

MAX HUNTER

thesis performance notebook

august to october 2021 → concordia

this notebook reflects the preparation for the thesis performance.

this journal includes reflection, questions and preliminary analysis, concluding at the start of filming and recording.

Transgender Drag, Transgender Joy: A Non-Binary Approach to Creating Joy Through Drag Performance

Submitted by Max Hunter

2022

PART A: Background

Key in this section:

- where does my understanding of gendering come from?
 - what does 'transition' look like for me?
 - how are bodies gendered based on clothing
 - how can clothing act as intervention into how ~~other~~ bodies are gendered?
 - What is my drag?
 - ↳ what does it look like?
 - ↳ what logics does it have?
 - how does this background affect ~~go~~ where this performance work will or should or may go?
- * this section will lead into section B, 'joy'

key terms:

- transition
- gendered
- community
- gaze
- perception
- visibility
- obscurity
- joy

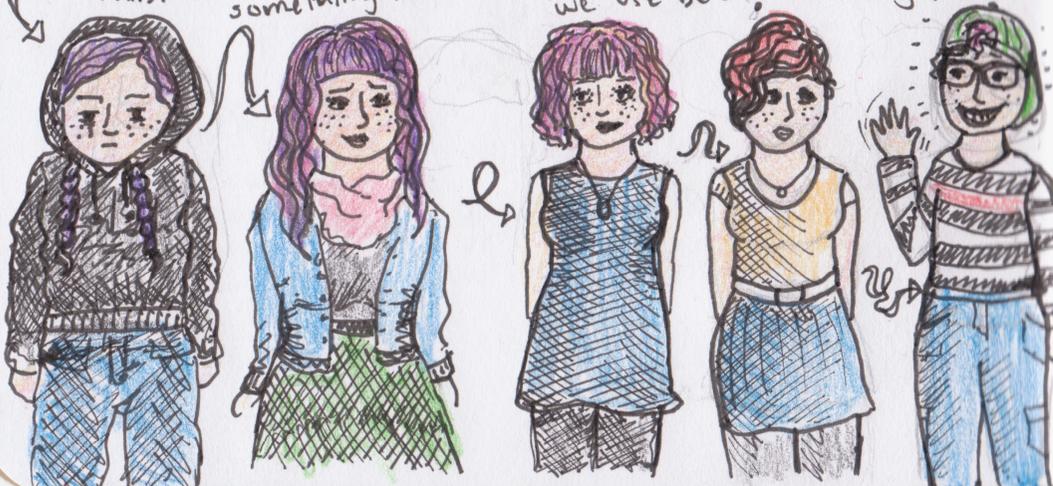
... what does transition / being trans look like for me?



not all changes in presentation are gender-based, but can lead to new discoveries about our relationship to identity and gender



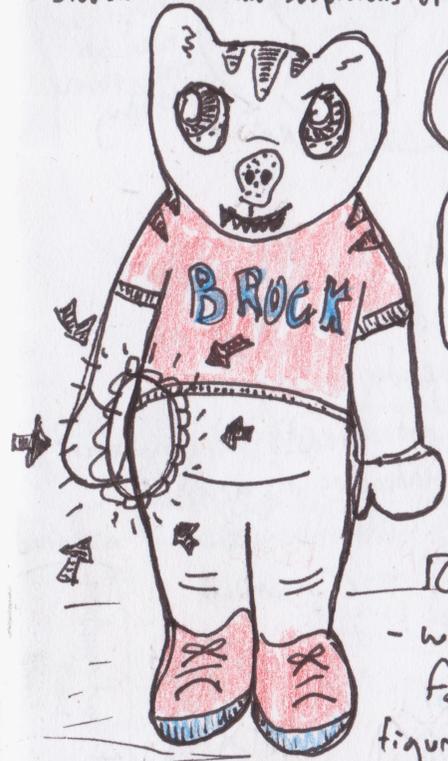
transition then feels like a tipping point where we stumble into something new and push forward with it, the languages we use become something new



How is my body gendered by onlookers out of drag?

^{Badger}
The Badger Costume: actually an analysis of clothing on body...

i used to work as a mascot during undergrad. The costume was huge and had the typical mascot body type... i.e. like a plush animal. The character was male but nobody who played it was, for some reason male students who had suspicions of this were baffled and weirdly offended.



i can tell there's a girl in there.

ya man. see how her hip is out to the side like that? ya.

The Badger's A GIRL!



QUESTIONS FROM THIS:

- why are people so fascinated/uncomfortable with figuring out the bodies of people in costume?
- why are people uncomfortable not being able to gender somebody, especially based on body?

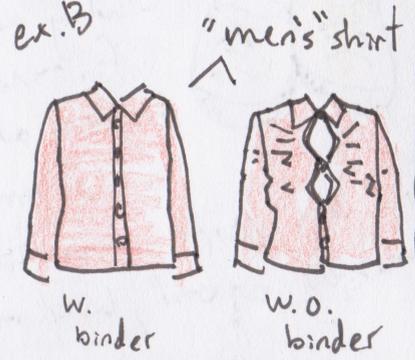
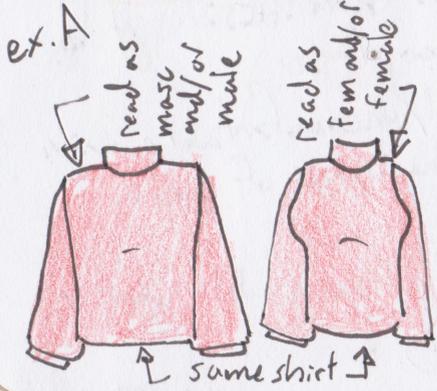
The 'inevitable' gendering of the chest

(outside of a badger costume)



different garments produce different shapes, even on the same body

- none of these garments tell what a person's gender is
- ↳ while they may be intended as or read as signifiers of gender *or* gender expression
- people tend to use perceptions of breasts vs. not-breasts as a primary indicator or key indicator of gender
- gendered clothing is often made with this idea of assumed body type in mind, and assumed size in mind

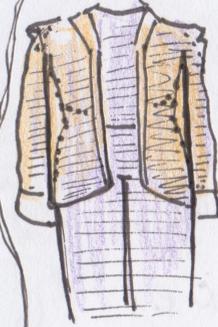


there's a lot of 'confirmation bias' that goes on w. gendered clothing here

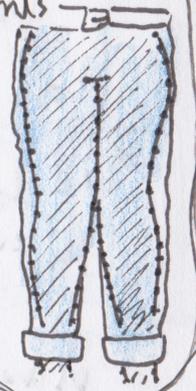
Gendering the Contours of the Body (mine)

"how is a body more generally gendered based on clothing fit?"

related: the term 'read as' ← clothing as visual language



- larger clothing that hides curves can make people pause before gendering
- when people can't see somebody's body they often try to fill in blanks
- this can also create a pause, a moment of questioning that can shift what gender they land on



visible contours create different gendering of the same body

↳ this includes the face, mask wearing has made me get called 'sir' a lot more (not accurate but still)

↳ glasses too? why?

- this says a lot about the cycles between gendering bodies, and gendering clothing

↳ pants are big for this affect



stripping onstage in or to get out of drag makes sense because these gender presentations are fun for a bit, when we can take them off

What it is / why include it here

project/show i started in 2019 to have a space for trans performers to have the chance to perform more bawdy stuff. i now co-run it with a drag queen named salt (see previous page)

Can you fix my lashes? im out of glue

it's fun... as a costume



drag feels like performing into a void

more text?

the first one was a variety show, but now it's mostly drag with some burlesque/strip performers. Always all trans casted!

we run the shows exclusively in places where there's no limits to how much performers can show or use their bodies

Conversations i've had over time w. Salt that we repeat a lot when we plan together:

what does ~~drag~~ drag mean when it's not in service of an audience? or in service of a cis. audience?

did you get paid yet?

how do we make performances that allow ourselves to put ourselves first, but give others access to our joy?

"we don't have the language to articulate that" (yet) but this works in it's place for now

hey im running late

taking gender and playing up until it becomes divorced from reality

is the call up yet?

clowns are inhuman so what does that mean for that a lot of nonbinary performers end up as clowns?

read as

TRANSVERSERS

- This show is why i started really thinking about trans drag performance as being about community, collective space, getting away with what we aren't supposed to be doing, intervention, embodiment etc.

- stripping is vital to this show because it allows trans performers to choose how, when, and why to let audiences view their bodies... also to push back against the viewing trans bodies as obscene

- we're also the only all-trans nightlife/drag/burlesque show right now in montreal, might actually be the only one in toronto too... there aren't a lot so this creates a unique space

- organizing and co-hosting puts my role as a drag performer into one of supporting other's work first, and i learn a lot from the other performers (definitely a huge influence)

- this is important for me to include because it reflects that no matter how much i isolate my drag practice, it is always intricately intertwined

- this stage allows for failure, flaws etc... this might reflect "performer first" vs. "audience first" drag

- maybe something here about how the first one of these was technically in my living room? (when i lived in a venue)

- moments of literal and figurative MESS!

thoughts

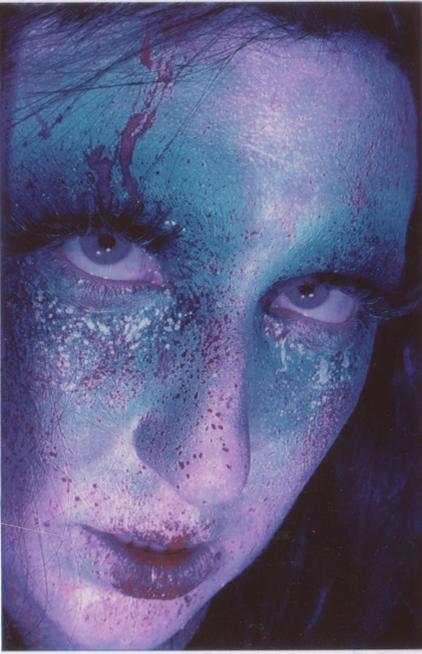
don't hit that pullover!





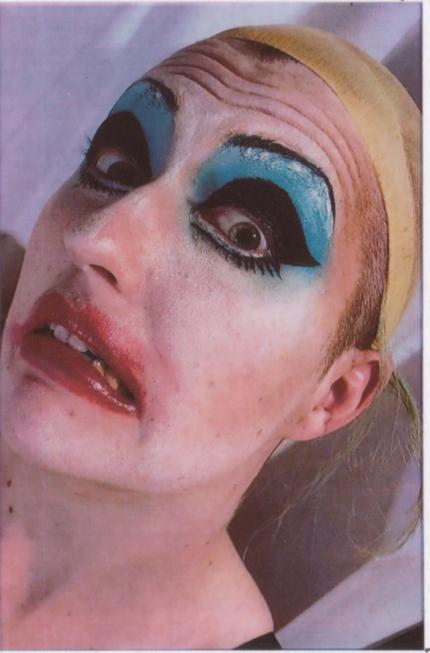
for: creating an unsettling affect, reflecting a void

for: figuring out how to do makeup on impulse vs. trying to do it right, focus on colour texture



for: making 'pretty' into 'scary'... for a number 1. first time feeling like drag a cup of blood drunk

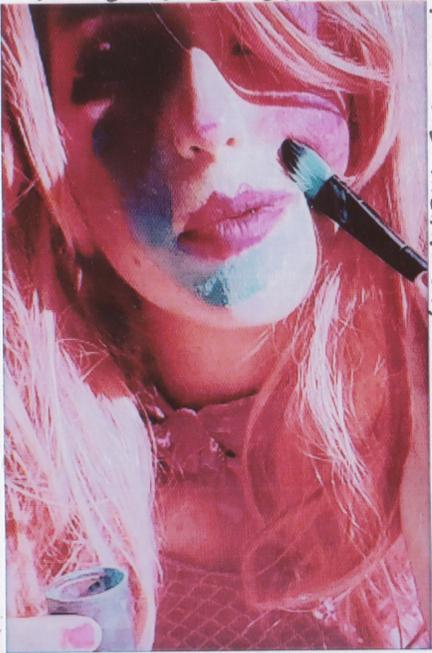
for: number about kinda bad drag, poking fun at how low the bar is for cis men



• Beyond stylistic differences, how do these looks do different things? What do they communicate?

• How can aesthetic differences outside of expected gendered signifiers shift what gender the performer is thought to communicate?

• Who are or what are these aesthetics in service of?



for: a number about mental health, this one was intentionally a mess

styling looks

for: plot/character purposes. Drag king looks are usually for plot purposes (like this)



for: to pair with the pink chaos look, to look 'put together' while unchanged

for: character, mess because inside of whole L with king character



Why do I do drag, how i ended up in it, what it means for me...

i did not mean to end up as a drag performer.

i started under the impression/assumption that i was a woman doing burlesque which set off the following series of realizations:

still they/them

actually gets ungendered less

still non-binary
still a dyke



- 1) "oh shit, this is feeling a bit like i'm in drag"
- 2) "oh shit, that might say something about my gender"
- 3) "oh shit, i'm non-binary."

- ↳ i have never wanted to or thought of this character as being a woman.
- ↳ my drag character is an alternate self with a 'hyper-feminine' presentation
- ↳ this presentation is used to disrupt
- ↳ this character is meant to be a bit uncomfortable even if "pretty"
- ↳ "pretty" is a way to draw people in, the performance makes things... weird.

Name: play on 'Anagram'

↳ re-arranging the same things to make something new

(literal version is with letters and words of course)

↳ i chose it because drag, for me, is about re-arranging gender presentations to make something else

↳ also interacts w. the body! can be multiple things at once!

↑ has never done a number about gender.

Why drag is different for trans performers:

- we arrive into drag with our bodies, presentations, and genders heavily scrutinized
- people have a tendency to only ~~talk~~ talk about Butler's concept of gender as performative when ~~have~~ having to acknowledge trans people, particularly non-binary people, especially when not wanting to admit to discomfort
- ↳ drag lets us say "ok, fine. if you're going to see all this as a performance, i'm going to reclaim that and be ~~outraged~~ outrageous about it."

do trans performers ever get that ~~crit~~ crit about queering gender to do numbers about queering gender.

↳ drag is not a utopia. the same cis-sexism and transphobia etc. are prevalent like anywhere else. we have to work against shows not thinking we're actually in drag and still our genders

- drag can be a way of allowing ourselves permission to present in ways we can't elsewhere
- ↳ allows for non-commitment gender play
- ↳ drag can be a moment of stepping outside our gender



why is wig removal ALWAYS read as being a gender shift

PART B: [Trans] Joy [as a concept and in practice]

"[trans] joy has arisen as a concept"

Key in this section:

- what does 'joy' mean to me
- what does 'trans joy' mean to me
- how do i experience joy in not having to make everything make sense to others
- how does joy emerge through artistic intervention
- what can visual language communicate that text/speech based language cannot?
 - ↳ why does this bring joy?
 - ↳ how does this allow me as a trans person to reclaim control over my presentation and representation?
- what does the opposite of [trans] joy look like for me?
- how is all of this connected to those around me

Notes on content in this section:

- the center two pages willfully omit explanation
- the last page addresses non-trauma-based examples of what trans joy does not look like
 - ↳ this is done in reflection of not owning access to trauma history, knowing that this journal will be read.
- i am choosing to unpack this later section

Key terms:

- joy
- identity
- justification
- trans joy
- emerges
- perception
- visual presence
- visual communication
- 'gender speak'?
- non-gendered
- visual language

What does 'trans joy' mean for me?

an unplanned/impulse based list in no particular order

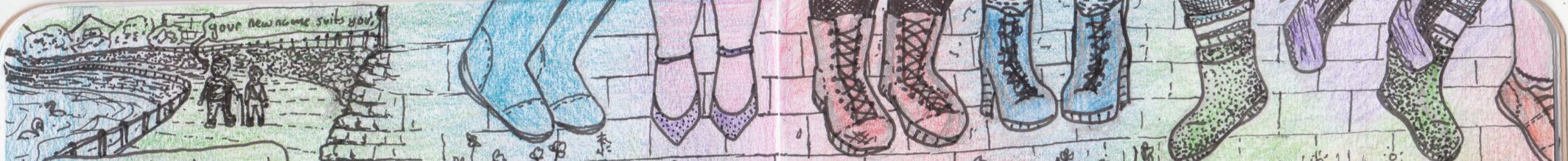
- not having to apologise for existing
- not constantly having to explain myself
- not having to justify why i identify the way i do
- not worrying about how my movements are gendered
- not having to think about gender or talk about it
- not having to ask permission for or hide liking things with perceived gendered meaning
- not having pronouns be the primary issue in conversation
- being with other trans people
- seeing trans loved ones thrive
- having my gender be the least notable thing about me
- access to trans-inclusive healthcare
- trans specific spaces/social settings/relationships/activism
- family acceptance/adaptation/understanding
- seeing kids and youth have access to information and identities that a lot of people haven't gotten access to until adulthood
- getting to learn from, know, work with, see thrive etc. trans elders
- spaces/moments where the idea that gender wouldn't be a construct seems bizarre

↳ my chosen name being a non-issue

- * Things that have theoretically nothing to do with gender that bring JOY for me
- teal/green/blue colour schemes
 - working in/making/seeing theatre
 - quiet spaces, sound outdoors
 - going on adventures with my girlfriend
 - seeing family
 - my cat
 - plants
 - punk shows
 - coffee
 - drawing
 - the noodle drawings i do that look like rhizomes
 - dancing badly to bad music alone
 - ocean documentaries
 - scottish sweets
 - indie comics
 - baking
 - crocheting
 - pattern drafting
- ↳ what trans joy looks like for me

• Kurt Vonnegut novels

• squirrels



your new home suits you!

ok! now just wait for that
to dry... now you
know how to
glue your lashes!



... and tonight our show has an
ALL TRANS cast!



Oh hey,
this fits
with a
biodep.



hi grandma!
it's Max!

oh it's you!
hello Max!
oh Max is on the
phone Bill!

What does trans joy not look like (i.e. what is the opposite?)

have you ever thought of transitioning?

i did. i did ~~four~~ five years ago.

no... like.. transition... top surgery.

...and so she said... that she... they... they... they!... meeting so she... THEY... YES!! know!!!

you have to give me more time and be patient with me! you have to understand how hard this is for me. can you just make an exception for me? you have to understand that this is all so new this gender stuff and you can't just...

oh my god! girl... i love bio queens

you're just reinforcing the gender binary by identifying as trans

ya there's a neutral one but you need to apply for a key through the security guards...

well you were a woman when you were born so...

i was a baby when i was born.

oh your real name is M~~is~~ right?

this is a barber shop. we don't cut women's hair.

go to a salon!

you just want attention

PART C: costume design



questions
Key in this Section:

- how do i translate my body into costume
- how do i add layers to my body that obscure what does not bring me joy?
- what are the roles of shape, texture, colour, and pattern in creating joy?
- how does beginning with -impulse- create new paths for ^{my} costume ~~design~~ design?
- what is the role of contrast in this design?



- how does the act of constructing shift how i experience the costume?
- how does the costume shape the performance

- Key terms:
- shape
 - obscure
 - tactile
 - constructing
 - body shape

This page is out of 'chronological order' \rightarrow



Constructing the bodice:



1. shaping the body: both by binding and wearing a corset gives a shape closer to the one i have in drag (and allows that shape to be replicated with an embedded corset), and gives space for the chest casts.
2. the chest casts are done separately w.o. binding and individually

3. the dry cast is glued back onto the corset in a stretched position to shape how it will be when tightened
4. the cast is painted in layers (see texture page)
5. chest casts are painted and drilled to lace

Parts 1 and 2 are done with plaster. This gives a rigid...almost protected (armour) shape, a bit of control too. it builds up from my body and becomes an alt version of it

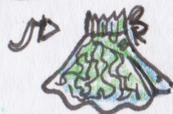
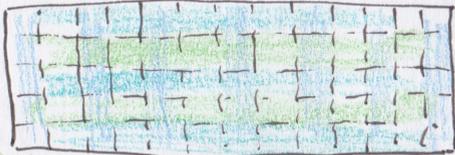
Constructing the skirt

1. 15ft of muslin fabric, hand dyed teal green
 2. linocut stamp (see texture page) cut, 1' by 7"
 3. linocut block used to individually print each pattern bit
 4. ribbon woven through top section to create tied skirt
- skirt can be tied on during performance



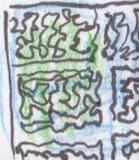
paint as ink, same as bodice

scaled up



role of labour

15' by 4'



why the removable chest compartments?



ya it's not that i don't want boobs, i just don't want them all the time... it would be good if they twisted off or something.

ya, same or maybe if they at least could be used as pockets! ^{super common trans thing...}

- the choice of doing body casting came partially from thinking about the body casts a lot of women's centers do, and the feeling of being glad for the celebration of women's bodies, recognizing that the casts are of women's bodies because they are women, but feeling dysphoric over that my body looks like that but is not a 'women's body' because it is mine.
- i like the idea that what could be inside is more interesting than the exterior appearance
- giving this a physical and aesthetic use makes it something to draw attention to instead of hiding.
- the sequined insides bring joy, make them interact with lights, and create this 'geode' effect
- teeth and spiral create a strange consuming void

dysphoria in certain contexts. see page on 'how my body is gendered'.



What would bring joy?

what movements bring emphasis to things that don't

what movement brings joy?

what clothing helps me to move with joy?

what types of movement scare me?

what movements bring physical risk

How does clothing move with and against the body's own movements?

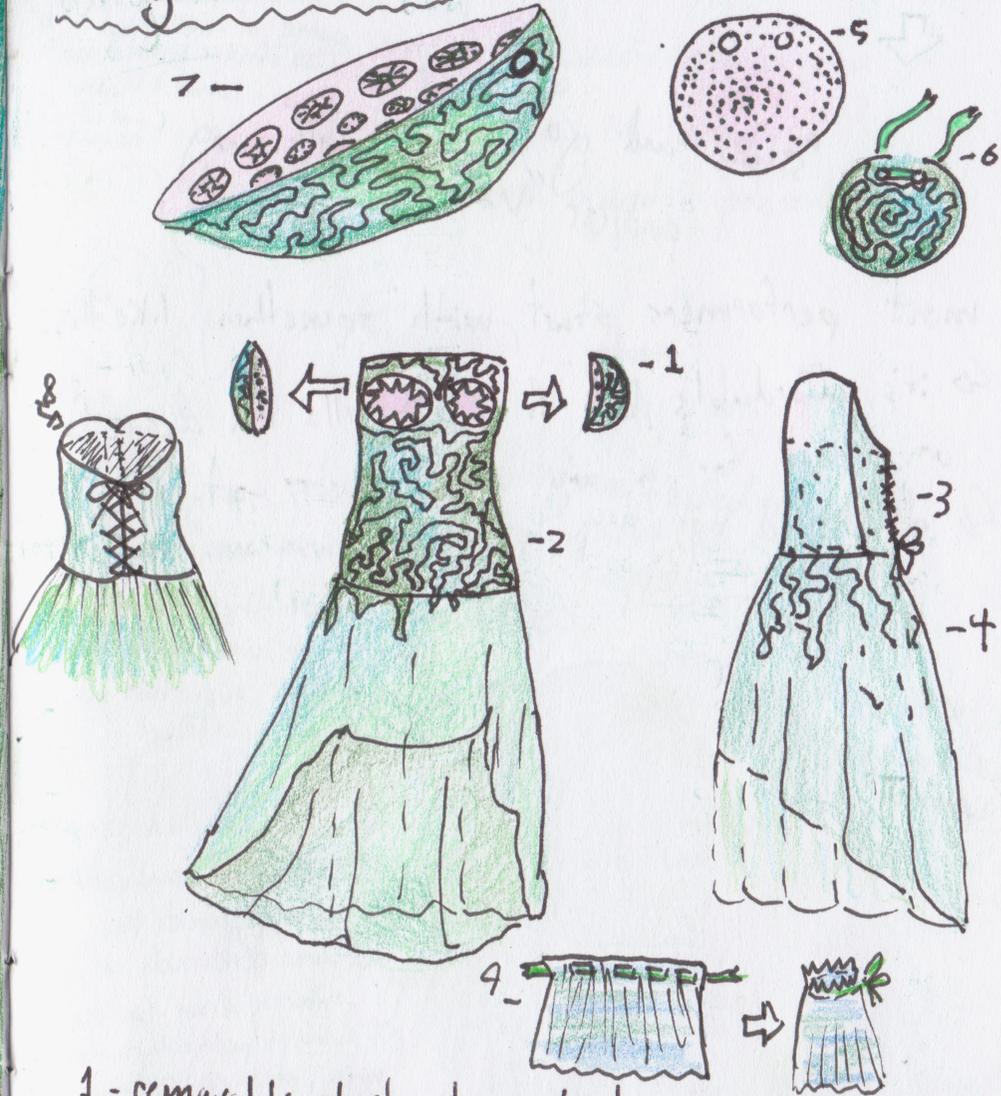
what movements bring social risk

how can the restriction created by garments contribute to flexibility of movement?

how can i move to make clothing move in relation to my body in ways that bring joy?

how can ~~rigidity~~ rigidity allow more freedom of movement because it prevents unwanted movements, keeping focus away from them

Design Breakdown:



- 1- removable chest casts, contrast colour underneath
- 2- plaster body cast done over binder + corset
- 3- corset under-layer to stabilize / make wearable
- 4- skirt section, part painted
- 5- drilled holes
- 6- ribbed opening to fit onto bust
- 7- sequins inside
- 8 rear view 9. updated skirt

possible concept ~~HERE~~ HERE [wigs as transformation]



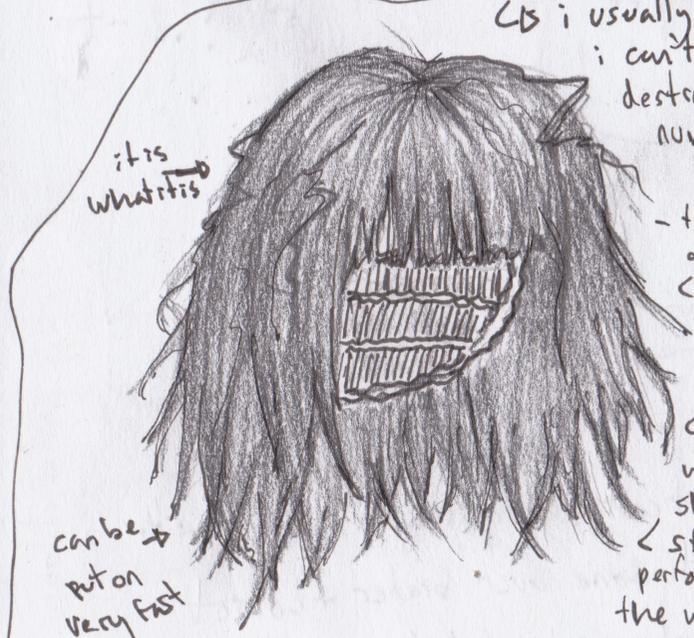
frankly speak

the "shake and go" and/or "halloween store" wig (cost of even)

Not the same of course but somewhat similar based on what I have

most performers start with something like this. ↳ it's affordable, but it also fulfills the desire for or need for a wig without excess cost. ↳ often used by alt performers because we can mess them up.

↳ I usually have these because I can't style wigs and usually destroy wigs super fast via. numbers or neglect



- this wig communicates a moment of transformation ↳ it also represents the moment, internally, of 'entering drag' for me ↳ when putting on a wig, presentation immediately shifts, character emerges ↳ starting to use wigs in performances was one of the ways I transitioned to drag

there may be a point in here about how performers with less income sometimes gravitate towards alt drag because it rewards

Wig

- wig shapes character, key way of separating out v.s. in drag - way of altering gender presentation

alternative wig options?



- ~~crispy~~ crispy wig? ↳ overheated to melt into fixed shape, could be glued onto ↳ issues w. movement, lose that movement element



- paper wig ↳ can look a bit too much like a paper wig just for the sake of having one ↳ more motion than ~~crispy~~ crispy option ↳ can look a bit cosplay or derivative



- bald cap ↳ not a wig, but awareness of its absence ↳ note towards erasing hair before/by wearing

Why not 'dress'? - all of these feel like they draw attention not take away focus to other elements... it risks the performer being about the wig being 'cool', even w.o. a specific look.

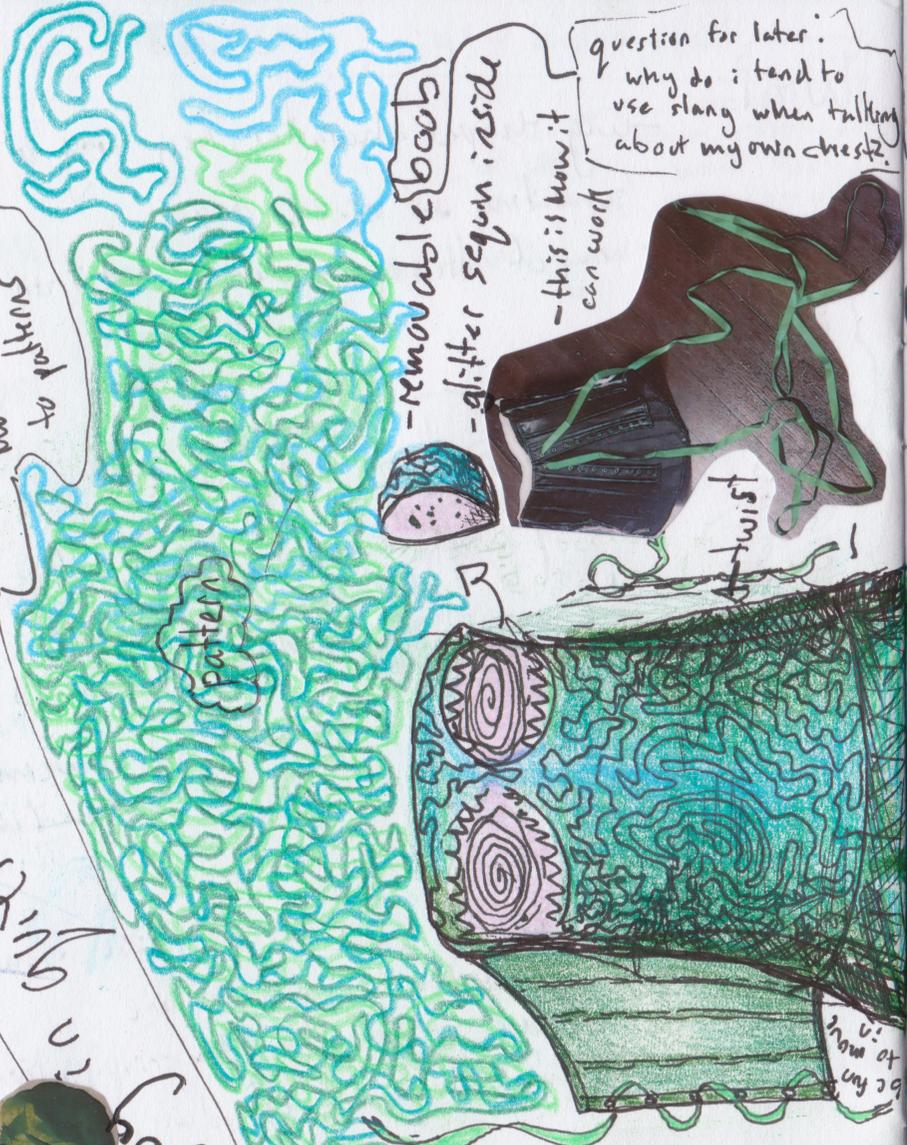


Use in skirt and chaos

Use in skirt

colour palette

id/pastry/antward
to just on back inside



pattern

twist

-removable boob
-glitter sequin inside

-this is how it can work

question for later:
why do i tend to use slang when talking about my own chests?

how can this be translated to patterns

green/blue/teal on outside - savable
pink/shiny on the inside + lurid

detachable skirt

parted thighs?

is making these skirt at
issue of making them (are they) more like the skirt



the shape of the skirt should be to move

why the 'up in the skirt' fabric - it need a shape?
no.

rough edge
traces?



This do
Sketching w.

Painted tights don't add much but pull focus



Shoes

going on impulse, Pleasers make the most sense because they're such a well loved element in drag that ive found helpful in creating a marked difference for myself in drag.

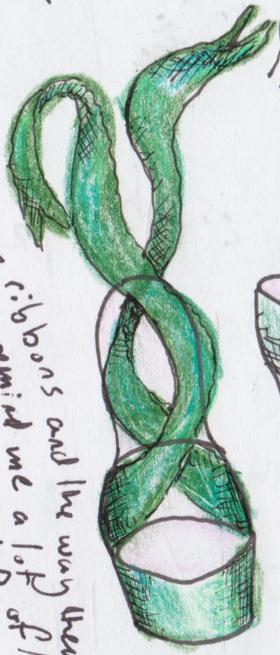
↳ these shoes add so much height that they shift body position and add to the sort of grandeur of a drag persona

↳ Pleasers are a big contributor to that sort of magical "this drag queen is unnervingly tall and more of a spectacle". it doesn't matter how tall they are initially because it's a lot of height depending on the shoe

- easy to fall in (risk)
- fun to dance in
- impossible to ruin.

the most important thing for me about Pleasers is that they are a reminder of the history of sex worker's role in drag history, and a reference to how much drag and sex worker communities are intertwined. Because Pleasers are so closely associated with/made for sex workers, they're illegal in some places and can't be taken across the border.

In a lot of ways they're a way of reflecting solidarity and credit... not always though. there's a lot of issues within drag spaces with whorephobia² and denial about where so much of drag comes from. ^{community knowledge} ^{part is coming from the rest of} ^{some of this info is in} but not exclusively. ^{particularly towards FSWs} ^{1 anti-sex worker ideology}



↳ the tie remind me a lot of the separate people become one when... toward 5...
 (etc.)

Destruction and Reconstruction:

* these should be worn with tights because of rough edges, plus tights add contrast colour + shape



- sanding down shine
- ~~texture~~ texture added
- * un-usable for stage¹ at this point.
- paintable
- rhinestones sanded down
- ¹ mainstream stage, or at least 'as is'



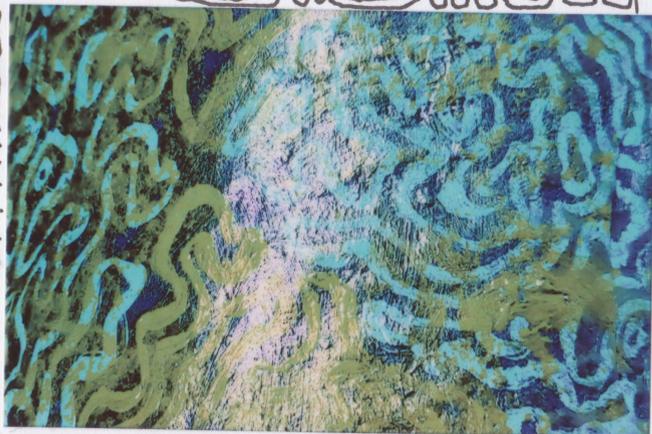
- layered paint, new texture
- sparkly bits covered
- red left
- ↳ a bit of a nod toward what they are underneath
- ↳ the construction... ooooh... the transition... is visible

↳ actually maybe a nod to 'the red umbrella' symbol?



- ribbons glued.
- ↳ crossed for stability
- ↳ tie up so that they also fit well
- ↳ the act of tying them can be a 'moment'... a bit of a pause
- ↳ red left as a reminder of what they are but also the texture adds stability

Texture



texture matters a lot to me because it requires focus and layering. while a lot of the drag i do, and the drag in this performance is impulse based and less attentive to tiny details in the ~~moment~~ moment, this kind of texture building takes a lot of layering and patience.

This pattern works with the plaster etc. to obscure or complicate close ~~the~~ attention to my body within it...

This particular pattern is something i've drawn over and over again since starting to transition. It wasn't intentionally on that timeline but over time it's come to represent my gender: there isn't a central point or core, it doesn't really make sense, and it shifts over time within itself
↳ it's also something and nothing at the same time
↳ it's messy
... this pattern/texture then is a way of putting my gender onto my body...

tactile texture:

- paint layering + plaster creates smooth bumpy texture
- paint (no printed on fabric) has a rough feel
- paint exposes structure of other materials



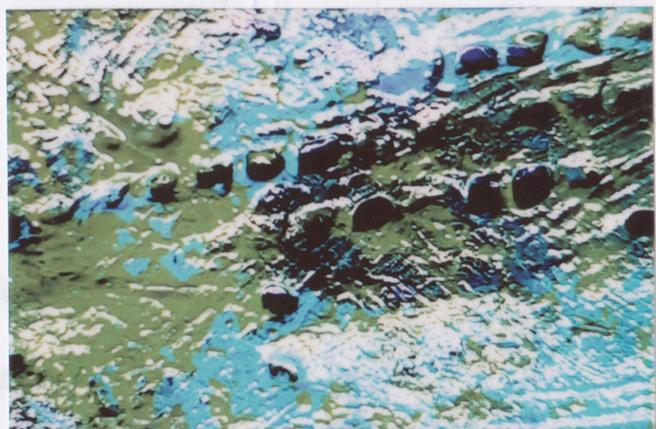
visual texture

mmh

while a lot of the performance is more 'devised in the moment' the textures require labour over time and are less visible

Labour

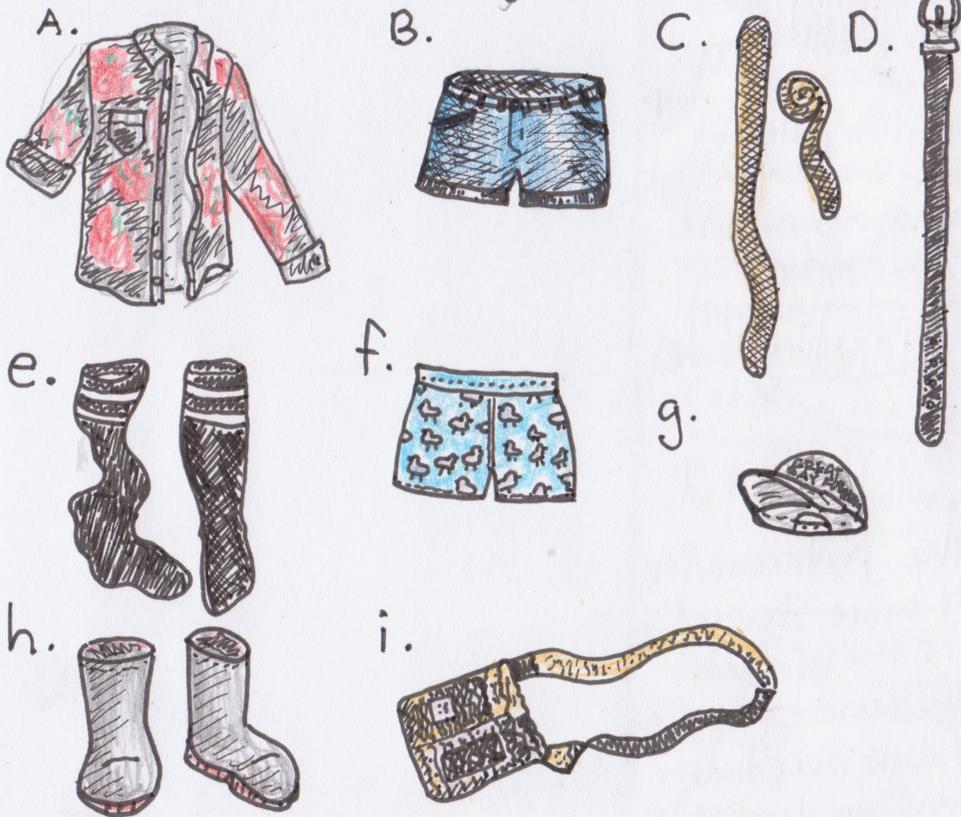
↳ patterns alone took over 10h, and much of that isn't always visible in the final... think about this more...



↳ skirt fabric, printed + dyed!

What clothing... non costume... does the performance begin w/

Thinking again about deciding this part on impulse and memory alone:



- A. my favourite shirt. it was the first shirt that made me feel gender euphoria that i could identify. can be worn many ways to be read differently in different contexts (ex. more ~~butch~~ butch, femme etc.)
- B. very generic comfy shorts, a bit of a default in summer for me
- C. K.T. tape: real purpose is for athletic strain, but it's been re-purposed by trans people who bind as a less noticeable/more versatile alternative to shirt style binders
- D. belt E. socks F. flamingo boxers, ridiculous. G. "They" hat
- H. favourite rubber boots I. collab. w. grammar bag

PART C: launch-points for the performance (A non-plan)

Makeup: - i want this to be impulse based
 - the best way to do this (i think) and to not do it to try and get it 'right' is to do it by muscle memory
 ↳ doing it this way lets 'play' happen, and connects to my body first
 ↳ this moves away from performing ~~for~~ for an audience
 - keep within colour scheme
 ↳ use waterbased pigment (what i know best)

Sound: - during the performance this could be music etc. that bring joy etc., but taken out that they're private

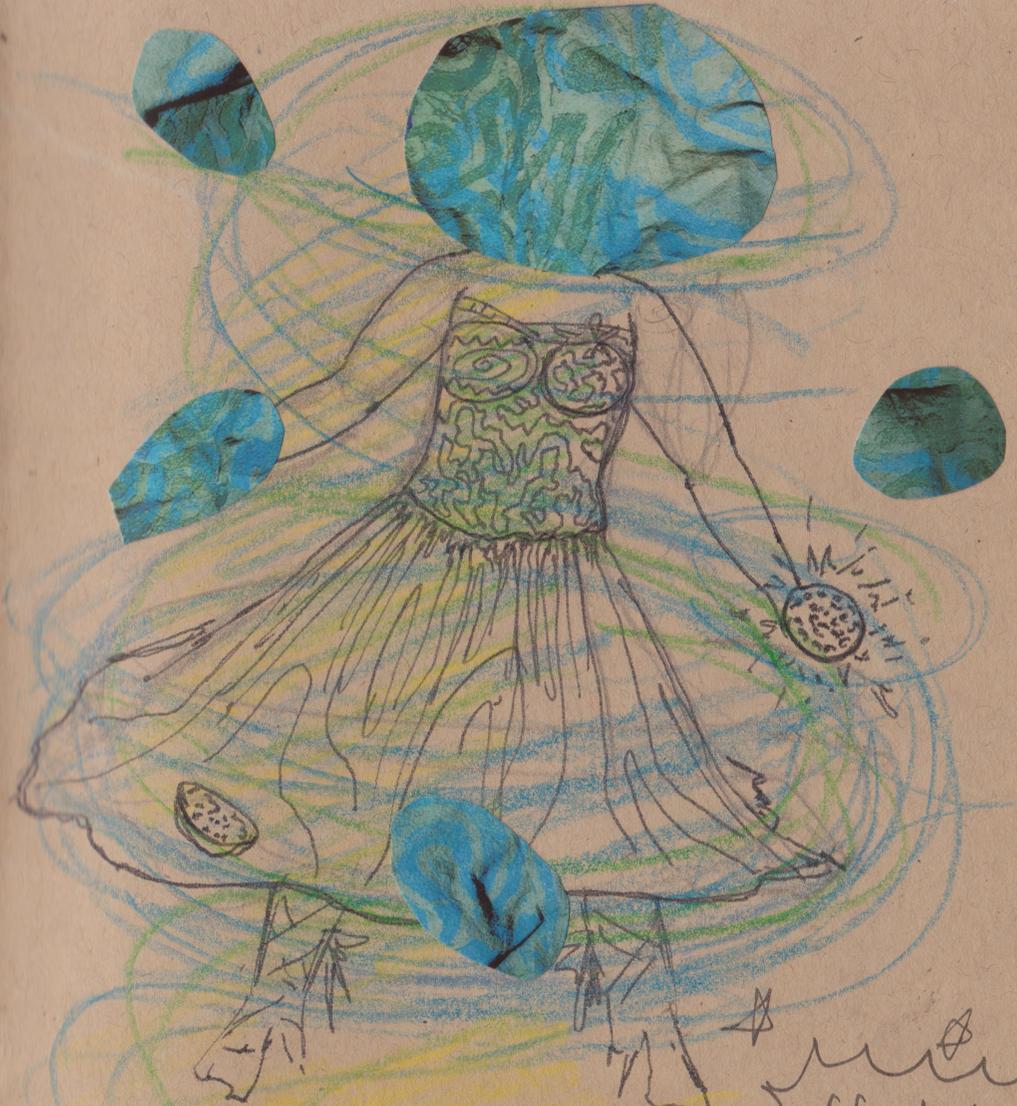
↳ sound then becomes in response to the performance
 ↳ this is the reverse of a lot of drag numbers... usually we're expected to lip sync to pre-recorded tracks

... could move towards something with my own voice and maybe violin because those feel the most natural and 'innate' before anyone else

Lighting: need a tech but maybe best to have somebody i know (partner or friend) so i'm less self-conscious... removes unintentional element of spectator

BASIC FRAMEWORK FOR PERFORMANCE:

- enter not in drag → move towards costume on floor
 ↳ light pulse ————— a bit like heartbeat
 — lights blackout
- makeup and wig in bag → take them out ↗ moment of shift
 — lights off —
- wig on, get into makeup without looking
 — lights off —
- put on tights, skirt, shoes, then skirt
 —————
 take time to play w. each element
 — blackout —
- put on corset, play with that
 — blackout —
- full costume on, chest cups come off, objects inside
 are snack (fav scottish candy?) plus secret object, contrare
 to move and play as much as possible
 — blackout —



if found, please return to

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