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Spring 2017

## **Meat Cake**

Todd Wilson Reynolds

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A photograph of a man in a cowboy hat and plaid shirt posing against a wall. The man is shirtless, wearing a brown cowboy hat and a plaid shirt that is pulled down to his waist. He has a tattoo on his left chest that reads "VIRI VIDI VIDI". The background is a wall with a yellow and white striped pattern. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows.

# Meat Cake

A Piece of Work by  
Todd Reynolds

# MEAT CAKE

TODD REYNOLDS

STUDENT EXHIBITION CENTER, SPRINGFIELD MISSOURI

APRIL 22 - APRIL 29, 2017

MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY  
ART & DESIGN DEPARTMENT  
901 SOUTH NATIONAL AVENUE  
SPRINGFIELD, MISSOURI 65897  
417-837-2330  
ARTANDDESIGN@MISSOURISTATE.EDU  
ART.MISSOURISTATE.EDU

PUBLICATION CREDITS  
DESIGN: TODD REYNOLDS  
PHOTOGRAPHS: TODD REYNOLDS  
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Meat Cake

An MFA Thesis Submitted to the Graduate College of Missouri State University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Master of Fine Arts, Visual Studies

May, 2017

**Abstract:** There is a language being spoken in visual art; a rhetorical discourse that uses semiotics to communicate with a viewer. My research has focused on ways to break the traditional ideas of narrative in photography. By focusing on the forms of delivery, and by combining digital and analogue techniques, my work forms a distortion of communication that forms a new language to communicate with the viewer. Much of this research has led to a specific form of communication that has been termed "punk" which began as a musical and artistic movement in the 70's. This style, both visually and musically, broke with tradition and focused on raw and anti-establishment aesthetics. These elements I have adopted into my work, which focuses on queer identity and relishing in not fitting into mainstream society. The results become a vibrant distortion of language, and the language of photography.

**Keywords:** male identity, queer culture, male body, media culture, photography, Bruce Labruce, fanzine, zine, punk art

Approved:

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Sharon Harper, MFA

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Mitzi Kirkland-Ives, PhD.

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Catherine Jolivette, PhD.

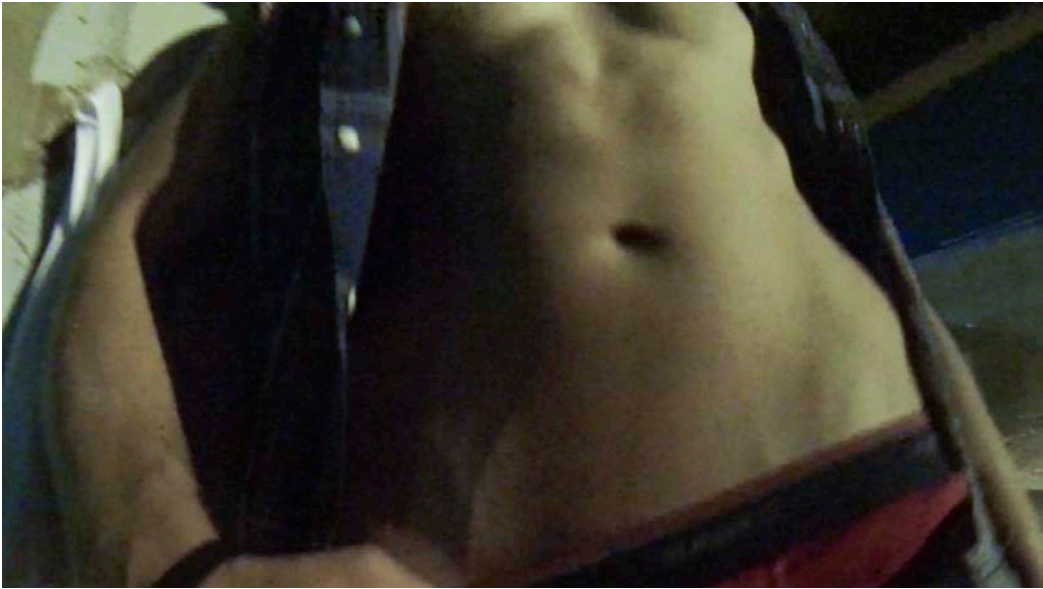
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Sarah Williams, MFA

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Julie Masterson, PhD: Dean, Graduate College

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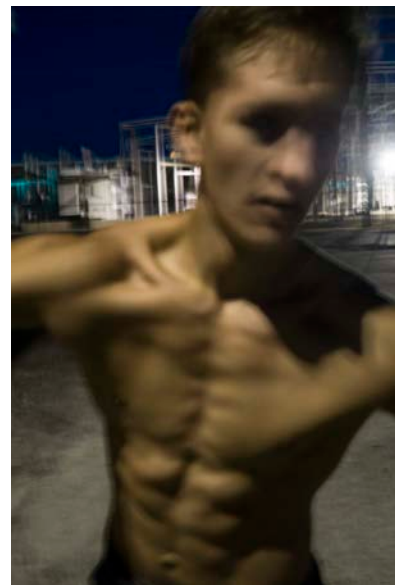
My photography has a language. It's punk language. It's a "I don't give a shit about pretty photos" language. It's a language that speaks of dirt and grime and drinking too much and reading too much William S. Burroughs and trying to get laid, and all the while trying to stay alive. It's my language that developed over the years of reading comic books, watching action heroes in movies and on TV, looking at porn magazines, and grabbing every underground zine publication that used to be so hard to come by. Those zines were the dirty dark secret I used to mail order from those little ads in the back of magazines that brought magic to the mailbox, in a plain brown wrapper from some dude in Minnesota who handmade the zine at the local Kinkos late at night to avoid prying eyes as he photocopied blurred images of nasty things. The images in these zines weren't the slick magazine advertisement photos I was used to or Uncle Bob and Aunt Mary's vacation photo slides that we had to look at during family gatherings. These were something totally different and super sexy. These images contained in these marvelous creations were grainy and contrasty and sometimes hard to make out exactly what was happening but that was cool. I made up what I couldn't see clearly and then created entire stories around these images. I like to think my brain is kind of fucked up because I can never accept anything at face value. There's always has to be more and my imagination would take me deeper into the graininess of every image to provide an intense masturbation session.

Where does this fucked up brain come from? Baby, it's the way things are and have always been. Grab on, don't fall off because we're hitting the highway at speeds no one has ever gone before. Are you afraid? Good. We can fly down the highway going faster than anyone has ever gone before, the wind ripping our flesh from our bones and only the sunset in the distance to burn the rest of us to ashes. Hold on tighter because this is how it will end but we'll have a some kick ass music playing louder than a supersonic jet and that's all that matters. So pick out the best 45 in the pile and stick it on the turntable. Keep those tight jeans grinding against the skin because this has a beat that'll never slow down. I'll be looking at that ass the whole time and watching every move you make. So what if this ain't normal. It's not meant to be. This isn't the ordinary, everyday kind of life in the suburbs, sweet cheeks. This is meant to be subversive. It's an assault on anything normal; an assault against the cutesy boy bands, the pop tunes, the mall fashion, the usual club scene, the soccer moms and workaholic dads. Fuck you if you don't get it. It's all punk and loud and queer. It's the way it has to be because life is short, it's supposed to be fun, it's supposed to hurt and be ugly and be dangerous and be wonderful and we're playing without a safety net.

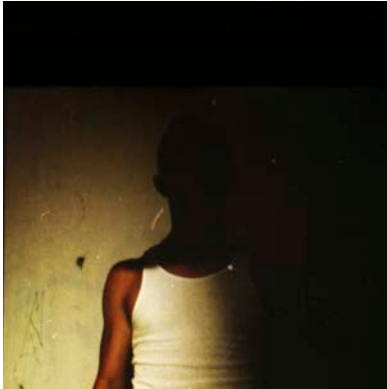












Did you notice? See how smoothly I slipped that in? Yeah, sexy, you're on the ride of your life with a queer guy but don't panic. Not too much. I do like to see a little fear in those deep brown eyes and I do bite. But let me explain my definition of queer. In polite, everyday, heteronormal society, I'm gay. It's easier for the suburbanites to get their heads around that label. And yes, I do enjoy a sexy man in my bed, legs up, but I prefer the label queer. I'm not anything like the pretty gay couple feeding their adopted kids whole grain goodness from a box of cereal that you see on television. I don't fit in with typical gay, I don't fit in with typical anything. I even carry my idea of queer into my work because who needs typical perfect pictures? I like my photography the way I like my guys, a little rough, a little dirty, and a little twisted.



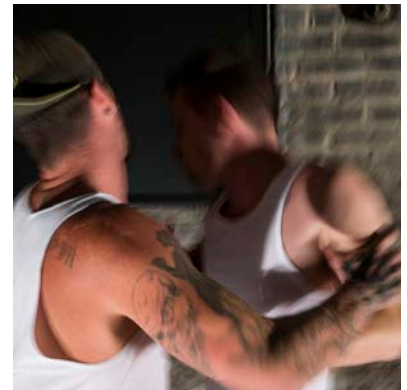
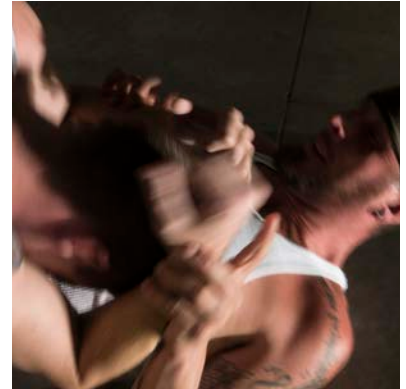
Want to dig a little deeper into this whole queer thing? Here's a nice little bit of writing from the "Introduction" to *Queer*, a whole book about queer, which sounds kind of groovy: "Outlaw sensibilities, self-made kinships, chosen lineages, utopic futurity, exilic commitment, and rage at institutions that police the borders of the normal -- these are among the attitudes that make up 'queer' in its contemporary usage."<sup>1</sup> That's my thing, especially when considering my photography. I am an outlaw when it comes to what photography should be and so much of that

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Getsy, introduction to *Queer*, ed. David J. Getsy, (Cambridge: MIT Press and London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2016), 12.

comes from this great digital age where everyone can take a photo with their camera phone, spin it in an app, and make it look like they're the best damn photographer out there. That's what happens, that's considered "normal" on all those photo sites like Flickr or Instagram and here I come with my stuff, committing myself to exile from the kind of work these sites promote. And yeah, I'm dead set against meeting the man of my dreams and getting married. Where's the fun in that? In his book, *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz writes that not only is the queer utopia fighting against the heteronormative society by working on the fringes, it also fights against normalizing the homosexual.<sup>2</sup> I'm happy being the outsider, working from my secret, dark, queer guerilla headquarters, giving the finger to the photo police and staying single. "The revolution is my boyfriend."<sup>3</sup> While I really don't believe my work will result in a queer utopia, which is unattainable,<sup>4</sup> I continue on in the tradition of others fighting in the resistance.

I've built my little lexicon of photographers that I can tell you all about over a six pack and some cigarettes. Pop a tab and kick back. I've spent a lot of time looking at this work and sure, we can start back in the day with Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden doing those pictorialist photos of



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<sup>2</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 26.

<sup>3</sup> *The Raspberry Reich*, directed by Bruce Labruce, (2004; Culver City, CA: Strand Releasing, 2005), DVD.

<sup>4</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 21.

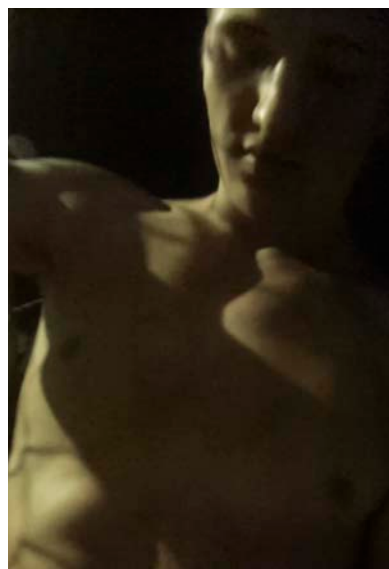


sexy, naked Italian boys baking in the Mediterranean sun or the slick and stylish surrealist inspired work of George Platt Lynes who liked his dancers sans dance belts. But let's move up in the photo history timeline and look at the black and white, medium format portraits by Peter Hujar or the created worlds of Arthur Tress. There's the Boston School with their focus on relationships and emotion that includes Jack Pierson, David Armstrong, and the incomparable Nan Goldin, who still manages to wow me. Part of that group is my sweet, sweet tragic boy, Mark Morrisroe whose disregard for traditional photographic aesthetics put with the soft and haunting images of his lovers and all the self-portraits still leaves me on my knees. Ah, let's down another beer and take a look at David Wojnarowicz's series like Arthur Rimbaud in New York or Sex Series. Here's the fringe element of queer. Hell, it was the fringe just because it dealt with gay issues and homophobia before gay couples became an advertising trend.

So down the rest of that beer and flip that 45 over on the player. Let's listen to the "B" side, you know that track that wasn't good enough for the album but the band wanted to release anyway. That's kind of the way this queer thing works. And do you notice that record? There's some scratches on the surface and my little sister left it laying in the car seat, sun warping the surface. And damn, it was a Black Flag, the one I found in that used record store in San Antonio

and will never find it again. Let's see how this sounds now.

That's the nature of the beast and the imperfection of records. They get scratched and warped, skipping, sticking, making your favorite band sounding like Slim Whitman is front man. Same with photos, analogue film versions that have a presence in the physical realm. Negatives get dirty and scratched and so do those prints you used to get from the Fotomat in the grocery store parking lot. I embrace the imperfection. I embrace the materiality of records and photos and all that stuff you store in boxes somewhere. It's better than storing something digital in the Cloud where Jesus and the angels watch over it all. Digital wants everything to be perfect. You can get perfect sound and perfect pictures and perfect realism from the phone in your pocket. I guess I'm punk in my satisfaction with imperfection. Slap another beer in my hand and let your startup garage band rock and roll all night. I'm good with that. Anarchy all the way, man. Fuck EMI, we don't need some slimey record producer to tell us what's good. Toss that empty beer can out the window and let's get this queer punk stuff started.













You do know that punk and queer go hand in hand, right? It's a thing. It's called "queercore"<sup>5</sup> and it goes like this: "Welcome to the wild, wild world of 'queercore', née, homocore, the cut-rate, cut-throat, cutting edge of the homosexual underworld. Enter at your own risk,"<sup>6</sup> as written by artist and reluctant pornographer Bruce LaBruce and that's exactly what's happening in my little world of art. As a queercore movement, LaBruce started a queer-punk fanzine called J.D.s (Juvenile Delinquents)<sup>7</sup> that combined the hardcore lifestyle of punk rock with being queer.<sup>8</sup> "With J.D.s, I and my former partner in sexual revolution introduced homosexual pornography to the punk fanzine formula... Not only did we unabashedly steal punk images from dirty, glossy gay magazines..., but we also began to exploit - gently, always very gently - our friends and various passers-by, politely requesting, after getting them drunk, to remove their garments and pose for us."<sup>9</sup> J.D.s made LaBruce an international celebrity. He has continued to build off that fame, and notoriety, and began making movies.<sup>10</sup> His work has even been exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in New York.<sup>11</sup> Not bad for a queer punk guy who's trying to totally fuck things up.



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<sup>5</sup> Bruce LaBruce, "The Wild, Wild World of Fanzines", in *A Queer Romance*, ed. Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (London: Routledge, 1995), 191.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>11</sup> Exhibitions and events, *The Museum of Modern Art*, accessed February 9, 2017, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/film/1512?locale=en>.





As Labruce continues in that little essay he wrote, he says that queercore is dead<sup>12</sup>, but all of his more current work says otherwise. Like he did with *J. D.s*, he's creating a new queer category from gay culture that wants no part of the commonplace. Two of his movies, *Otto; or Up with Dead People*, 2008, and *L.A. Zombie*, 2010 use zombies to look at how the gay culture has become homogenized.<sup>13</sup> In speaking about *Otto; or Up With Dead People*, he compares it to his earlier work, *Super 8 1/2*, he says, "Both films are about ...a young, disaffected gay man who is totally alienated from both society at large and from the gay mainstream."<sup>14</sup> *Otto*, in the movie, is dead, as are his experiences with the whole gay thing, which I sympathize with. Of course, there are some queer revolutionaries who come to his rescue in the movie. Labruce expanded this idea further with *L. A. Zombie* as a "critique of contemporary gay culture"<sup>15</sup> by stating, "There was a turning point in the early 2000s, where you had *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Will and Grace*, and it kind of legitimized these gay stereotypes for mass consumption... gay men were being domesticated."<sup>16</sup> Okay, that's fine if you're gay and you want to belong to the PTA and get your TJ Maxx credit card. But, for the rest of us who want to keep living

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<sup>12</sup> Labruce, "The Wild, Wild World of Fanzines", 186.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Hayes, "Queer Porn-Star Zombies Attack!: An Interview with Bruce LaBruce," *Cineaste*, 2011, <https://www.cineaste.com/spring2011/queer-porn-star-zombies-attack-an-interview-with-bruce-labruce-web-exclusive/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

the dream, porn is our last resource, according to Labruce.<sup>17</sup> Porn is great but the entire internet has devoted its existence to providing any kind of porn you can imagine with just a click. That kind of saturation is hard to compete with. I'm doing my radical, punk, fuck you to the system with a walk on the dark side of life so put that dick back in your pants for now, big boy. And if you think I'm photographing gay culture as a statement on gay culture, you can grab that idea right out of your mind and squish it, like you'd squish a cockroach with that satisfying "pop, squish" sound effect.

This language I use and all these queer ideas are a rage against photography itself and all the standard gallery pretty photos displays. My work does not play nice with framed prints hung on white walls. It doesn't play nice with what photography is meant to be. Most of my work is shot on video with a little hand held GoPro camera that has a crazy wide lens. While the rest of photoland sets up the tripod and shoots a few pics in a couple of minutes, I'm burning up the SD card at 30 fps, shoving that little beauty right up against someone's skin. It's fast, it's insanity, it's shooting blind because at the end of the day, I have no idea what I just shot. No convenient viewfinder on my camera. Pop it in a media player and scrub through the footage frame by frame. That's where my shots come from. It's those little



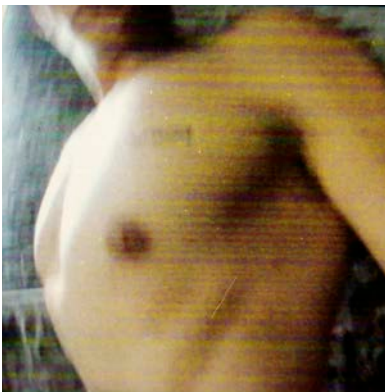
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<sup>17</sup> Hayes, *Cineaste*.

moments between breaths as the camera and subject blur together into something cool and alien. The focus is off, no adjustments on the depth of field, and I let those engineers at GoPro decide the exposure of every single movement. I'm shooting in a physical, 3D space and the picture plane changes every second. And when it's all said and done, the photos end up looking like Bob Mizer fused with a Marilyn Manson video.<sup>18</sup>



Mizer was the guy who did the *Physique Pictorial* magazine back in the 1940s and 50s and got arrested and dragged into court for promoting that obscene homosexual lifestyle.<sup>19</sup> He photographed a lot of bronzed beauties posing in flirtatious ways in nothing but a posing strap or in the buff at his house in sunny California to show off a perfection of male physique. But that's Hollywood for you. It's a dream factory of perfection. We all get happy endings. But Hollywood got fucked in Fred Halstead's *L.A. Plays Itself* anyway, or fisted, just like Halstead does to his boyfriend in the climax of the movie and saved for all posterity at MOMA.<sup>20</sup> My Hollywood dream factory is the flip side, that thing you're not so familiar with. Those promises of dreams coming true in the movies become corrupted ideas that screw with those very dreams. So I grab some guy, any guy who I can coerce, bribe, or ply into getting in front of my camera and push them just as far as I



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<sup>18</sup> Most Marilyn Manson videos are shot with a really wide lens, making his face even more terrifying.

<sup>19</sup> Whitney Strub, "The Clearly Obscene and the Queerly Obscene: Heteronormativity and Obscenity in Cold War Los Angeles", *American Quarterly* Vol. 60, no. 2 (Jun., 2008): 378.

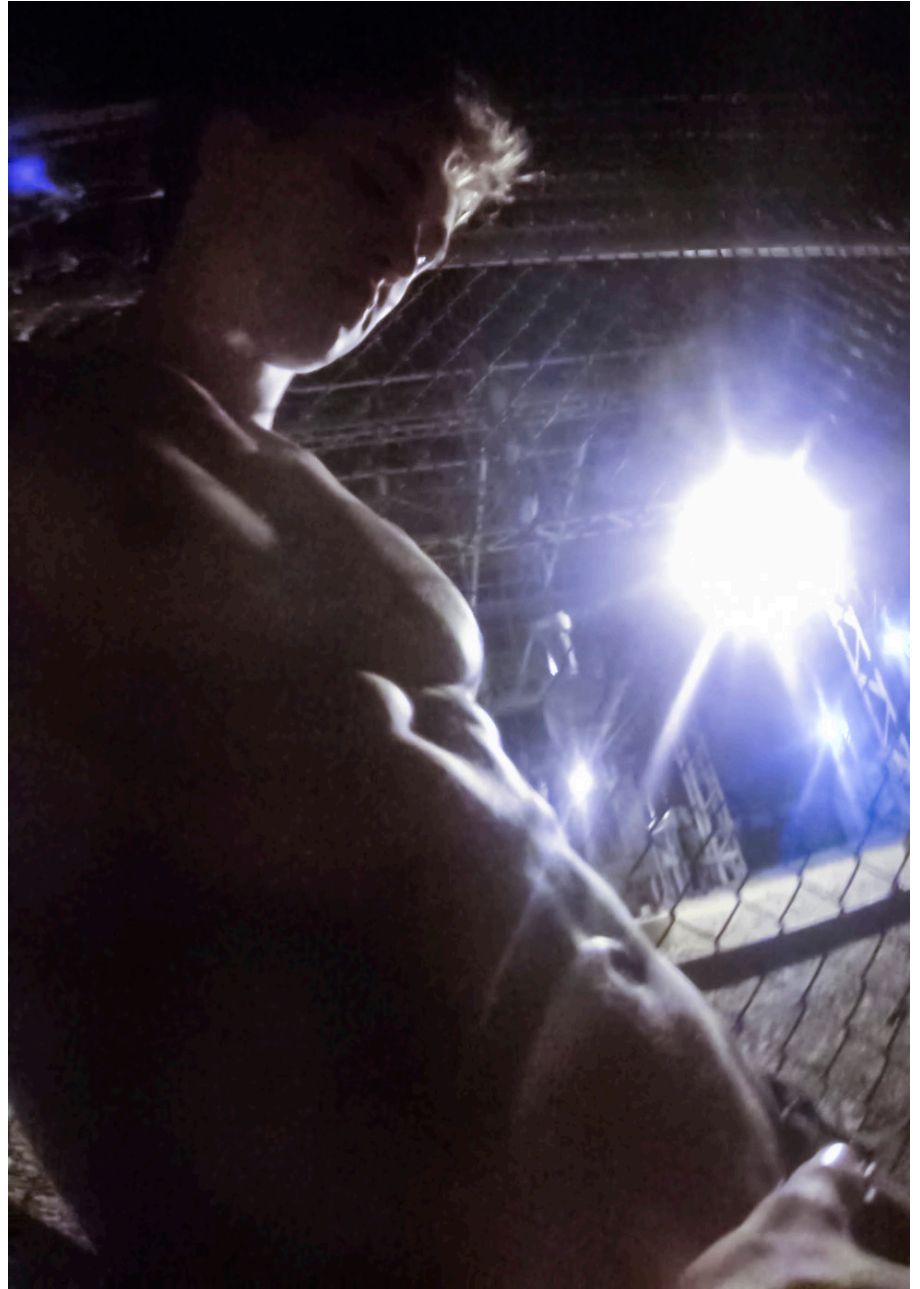
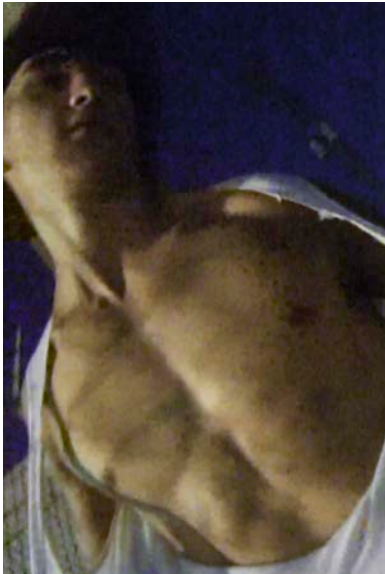
<sup>20</sup> William E. Jones, *Halstead Plays Himself*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 55.







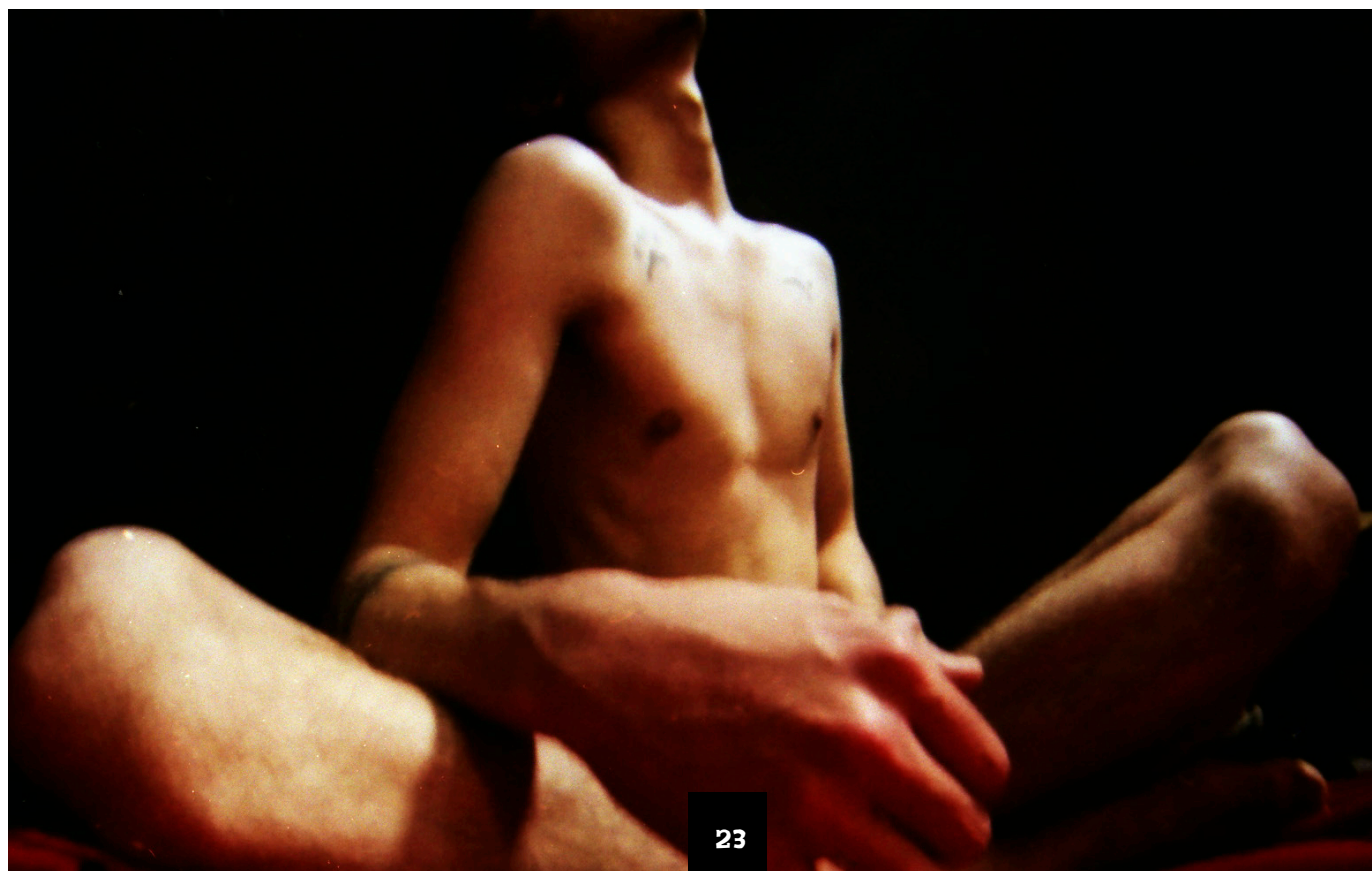
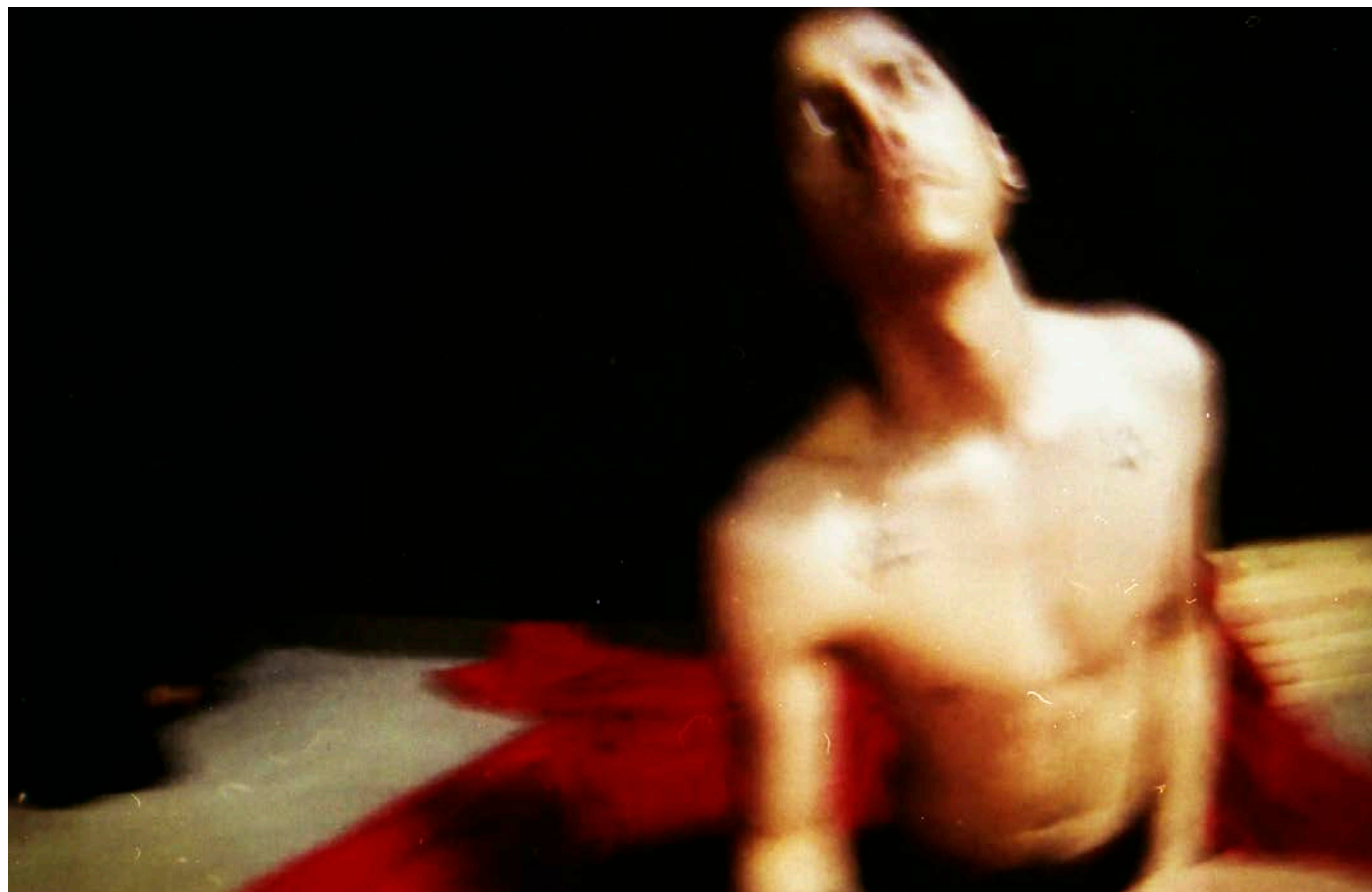
can, or how far they'll let me, and start shooting. Fuck the model, he's really just a lump of meat and gay, straight, bi, or however they identify is totally irrelevant to me. I'm just after the forms and shapes and how those bodies get twisted with the wide camera lens.













Whoever's body I'm working with, I put it through the meat grinder of my dreams, ideas, dark thoughts, and what makes me hard, to break up all the common photographic language, all those ideas of what the masculine body should look like as seen on the cover of a magazine. Warp it, twist it, rethink it all into a language that's about sex and violence, intimidation and titillation, fear and lust. After all, what's the male body other than a canvas of sex and violence. It's the place to punch, kick, and shoot a load onto. Maybe I watched too much TV or too many movies, but my ideas come from all this media that has been in my face since day one. You know what I'm talking about. We've all seen the movies where the good guy gets into a physical battle with the bad guy to solve the problem and end the show, right? Even little Harry Potter kicks some Voldemort butt in the end. That's media, baby, that's what sells the tickets. We've got to see the guys beat each other up, where the hero looks like he's about to hit the mat but rises at the last minute and puts a bullet in the bad guy's brain. It's what males are built for, lovely sex and/or violence. So bring it on, Jason Statham. You're out to kick ass, but you're shirtless and ripped and we've all got boners watching you crack skulls. My assault is with a lens and an invasion of space with a little GoPro and all this media is subverted here into something more primal, something brutal, something dirty, something kinky, something scary.



Guys are scary. You never know what could happen when you meet a sexy stranger on a dark street late at night. Look out the window and watch the shadows moving behind the closed curtains in the guy's house next door. The street is dark and quiet, no one is out this late. You can see the shadows and you have to wonder what he's doing behind the closed curtains. Press play on the movie that forms in the brain. Maybe it is being directed by David Lynch and as you peer through the cracks of the curtains, the world crumbles from white picket fences and picnics to a dangerous ride where we're going way too fast on that deserted road and we're drinking PBR with a gun in shoved up the nose.<sup>21</sup> Mystery thrives late at night when shadows move and figures lurk just out of the beam of the street light. This is my world. Late at night there are possibilities, intrigue, danger, mystery. This is where my ideas form. This is the world that I walk and let my brain wander to create what can't be seen with the eyes. Sorting through all the images I've seen, all the text I've read, all the language of photos, I process within the endless possibilities of the night where that figure walking in the distance can be anyone or anything at all. This is a Lynch movie.



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<sup>21</sup> Blue Velvet, directed by David Lynch, (1986: Beverly Hills, CA: MGM, 2011), Blu-ray.



Who is that mysterious figure lurking in the shadows? As Todd McGowan argues in *The Impossible David Lynch*, we are simply seeing what we think the world is presenting and that we aren't aware of how our desires affect what we're seeing.<sup>22</sup> Sure, cute guy at 5 o'clock and my neck snaps around. But it's more than that. There's a possibility there with that guy but, in the day, it's just eye candy. At night, the same guy becomes something more. Is he a cocksucker or fagbasher? What is seen, what is known? What judgement is the brain forming? This becomes the movie in the mind's eye. "By presenting us with an alternate fantasmatic world vastly different from our everyday experience, Lynch creates a situation where the distorting power of our desire becomes



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<sup>22</sup> Todd McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 23.

visible to us."<sup>23</sup> In the dark, this alternate world is a new experience and that's where I'm playing. And either way that guy wants to play it, I'm good with it because guys are guys.

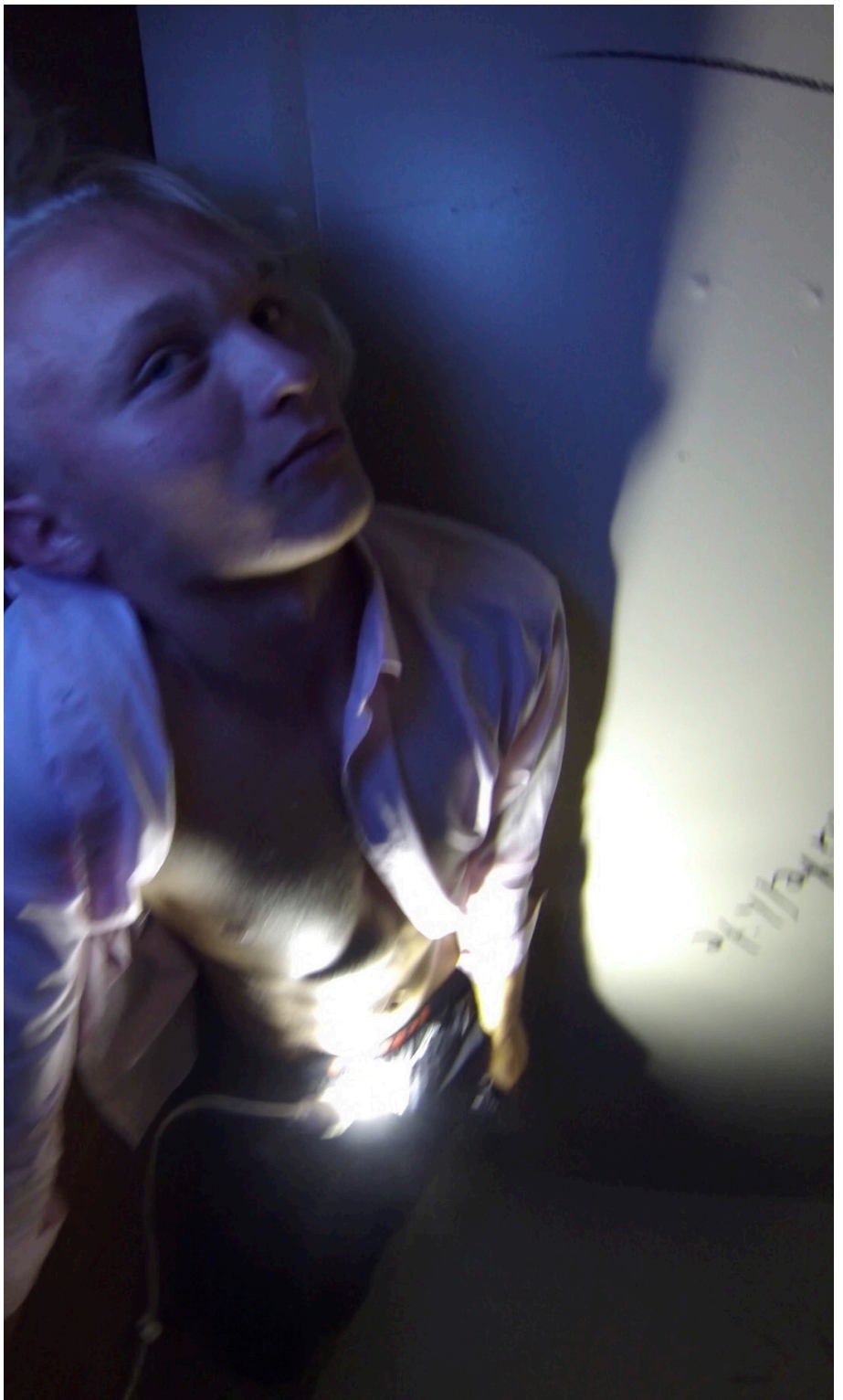
It's my desire for guys in multiple ways, as sex objects or as action heroes, that pushes my photography. It's also the desire for what my body can be. I have ideas of what I want my body to look like so gym rat here, time at the boxing gym, running, biking, hardcore plyometrics for some good anaerobic conditioning, to make me fit with what I see in my gaze of desires. So sure, I usually work with fit guys, or totally thin guys, and it becomes a comparison for me, what they have, what I have, what I need to be working on or those things I know I can't possibly achieve. I get down and dirty with the camera to explore what they have to work with and how they make it move. Movement is what really turns me on, watching all the bones and muscles working together, twisting the skin, reshaping the form. I watch this performance, giving directions to push the body and open possibilities that will burn my brain to cinders and leave me a quivering mass of abused flesh. No pretty poses for me, thank you very much. Act natural or play it up for the camera, let's make some rock 'n roll. Go ahead and hit me because it will look good in that lens. And none of it will make it to the cover of a magazine but that's fine with me.



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<sup>23</sup> McGown, *The Impossible David Lynch*, 23.





So forget all the media, forget the fancy photo sites on line and those slick magazines. I have no desires there or with the digital perfection beaming out of the screen on some device. We're getting messy here, wallowing in the dirt and the urine and the cigarette butts and the broken beer bottles that form our urban settings. What I am seeing is not meant to be mediated on a device. I'm not the only one to see this way. Magnum photographer Antoine D'Agata has much the same take on his late night searched through the city streets looking for the marginalized that rampant consumerism has left behind.<sup>24</sup> In his work, he photographs those who society has forgotten, the hookers and junk addicts. He says, "The creation of novel passions and life situations is more imperative than ever to survive the current general anaesthesia."<sup>25</sup> By digging in all the dirt, and with the queer sensibilities that go against all the accepted, expected, glorified, homogenized, my photos push more than just some underground queer movement. The secret guerilla headquarters is a place to free the minds from all this media, fuck with it, reimagine it, and slap it around like that sub you keep in the closet.



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<sup>24</sup> Kingston Trinder, "Documenting the Dirty," *Dazed*, accessed November 22, 2016, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/19240/1/documenting-the-dirty>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



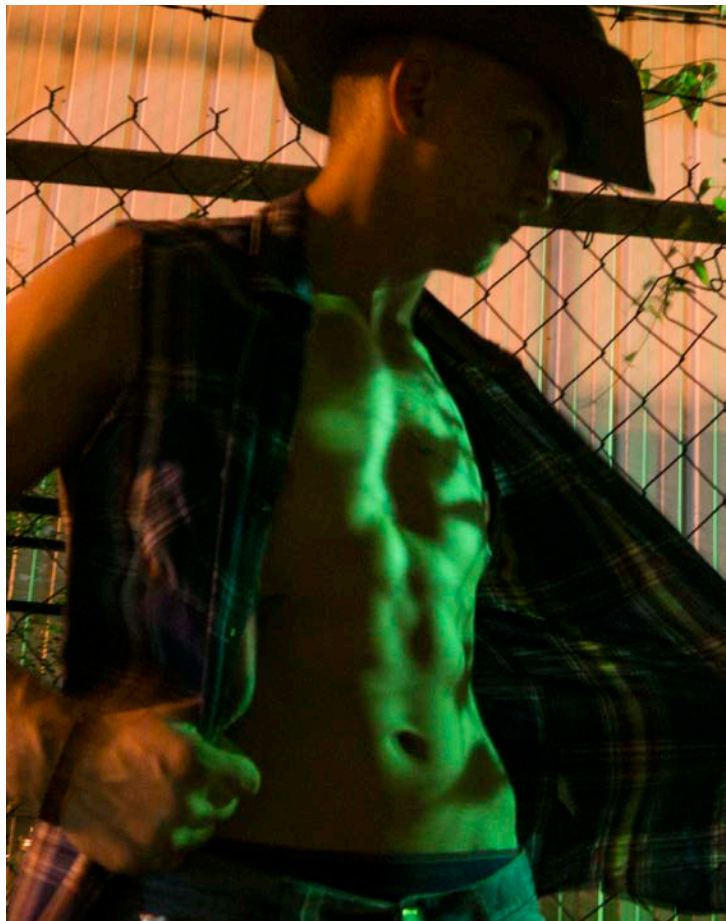
Can't see them  
any more

Will not  
pass  
st insect

I am  
so hateful  
we left him because  
we want his  
corpse to rot









D'Agata's images resonate deep within me, searing my brain matter and sending shivers up my spine. Distorted, confusing, or extreme close ups of moments not typically shared with a camera, he creates monsters. His images are of us, but rethought to become the subjects of nightmares. The subversion of meaning in his photography breaks apart that language and reforms it into something else. That is me, I create monsters, those that have always been lurking in the shadows of my brain. The monsters I create are formed from all the pieces and parts I find grave robbing the past media I've consumed. There's all the TV shows, movies, books, comics, and photos to pull from. I stitch it all together and shoot a blast of electricity running 30,000 volts into them and recoil in terror as the dead lumps take on new life. "It's alive!" These are my creations, misunderstood, shunned, searching for meaning in the cruel reality of the digitally perfect world. This is me, reshaping the world in my image, playing God, coercing nature, and hopefully, maybe, fucking with some brains and chipping away at the consumer reality as seen on TV.



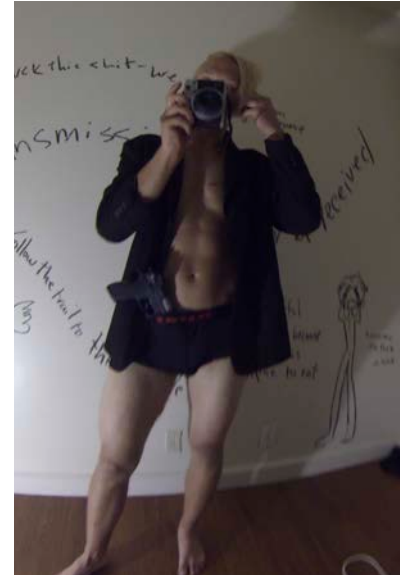








Time for a beer run. We've still got a pile of 45s, two sides to listen to. So let's get down to business, stud and get totally trashed, naked, and see where this goes. The past is written down in a book somewhere that's been overdue at the library for a decade, the future is for the nuclear holocaust mutant beast zombie hunters, and Jesus is sitting in Heaven jacking off to those photos of your dick you texted to someone last year. We're taking the now and defining it based solely on how you look lying naked on my kitchen counter. This is the frontier of resistance so we'll print those photos and hand them out and scream to the world that "heterosexuality is the opiate of the masses"<sup>25</sup> and this revolution won't ever stop. I'll keep shooting and you'll keep dancing and the world will be in awe of our awesomeness when they do the retrospective of our work at MOMA. There are no borders, there are no boundaries, and our secret queer guerilla headquarters is as big as we can imagine it to be piled with beer cans and cigarette butts. So show me more, give me everything you have because we can't ever stop this beat. It's way too much fun.



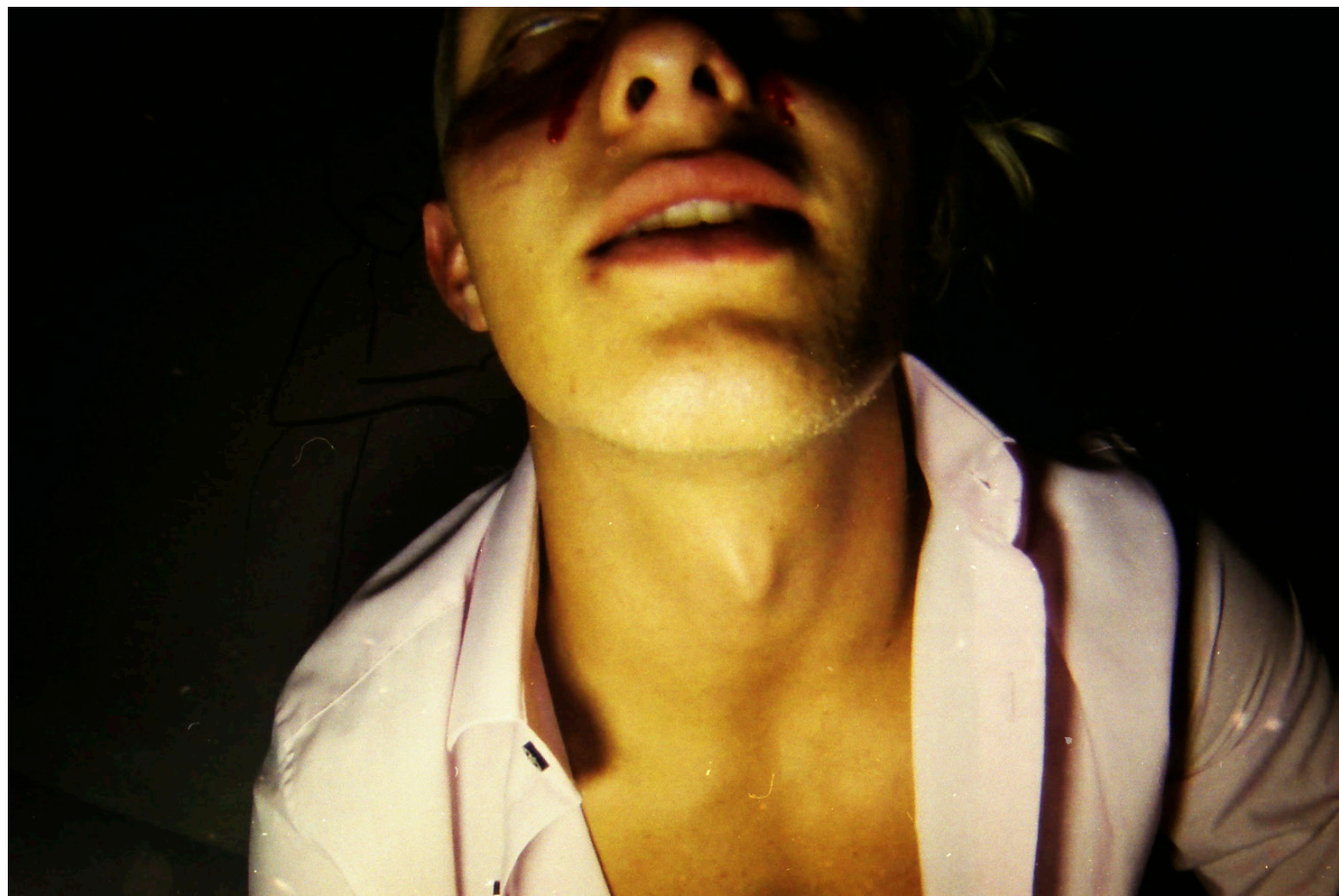
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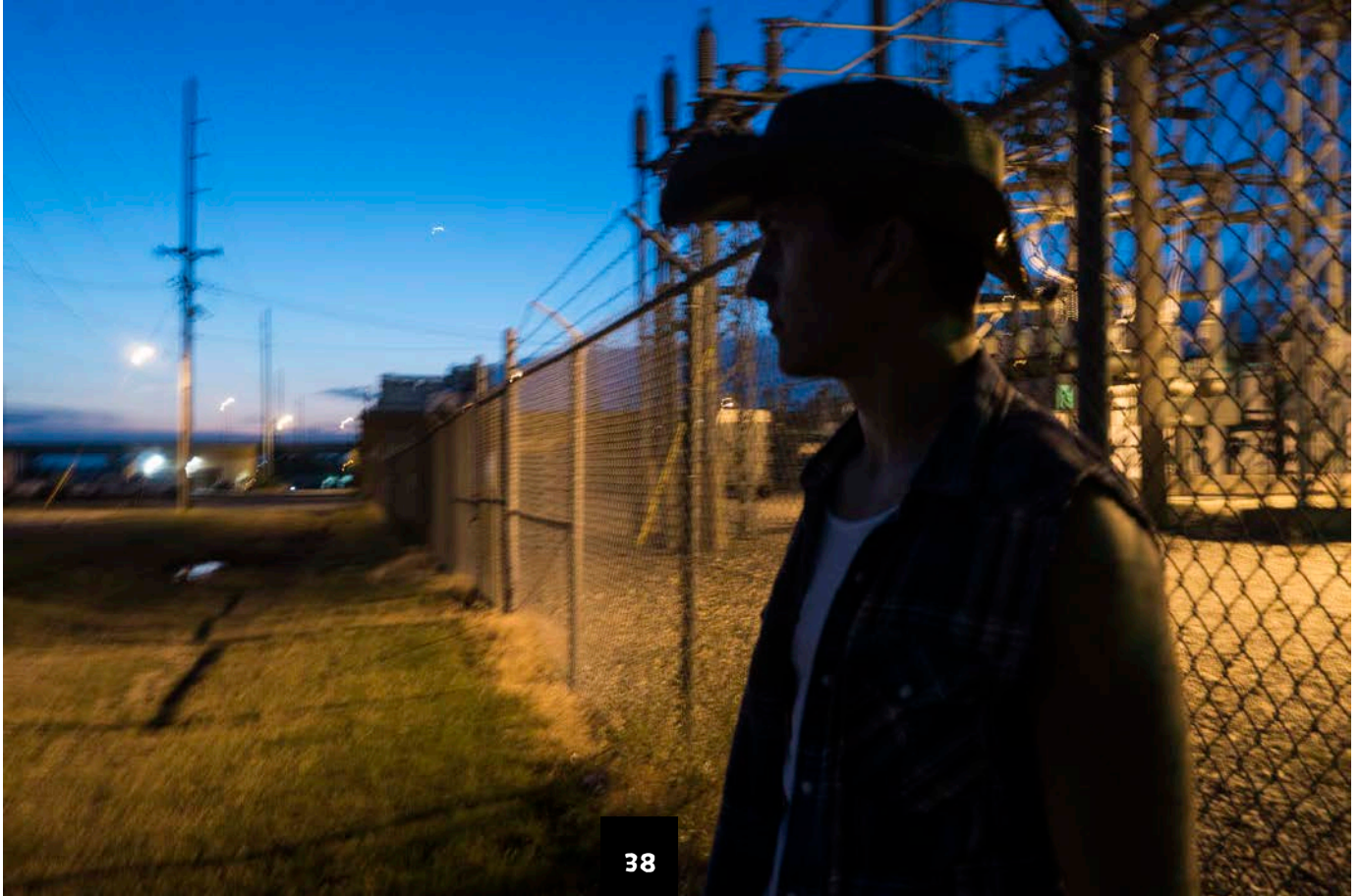
<sup>26</sup> Labruce, *The Raspberry Reich*.



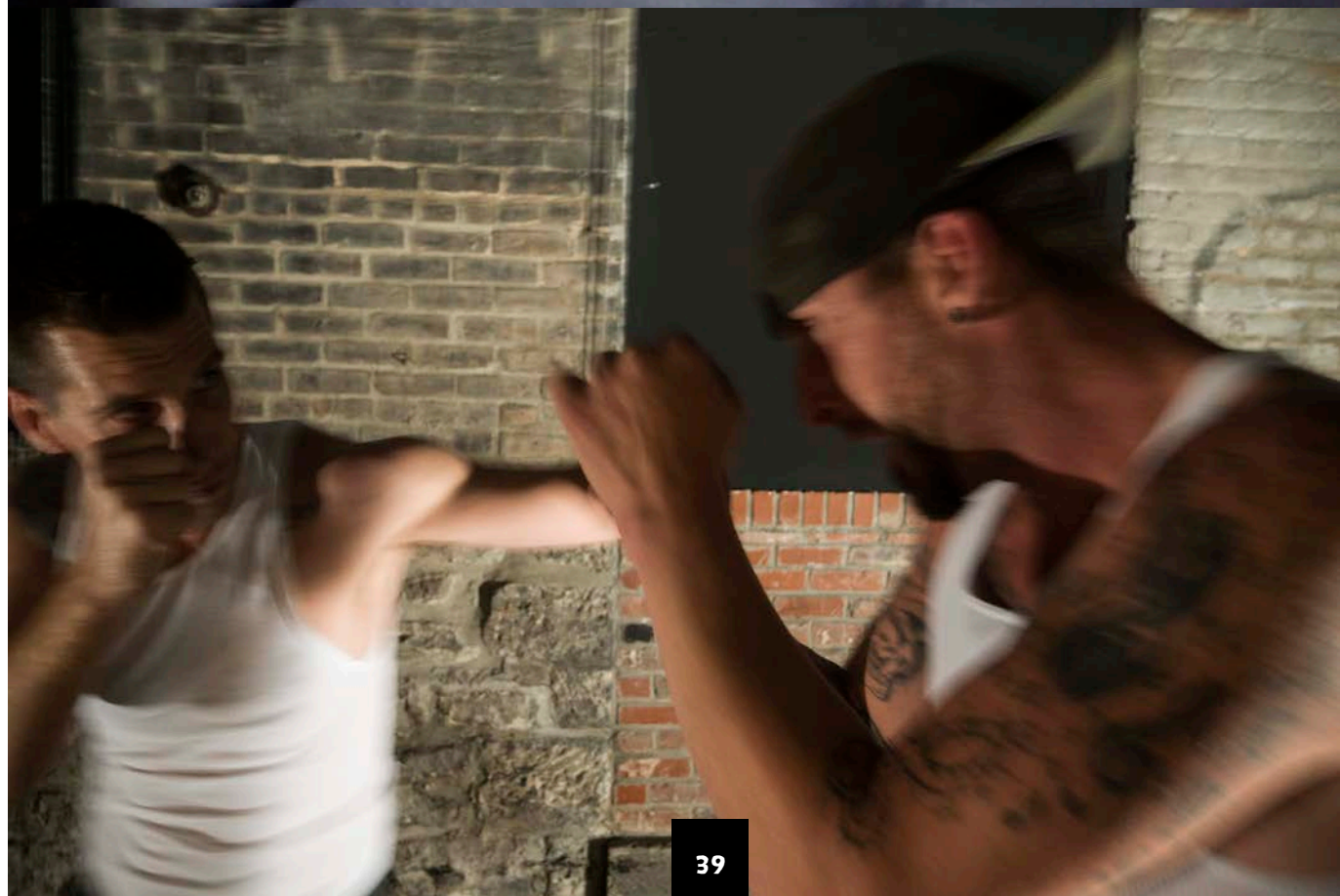








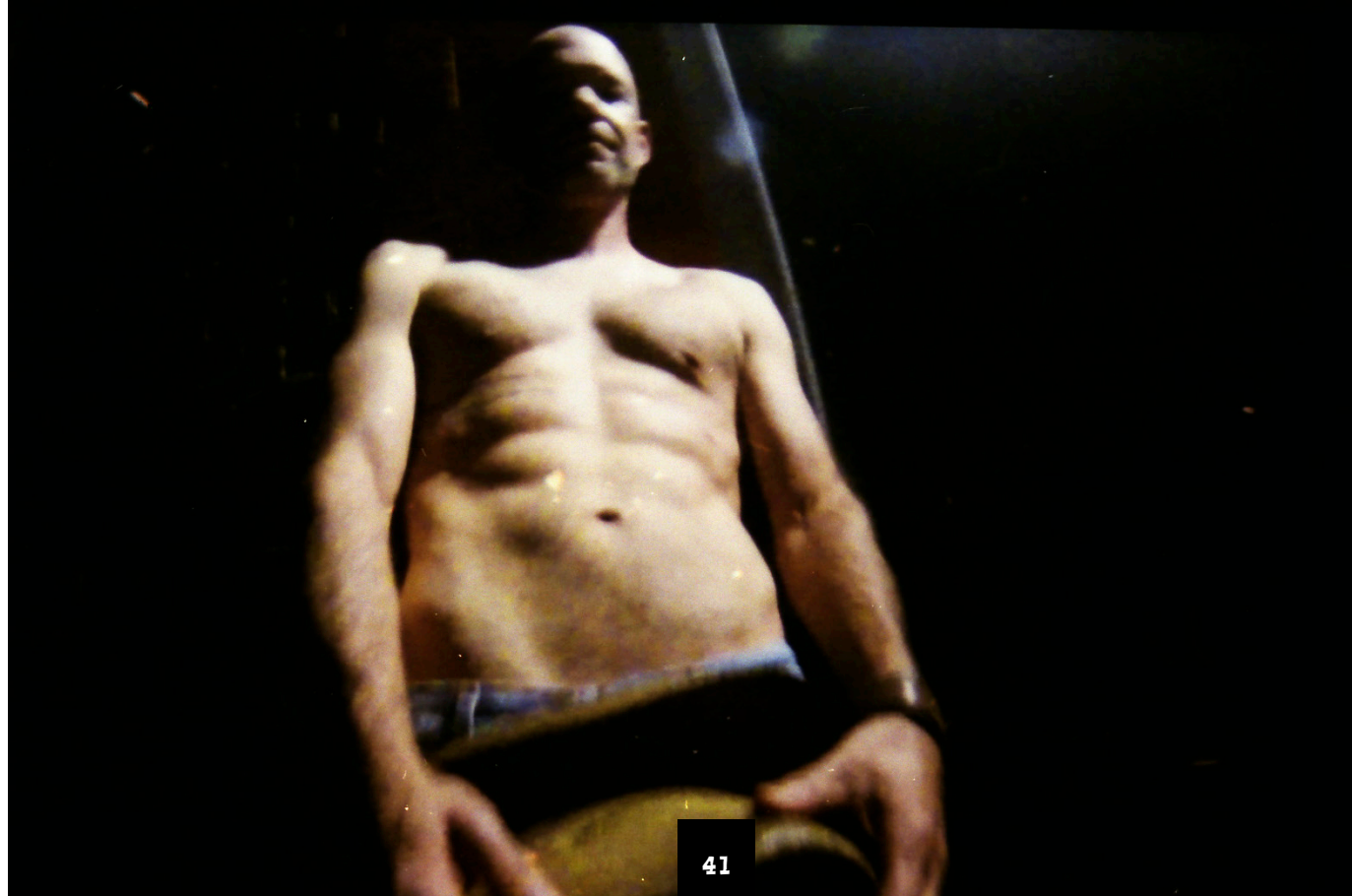




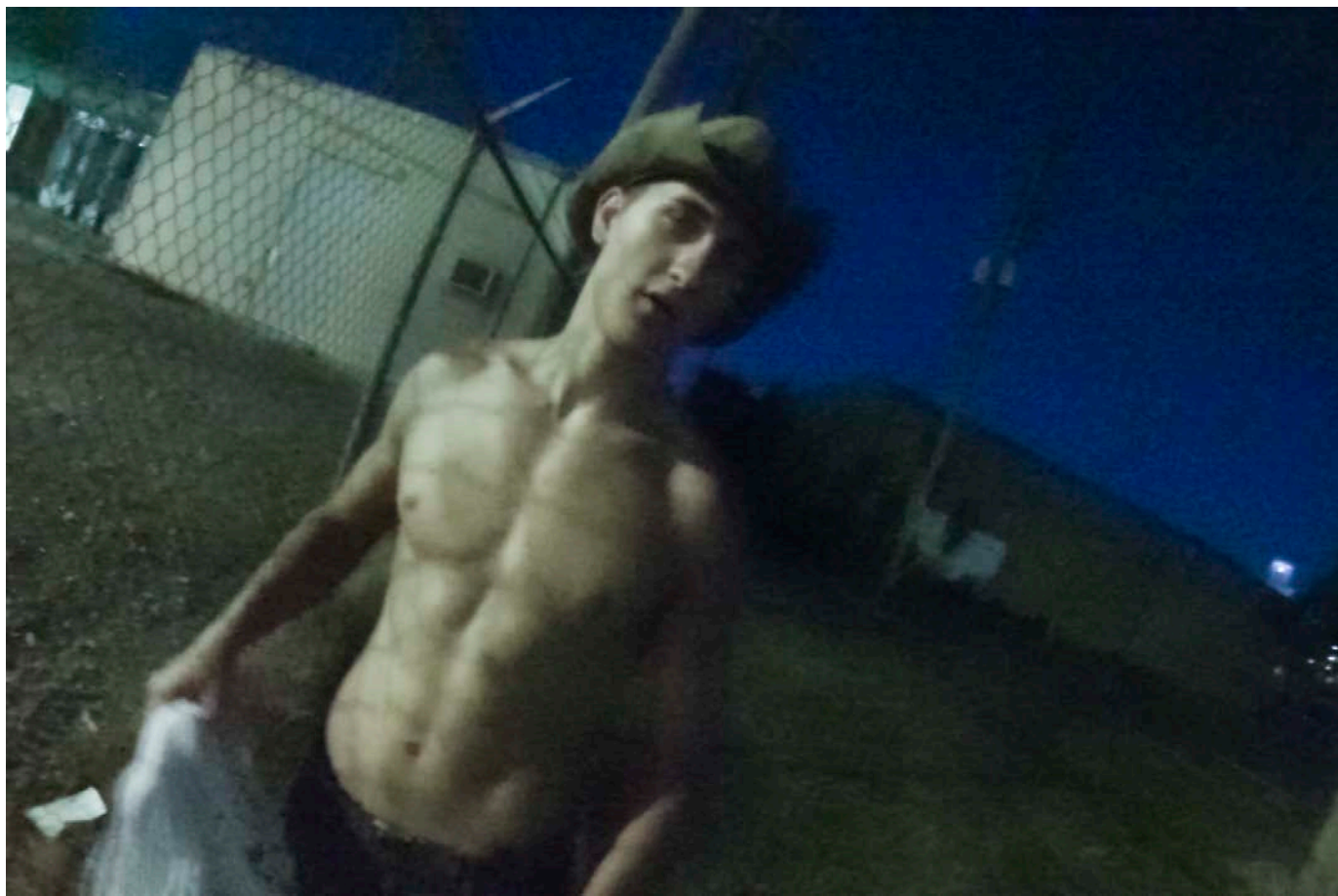


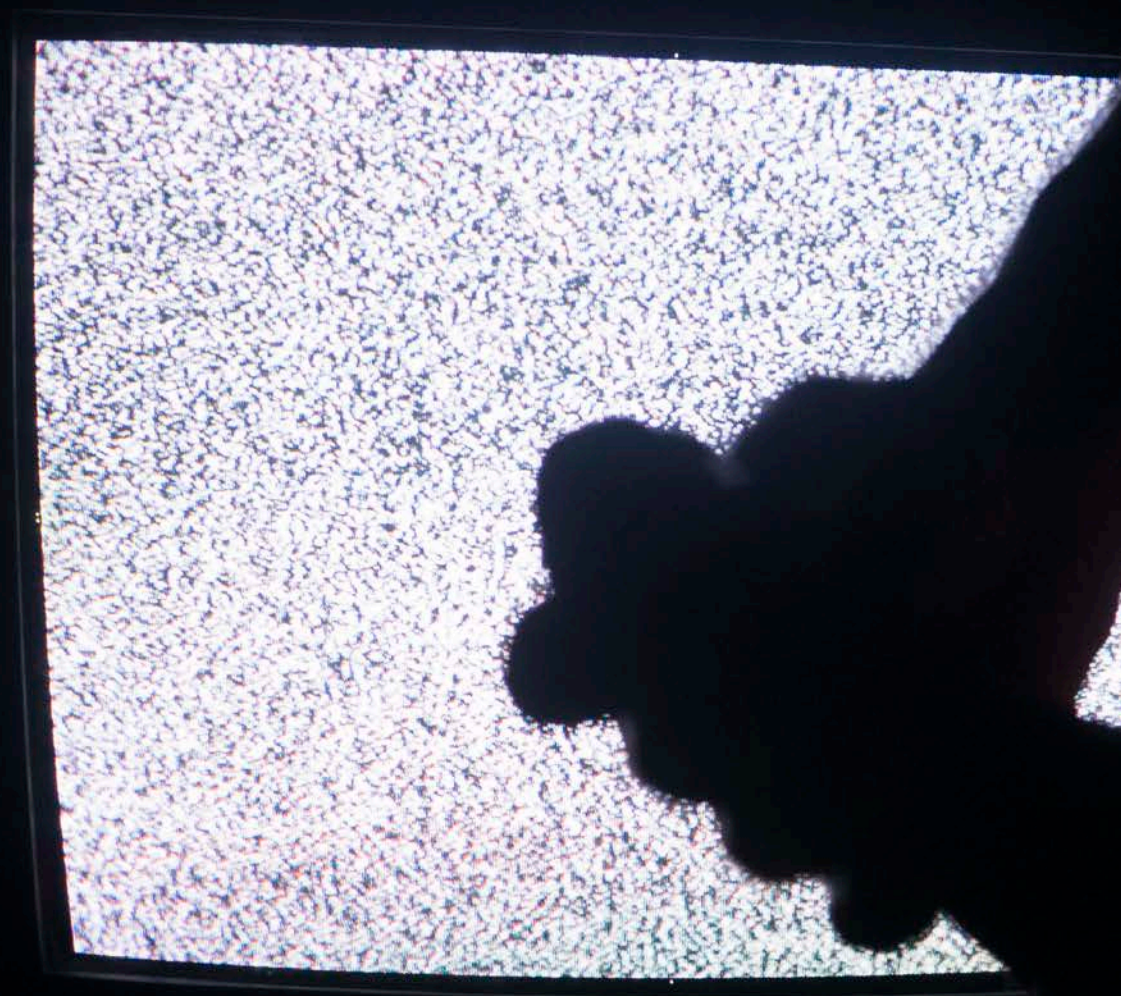






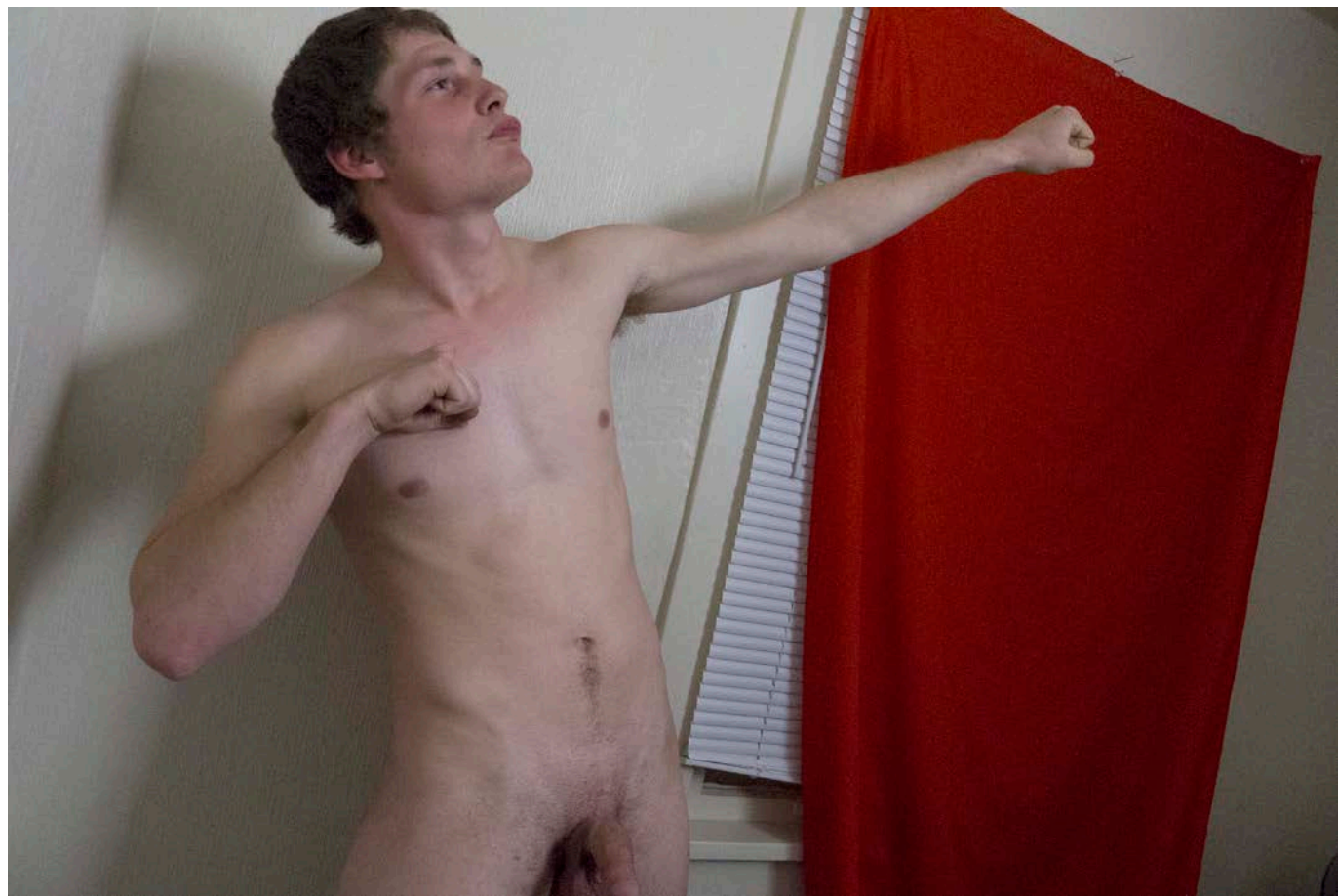








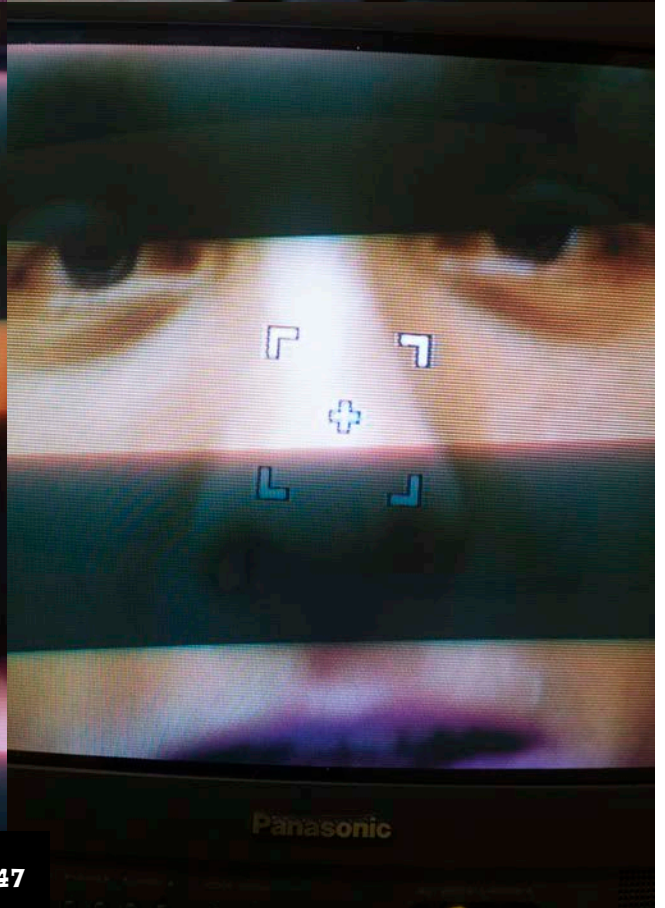
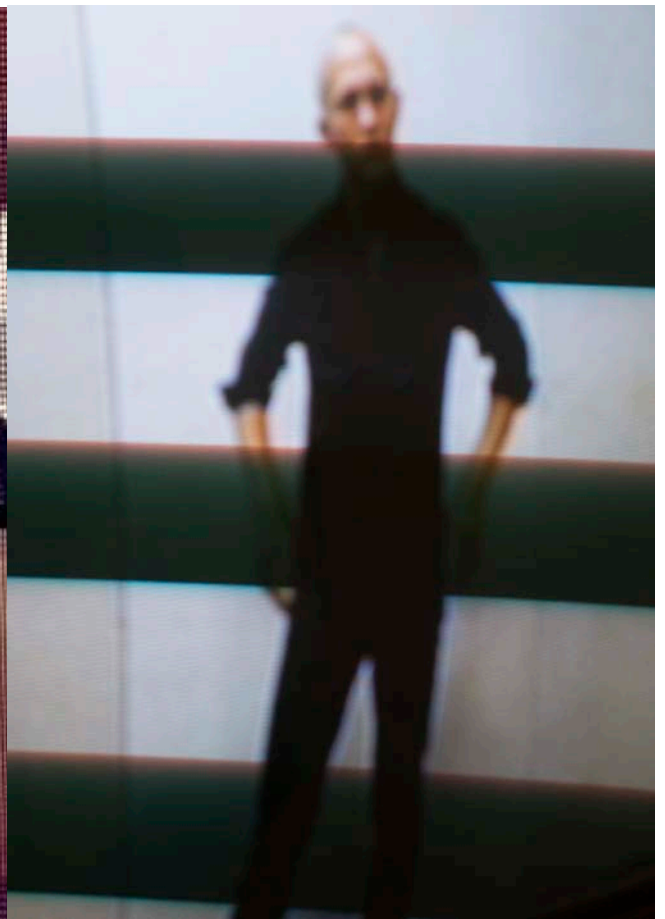
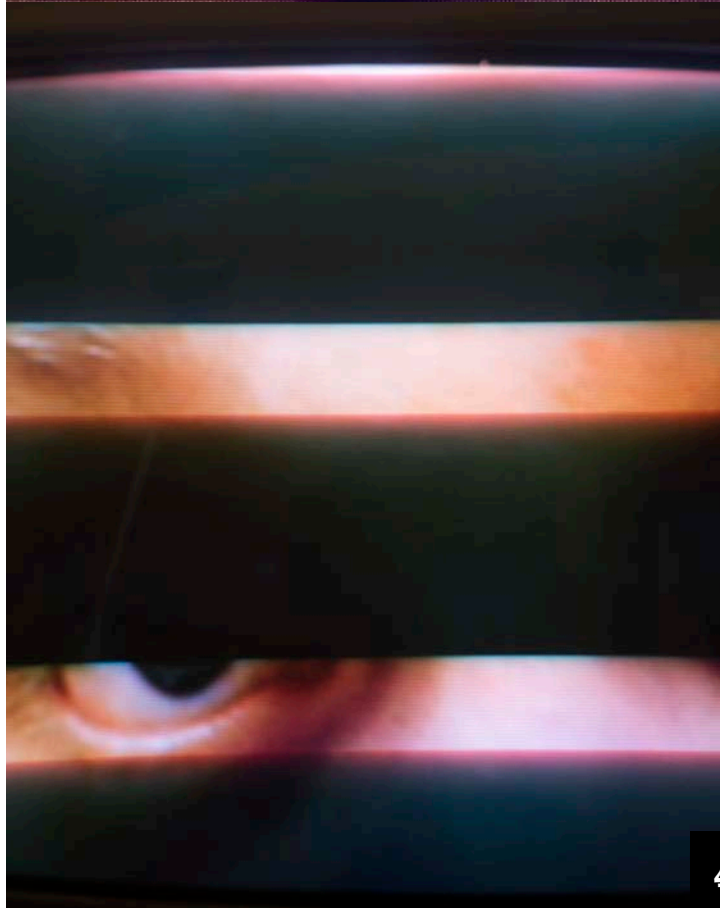
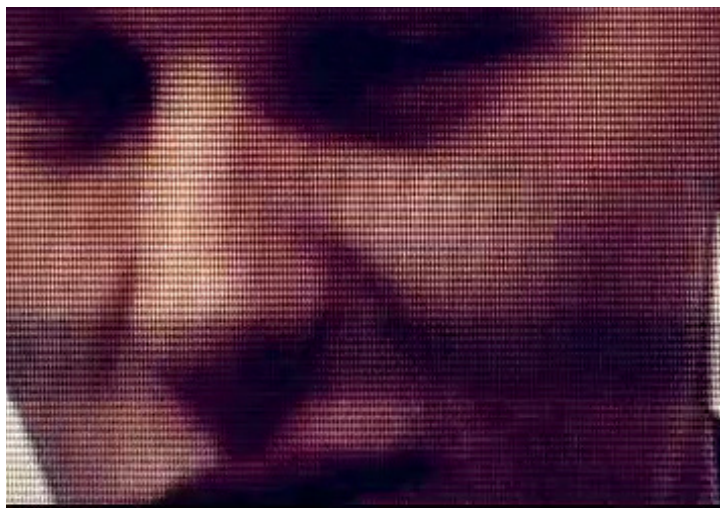








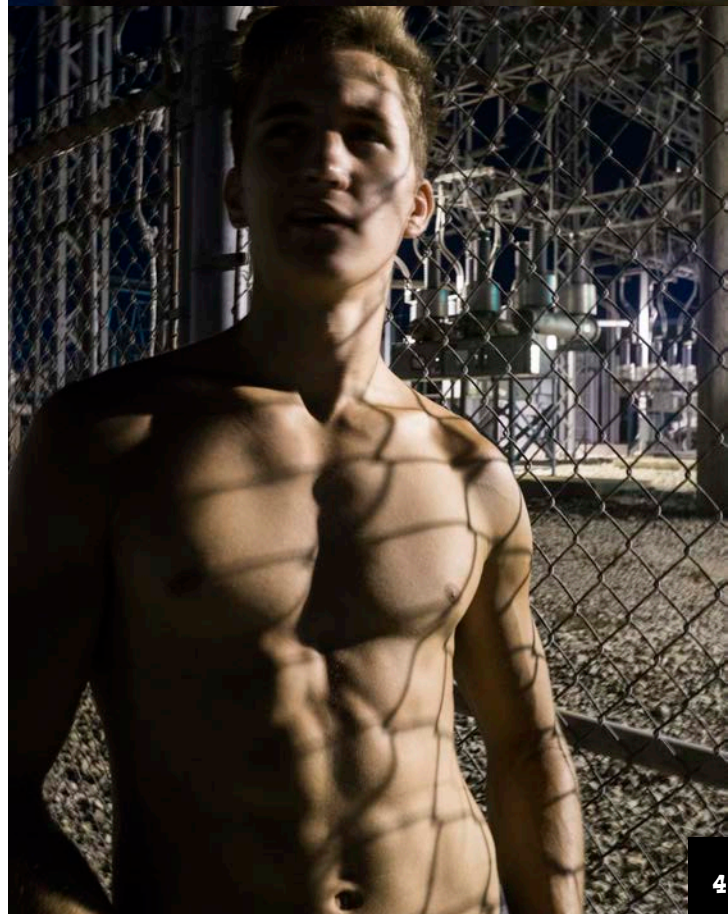






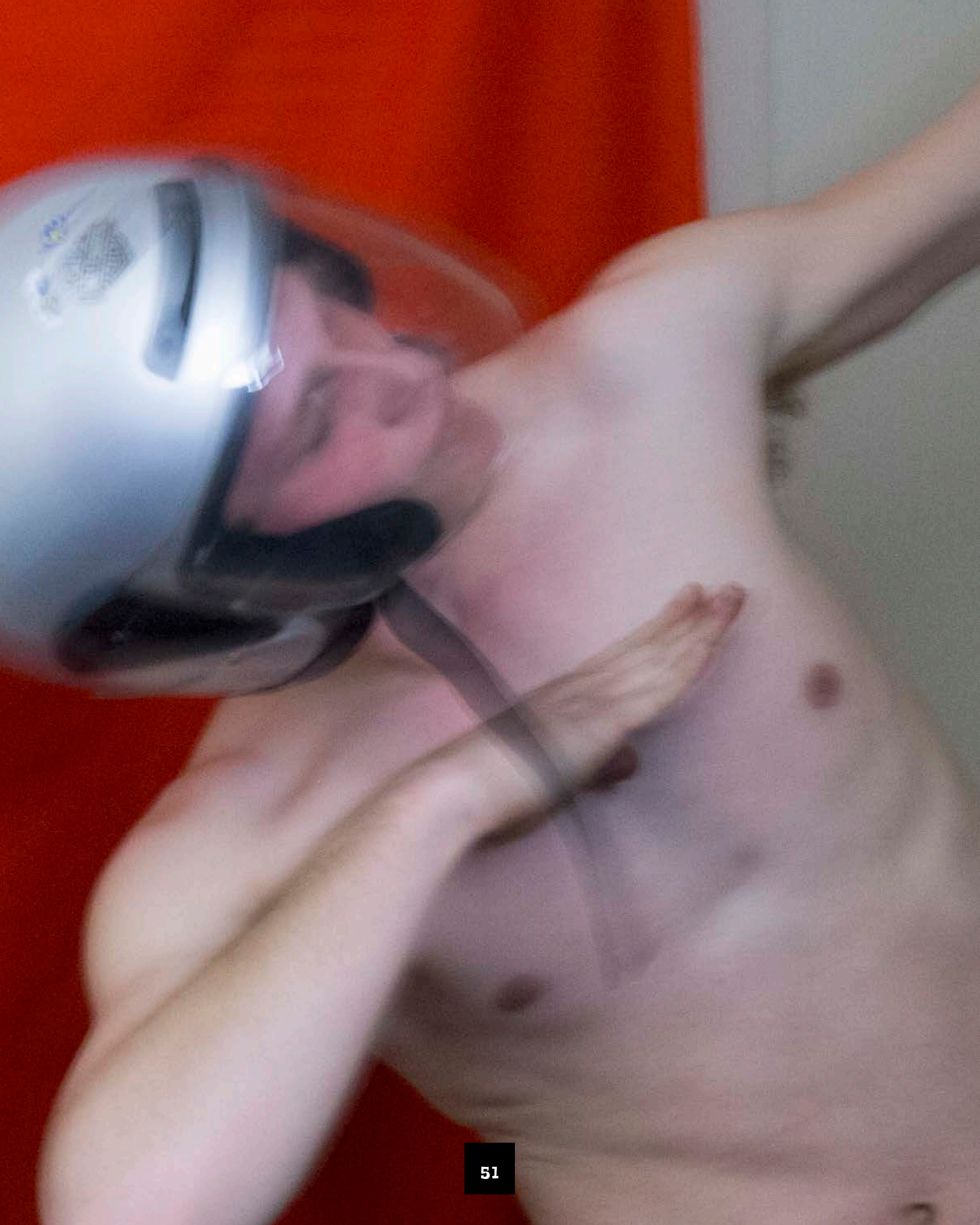








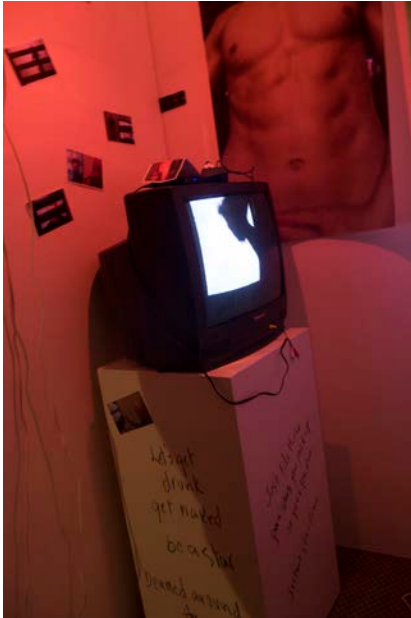


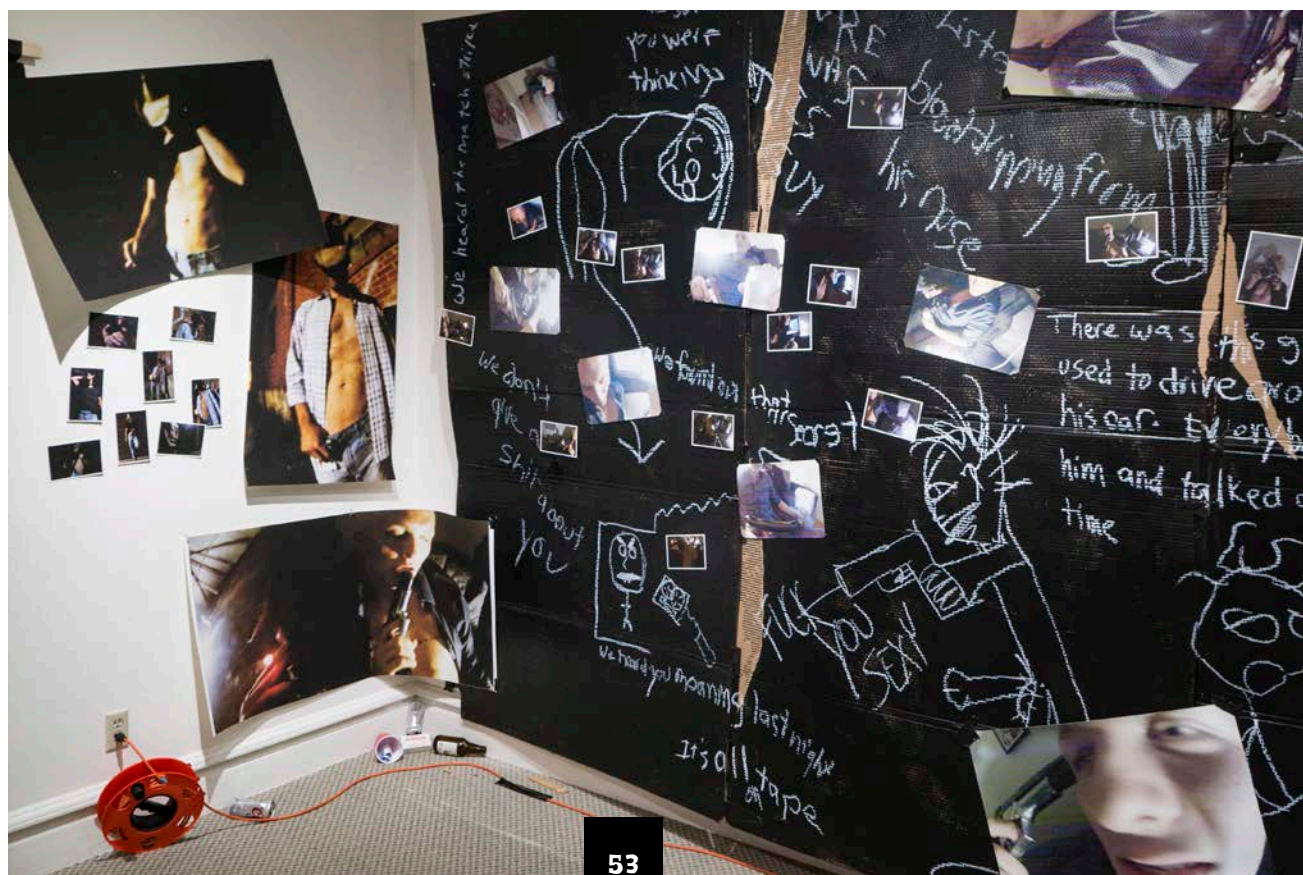




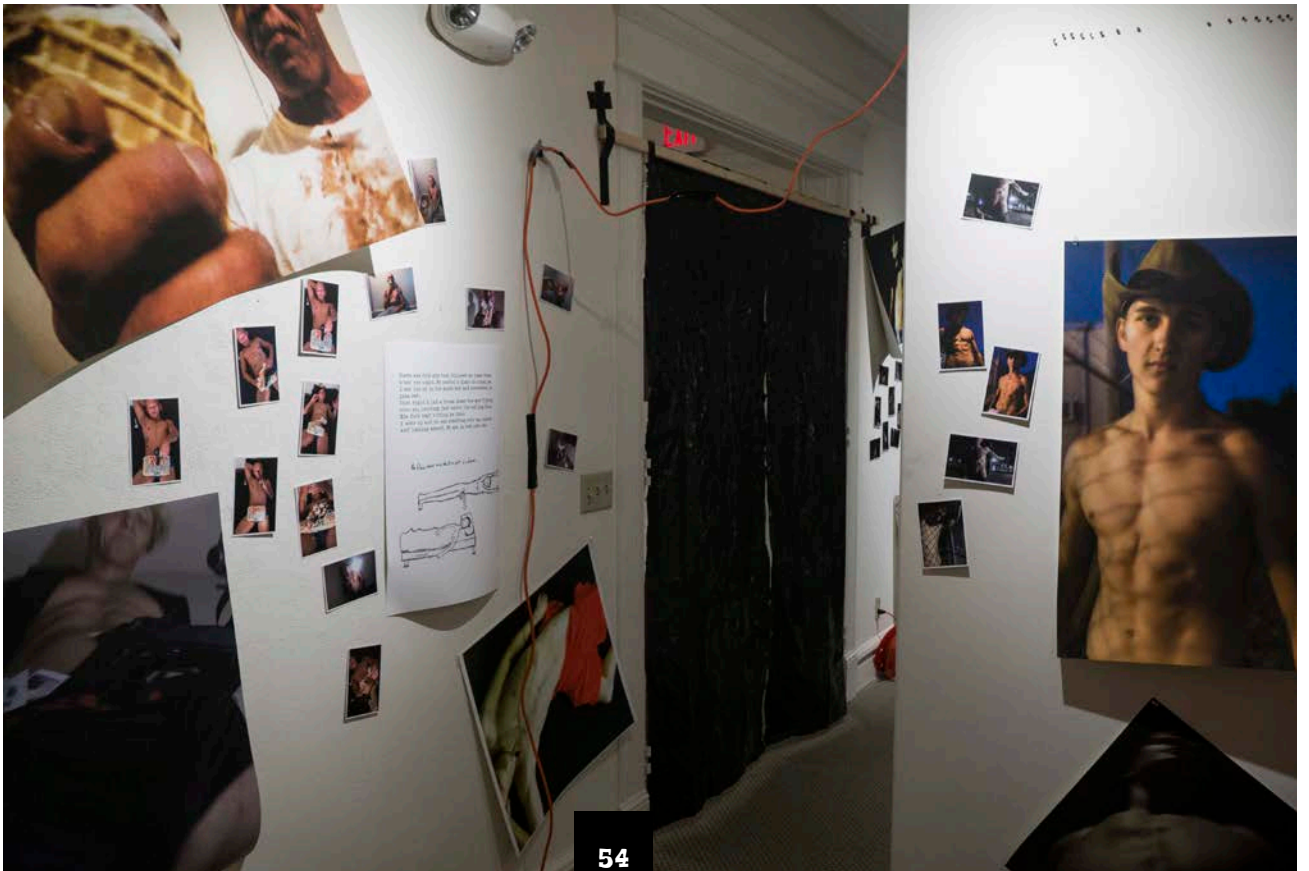
The themes and ideas behind the thesis, *Meat Cake*, required special consideration in the exhibition of the work. I wanted to create a narrative structure based on my research of fanzines and zine culture. This required the images to be shown in a space where the viewer would be required to move through a constructed setting. Typical gallery settings generally display the work in a large space where the pieces can be seen all at once. To create a sense of time, and narrative, the gallery space I used was divided into sections; an almost maze type situation where the entire body of work could not be immediately seen. It required an active part on the viewer to move through the setting, almost like turning the page of a book or zine. The images then begin to form a structure based on subject and location; each piece referencing another piece and thereby creating a whole. None of the images created for *Meat Cake* were meant to be shown as separate pieces but as a continual thought on queer identity, desire, mystery, masculine identity, and the portrayal of how cruising for sex was a large part of queer society prior to digital communication.

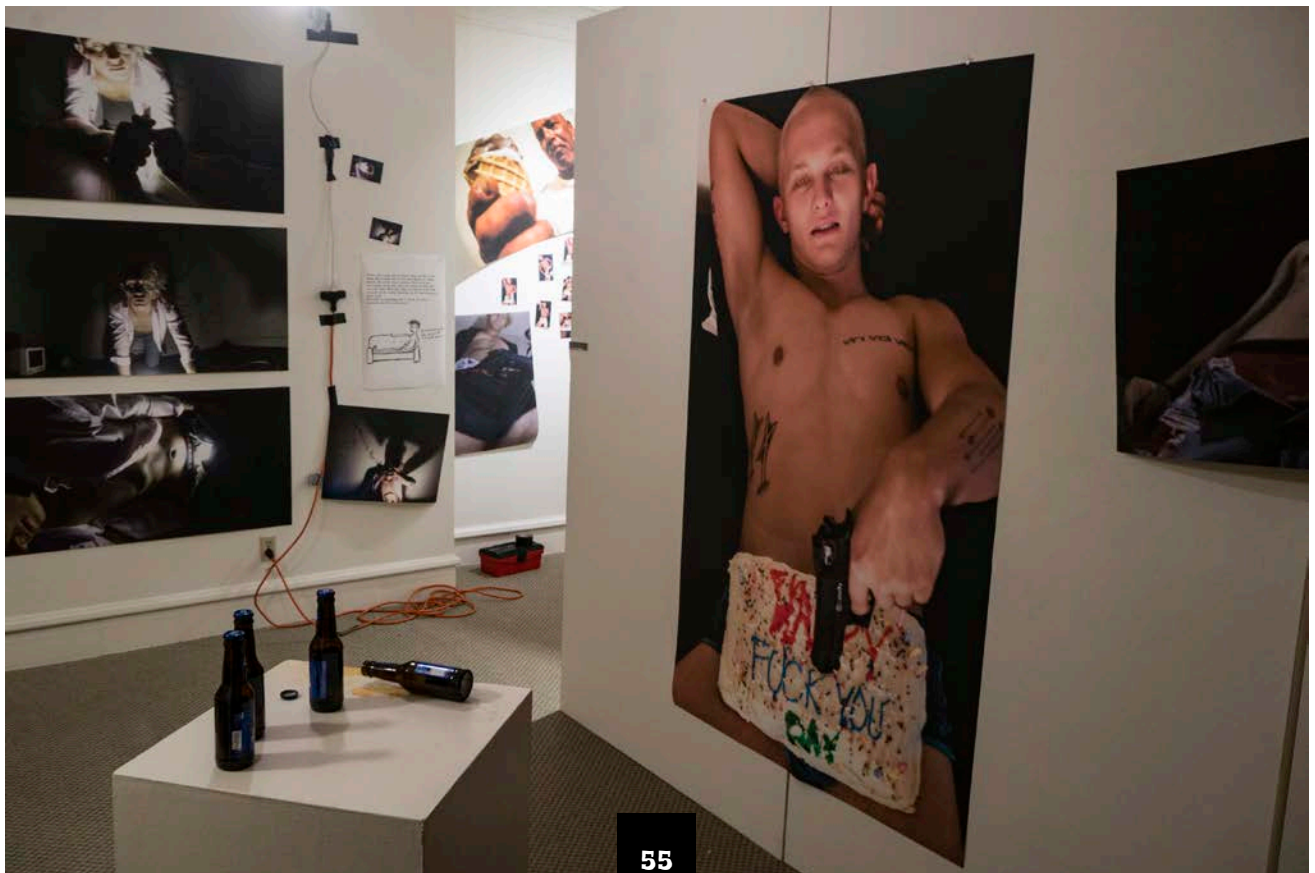
The following images are from the exhibition, shown at the Student Exhibition Center on the Missouri State University campus in April of 2017.



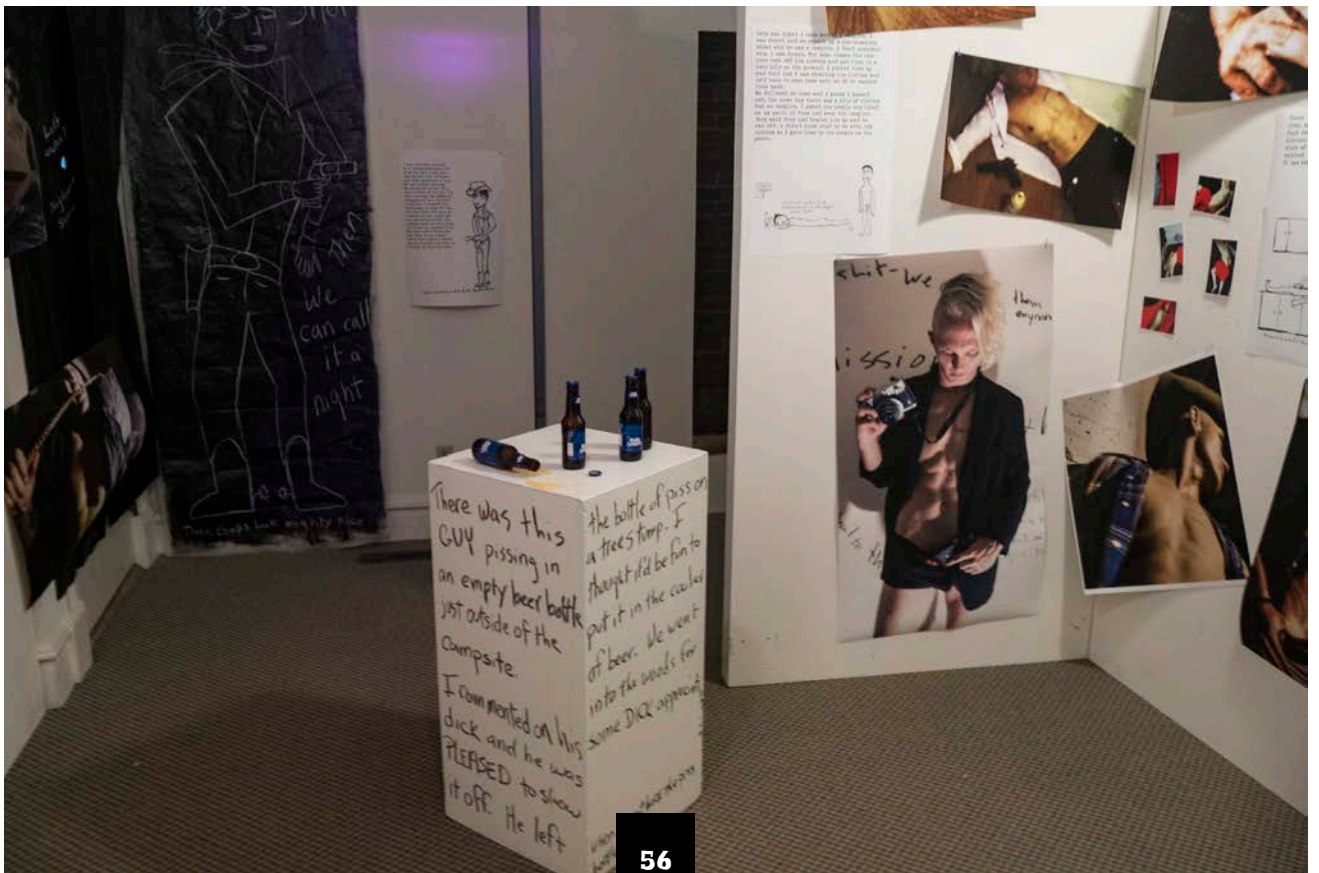
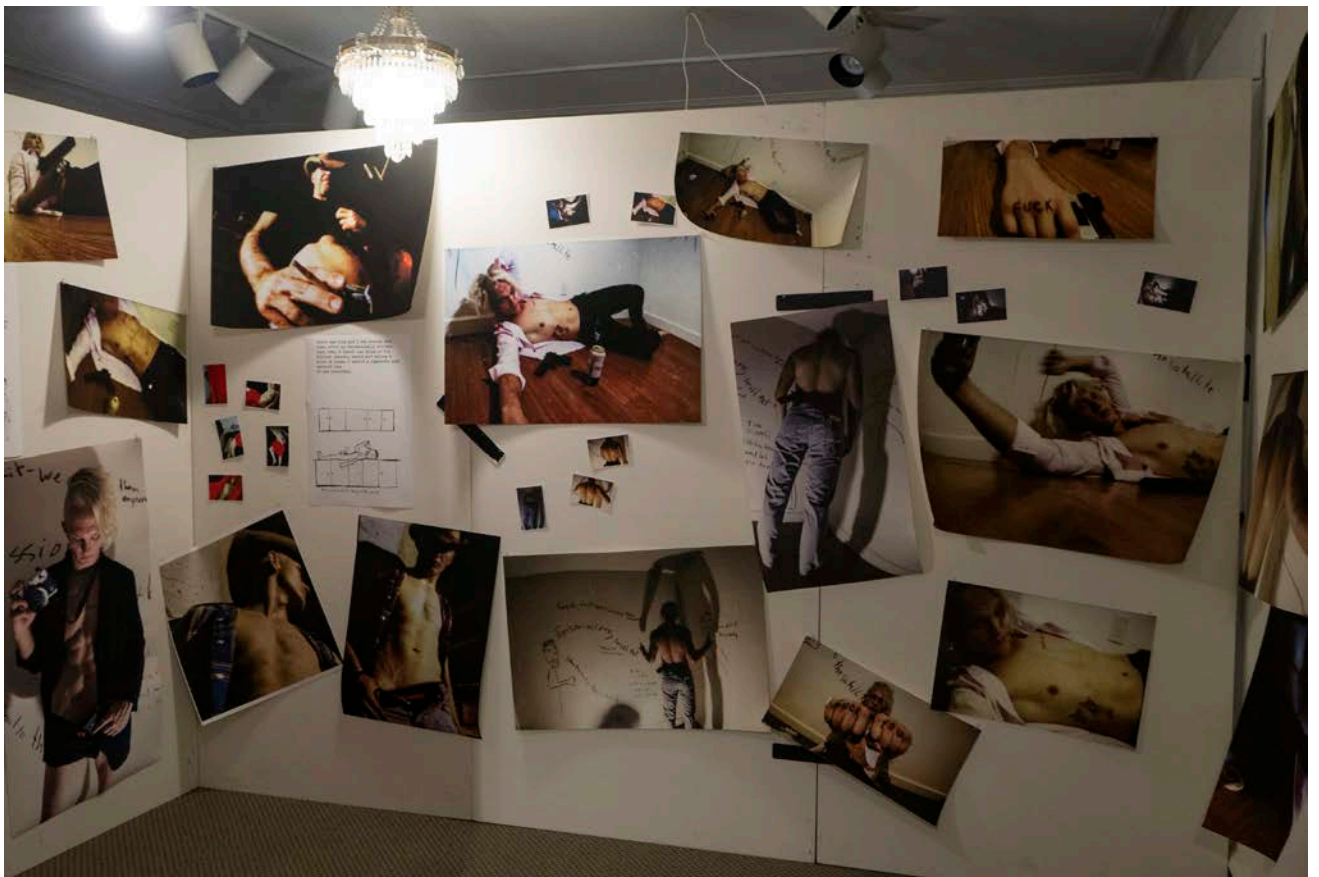


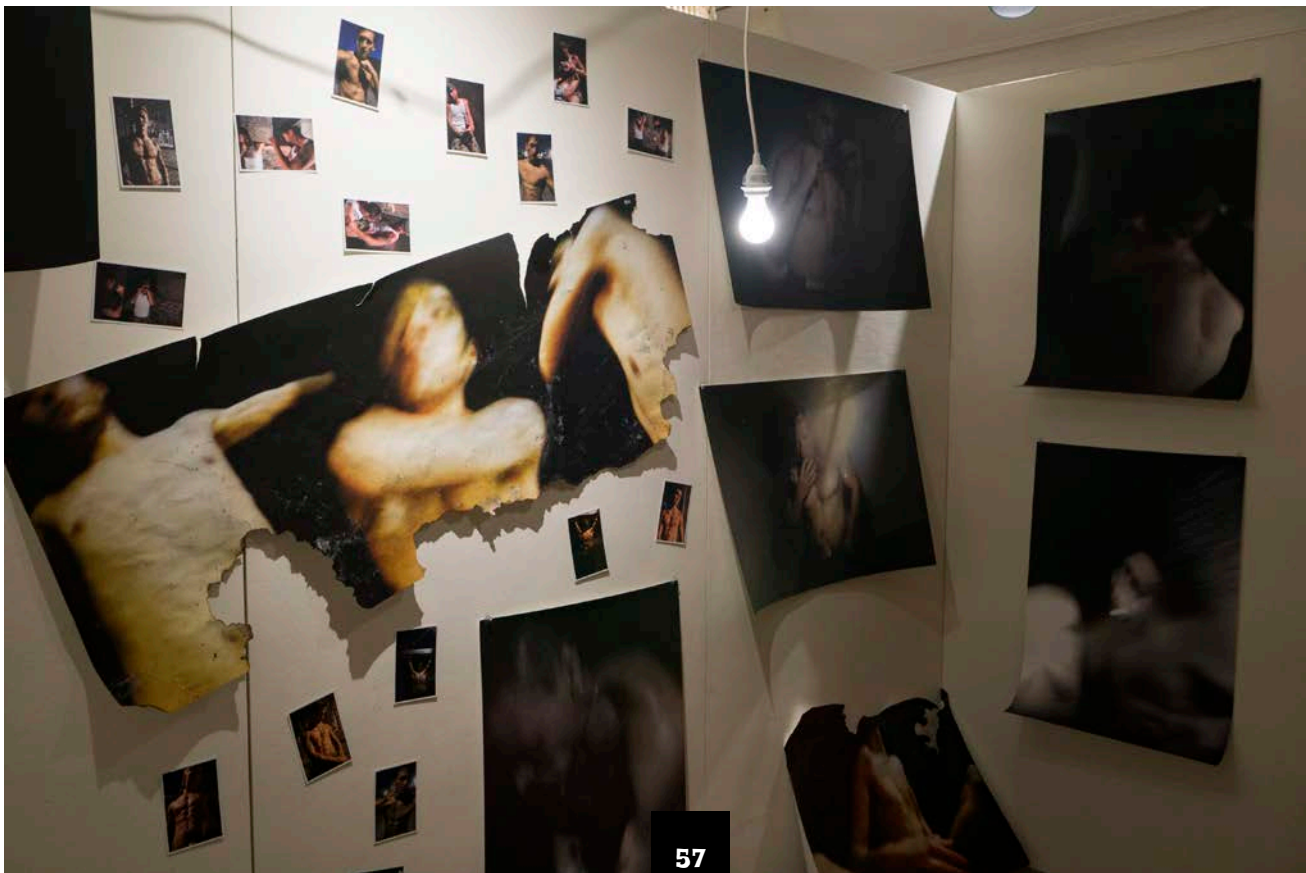
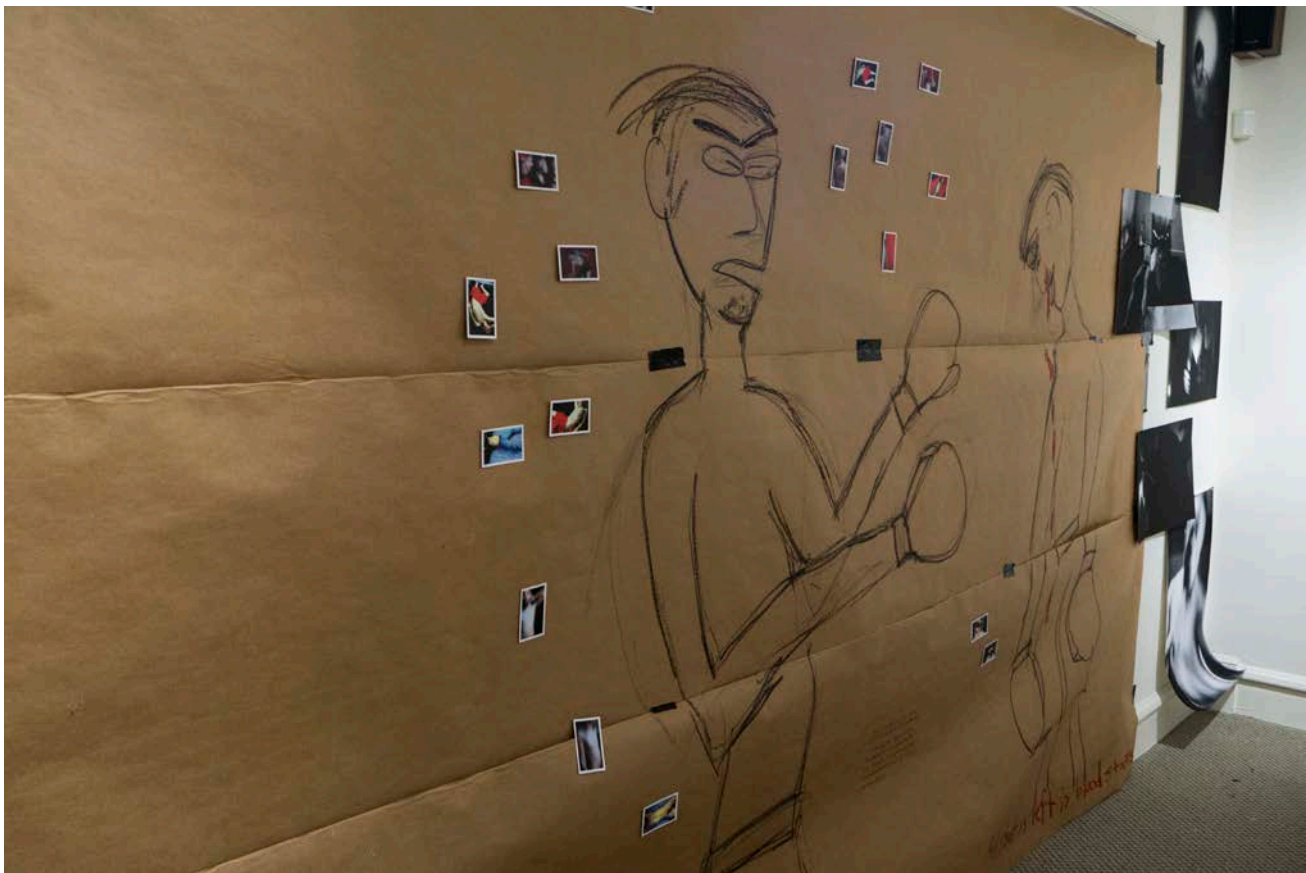




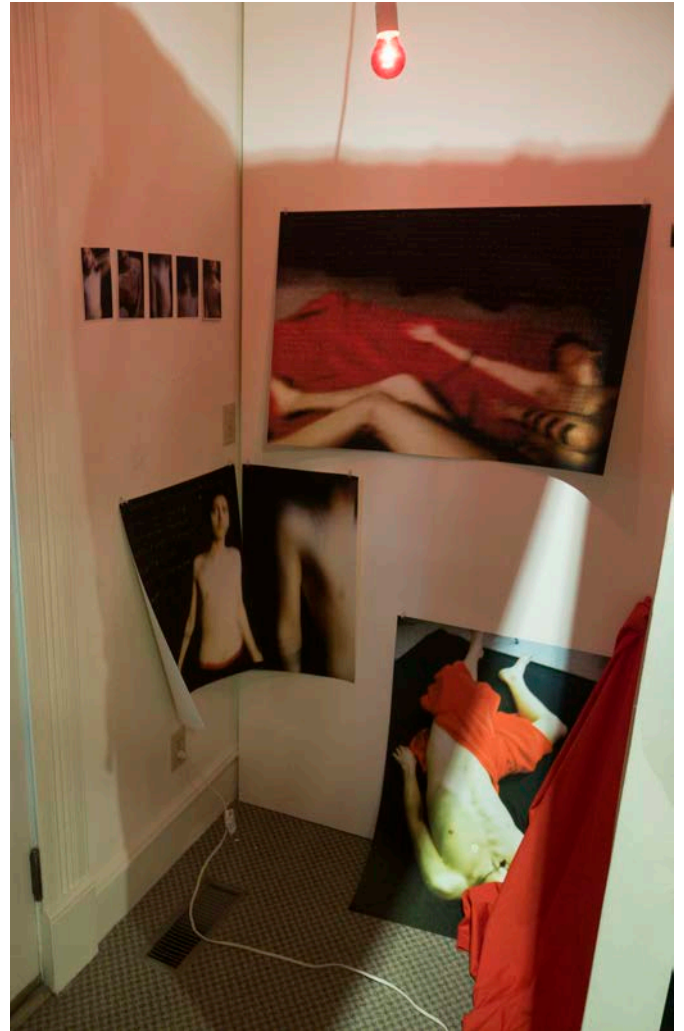
















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