True. There's a machismo and ego surrounding certain materials used by male artists at that time and I think there's something different about how a queer body politicises those materials. Of course, Andre's not a male I want to overrepresent, given his biography and the circumstances surrounding Ana Mendiata's death. Again it comes back to camp for me – that wilful intention to jar with the past, there's 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? A level of care? 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:** How interested are you in the legibility of your codes Garth?

**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. And the half-masked pink triangle, which I use in a colour called ‘Shy Girl’, which was the title of my last solo show [at Grundy Art Gallery]. I have an interest in work that seeks to maintain, rather than fight for new visibility or assimilation. Artists like Jez Dolan – who produced a Polari response to the Wolfenden report – are doing beautiful work around the refusal to assimilate, by keeping that hidden language alive.

**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 and porousness of queerness. How do 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 that show a diversity of artists and materials. Because there still aren’t many queer artists in the archives or included in anything other than queer art shows. But I’m constantly trying to challenge an overthinking mind – honing in on the idea of modular objects, for example, the idea of potential, before overexplaining it.

**JWM:** I’m suspicious of the term ‘queer artist’ because there’s a particular cultural capital around being queer at the moment. And I suppose I don’t trust that the mechanisms that prop up the art world have an interest in the queer project, beyond leveraging it to look current. 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. The term gay is very malecentric in Blackpool and sits amidst a white christian demographic and family friendly entertainment, so worlding differently can be problematic. I was hugely conscious of how announcing myself as a queer artist might marginalise me professionally. But I’ve taken a ‘bent’ approach to dealing with that, in opposition to what the Section 28-brigade might expect in terms of playing it safe and keeping quiet. Instead I’ve chosen to introduce the term ‘queer’ into the professional sphere. My show at the Grundy was the institution’s first to employ the term ‘queer’. So here in Blackpool, the use of ‘queer’ might be perceived as quite radical and brave, whereas I might have conversations beyond the Midlands where it’s viewed as ‘on trend’.

**AC:** In terms of this collaboration then, which 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 testing those in a modular way is useful. I would normally spend a long time in a space – moving things, documenting, taking images. 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 the *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 [laughs]. Perhaps chess isn’t the best analogy here...

**GG:** I’m committed to collaboration as a way of taking risks and accepting potential failure – separating signature from strength in testing. So the not being able to stumble across ideas is hard.

**JWM:** Whereas 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 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’. Garth also supported me in helping me write an Arts Council funding bid, which has been completely transformative because I can think beyond making the more commercially viable work.

**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 how people differ, 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!

**GG:** That's also why I like Blackpool as a destination, because there isn't much gallery interest here: 'Come here, take risks, no one's going to follow your career progression or oeuvre to date by this show in Blackpool!' You can actually do a lot in both refusing and accepting a peripheral location.

**AC:** 'Failure', and testing what that means, being another key queer concept. It's difficult though, working with minimal objects via images? James, you've returned to figurative forms over the course of the pandemic...

**JWM:** Yes. I'm making a lot of work with hands and fingers as a means to communicate the concerns of the practice in a way that might be more relatable for the viewer (fig. 5). Figuration works a lot better in a digital capacity, you understand the scale.

The pointing fingers stemmed from a cast of my hand in a contrapposto pose. I started out working with figurative photography – these massive images of my then-boyfriend in the contrapposto pose. I like how the photograph has been theorised as a kind of touching, an 'index of the real'. Mary Ann Doane compared the pointing figure to the photograph in that it has the same kind of performative function, they both point towards something – 'here it is, look here'. There's also something about the finger tip being an identifying device, which is an extension of my concerns about visibility and concealment, but more about the discourse of desire rather than queer theory. And disembodied appendages... they're funny in the way dildos are. Maybe because they make us a bit nervous...

**GG:** ...and there's something playful in that a finger points to shame something as well. There's a potential awkwardness to the notion of a minimal space featuring a single finger sculpture, which would feel like a very different encounter to a group of them. But both, depending on your head space, could feel like you're being shamed, or, alternatively, being invited to have a good time!

**AC:** The finger is also a straight line, which can be bent, or the skin wrinkled. It can be vertical or horizontal. Sara Ahmed has a great line about queer politics, 'making lines that do not reproduce what we follow but instead creat(ing) wrinkles in the earth', which made me think of this troubling of verticality.

**JW:** Yes. It's important that they're ambiguous. I'm also happy for them just to be fingers.



**AC:** Both of you employ systems and seriality, meaning through repetition and codes. Garth, you often apply a ‘nine-inch rule’ when deciding the scale or distance of an object, which refers to inevitable lines of questioning about cock size on Grindr. I like how that plays with minimalism’s interest in removing decision-making elements. Tell us about it?

**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 requirements and anatomical ideologies. On apps, you can be as blatant and refusing of anyone and make very intimate lines of enquiry before asking my name or what I do. There’s an overwhelming disregard for one another in a space that is meant to be about shared safety and care. I kept a record of the amount of times I was asked things like, ‘Have you got a nine-incher?’ When I collected my colour specifications for the titles, I simultaneously recorded that digital interference.

The nine-inch rule manifests in the stripes, how that rule is printed onto existing measurements and dimensions, so it kind of flags up a margin of error in terms of performance anxiety. It’s a different approach to the stripe than, for example, Daniel Buren’s, who deals with it architecturally in this mathematically precise way. If I’m to apply it to a wall, the nine-inch rule runs out or doesn’t fit (fig. 6).

**AC:** So again, it leaves the path open to ‘failure’.

**JWM:** It’s often the first thing we do in a new place. Fire up Grindr and see what’s going on. And it’s dehumanising in many ways. Similar things are lost in looking at art online as there are in flirting online.

**GG:** 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. There’s an innocence to it and it’s about finding a safe space. I like installation work or interventions as they invite a body to cruise around an object and navigate it.

And the kitsch colours add a campness to the nine-inch... I guess it’s an abstract Polari – if I was trying to create my own language or way of communicating with people, my equivalent of a historic language in a coastally specific, pastelly, camp, nonsense way... with the added interference of being asked about my cock size.

**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.

**GG:** Yes, I think if you are not heterosexual, then you often feel a slight loss or yearning in public spaces. If we behaved as others do – handholding for instance – we could be labelled deviants and safety becomes a concern. Apps in general pose a level of safety, but there’s always the spectre of catfish and half-masked truths in advertisements. Cruising sustains the

art of observing, following, communicating through movement, gesture, dress. Its part and parcel of gay semiotics... and you get your steps in at the same time.

**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!

## Figures

- 1: James William Murray, *Trio*, 2020, brass, oak (135 x 180 x 20 cm)
- 2: Garth Gratrix, *Shy Girl Fresh Squeezed Kindness of Strangers & Shy Girl Flamboyant Flamingo Crown of Feathers*, 2021 (beach towels). In collaboration with Harry Clayton-Wright. Photo: Matt Wilkinson
- 3: Gratrix, *Pursuit of Happiness*, 2020, oasis block, household emulsion (dimensions variable)
- 4: Murray, *Object Q III*, 2020, graphite on stretcher bars with T-shirt hems (16 x 120 x 4 cm)
- 5: Murray, *Also Men VIII*, 2021, beeswax, gilding paste, copper, linen, plywood (15 x 33 x 15 cm)
- 6: Gratrix, Installation view: 'Shy Girl', Grundy Art Gallery (18 Jan–28 Mar 2020) (Beach towel in colours Pursuit of Happiness, Fresh Squeezed, By the Seashore. Nine inch stripe balcony in colour Cottage by the Sea).

## References

- Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Duke University Press, 2006)
- 'Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation', *Art Journal* 72, no. 4 (Winter 2013)
- David J. Getsy, 'Ten Queer Theses on Abstraction'. In Jared Ledesma, *Queer Abstraction*, exh. cat. (Des Moines Art Center, 2019)
- David J. Getsy, William J. Simmons, 'Appearing Differently: Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities'. In *Pink Labour on Golden Streets: Queer Art Practices*, eds. Christiane Erharter, Dietmar Schwärzler, Ruby Sircar and Hans Scheirl (Sternberg Press, 2015)
- Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011)
- Nick Rees-Roberts, 'Queer and Upright: Sex, Age, and Disorientation in Alain Guiraudie's *Staying Vertical*'. In *Cross Generational Relationships and Cinema*, eds. Joel Gwynne and Niall Richardson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003)

Text © the authors, all rights reserved, 2021

Artwork © the artists, all rights reserved, 2021