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*“Offering,” 2016
acrylic on panel*

INTRODUCTION

CATHOLIC HOMOSEXUALS ARE BORN IN THE FAITH, BUT MUST LIVE WITH THE restriction of acting on their sexual desires. This is a testing space for those that live faithful lives, but are attracted to the same-sex. Queer space in Catholicism does not aspire to become straight; it aspires to acceptance in its askew state.

Fabrics, holy water fonts, rocks, reliefs, paintings, along with performances become the language of experience that help me to unearth Catholic queerness. My installations illuminate the tension between spirituality and sexuality in same-sex attraction. The manipulation of objects are double-coded to portray a third-space: gay and Catholic. The gifts of the church, wisdom, understanding, and fortitude, offer passageways that convey that LGBT Catholics have a place in the body of Christ.



ALTERNATIVE SPACE

Queerness is a broad term used to describe the non-normative, the strange, or “not quite right;” an umbrella term to define sexual or gender minorities that are not heterosexual. Prior to its current use, it was also used to denote the “odd” in a more general sense. There is a tension between the practice of the church in regulating sexuality and individuals who are carving out and claiming their own unique space within it. For homosexuals as well as heterosexuals, there is a negotiation that goes on between religious and sexual aspects of identity. I am interested in how these two dimensions of one’s identity co-exist together and how they appears to the general public. Creating personal meaning within the tenets of religion is a way of understanding and visualizing this strange terrain.

GLORIFICATION

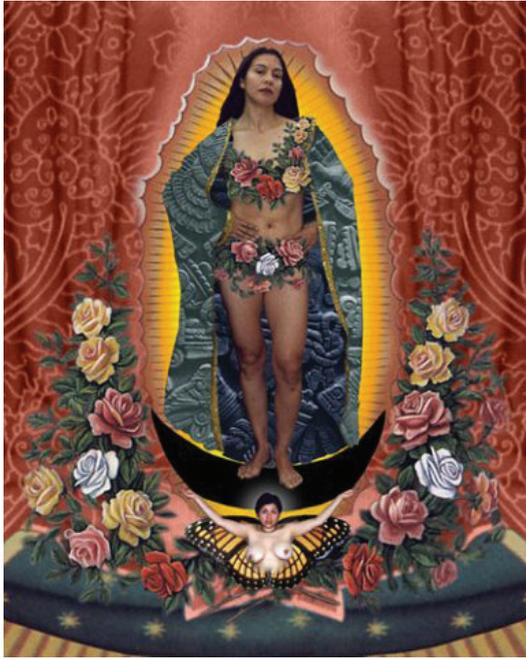
Many LGBTQ visual artists who grow up in Catholic backgrounds use tropes of icons in order to glorify queerness and allow for their “Saintly” inclusion within the faith. Mexican-American artist Gabriel Garcia Roman’s series, “Queer Icons,” references Christian Orthodox portraiture while illuminating contemporary figures. Adjustments to the figure, by way of tilting the head or non-normative appearances, can indicate a queering of conventional form and roles. His work aspires to bring a sense of refuge to this community.



"Kathy," 2014

Gabriel Garcia Roman

Artists who work within the realm of religion, either as a critique or a sense of understanding, risk being labeled sacrilegious. Mexican born, queer Chicana artist, Alma Lopez's work challenges traditional representations of Catholic icons with her controversial "Our Lady." The image she created of Our Lady of Guadalupe questions the de-sexualization of the body within Catholicism by inserting a sexualized version of Our Lady where a clothed, holy woman would normally be. Lopez denotes her lesbian identity with the bare-breasted, female monarch butterfly putti beneath her feet. No other symbol captures the identity of Mexico's indigenous people more than the Virgin. It's no surprise the image outraged Catholics and Latinos who considered the work a cultural as well as a religious affront.



"Our Lady," 1999

Alma Lopez

OBSCURITY

Throughout history, traditional Catholic artists, such as Caravaggio and Michelangelo have used their masterful skill to insert hidden messages into their paintings commissioned by the Church. They used double-coding as a way to identify themselves within an ideology that often dismissed their lifestyles. Contemporary artists still embrace this way of making meaning through identity. In his quiet, minimal, poetic work, Felix Gonzalez-Torres used the double coding of curious objects that opened up discussions of larger issues. This manner of object making, and the viewer's participation in ritual have been a guiding light in my own work.



*“untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991
Felix Gonzalez-Torres*

Although his work was not overtly “Catholic,” Gonzalez-Torres’ subtle use of the ritual of communion in “Portrait of Ross in L.A.” spoke of the poetic nature of the church, the body, and identity. Participants are invited to take a piece of candy from the installation, which represents the healthy weight of Ross, his lover. As more participate in the piece the weight is lowered to show his declining health from the AID’s virus. He was able to portray a body that wouldn’t be accepted by the public due to its illness, and bring it into acceptance by the public’s ingestion of its proxy—the candy. What is most inspiring about Gonzalez-Torres’ work was that he didn’t give into the normative vision of what a gay male artist would create. He wasn’t overly sexual in his pieces; instead he used metaphor as a way to discuss those issues around identity that mattered most to his own life.

CORPOREALITY

The body in Catholicism is portrayed largely in two ways: as functional (a vessel to create life), or transformative (as nourishment for our eternal salvation). Flesh is used to depict normative ideas of beauty and desire, while serving as a container for the soul. What makes flesh wrong? What makes flesh right? Robert Gober's work has a deep connection to metaphors for the body, homosexuality, Catholicism, and memory. Unlike Gonzalez-Torres, he approaches the body figuratively. His sculptures are beautiful yet, gruesome - severing body parts human hair. The flesh is made of beeswax, which reminds us of its fragility and malleability.



"untitled," 1990
Robert Gober

The dismemberment of body parts and the choices he makes in selecting certain parts of the body can represent loss and disconnection to the body. His Catholicism is evident to me in his exhausted torsos, which remind me of Christ on the cross; his shoulders mimic the cross beam on which his arms were stretched out upon. The free-standing chest is no longer confined by the wounds in his hands or feet and looks like a discarded brown paper bag.

INTERPRETATION

Artists have used performance as a way to understand identity. Where do we come from? What is the point of our existence? What is our connection to nature and man-made ideologies? One component of performance is ritual, which is defined not necessarily by its connection to religion but also to a deeper understanding of humankind. It is a way to represent the internal state of one's spirit. Ana Mendieta's work was predominately auto-

biographical, dealing with her body, her identity and women's issues. Her performances consisted of the interaction of her body with the earth – she used non-traditional materials such as dirt, mud, flowers and blood to become a part of nature. This connected her to her homeland of Cuba, pre-Columbian ceremony and the rituals from her Catholic upbringing - all things that defined her as a person. Although, Mendieta was not a LGBT artist; as a refugee, she understood the dynamics of being cast off due to her identity. In the Silueta Series the body becomes a free form figure that is free of any speculative physical identity.



"Tree of Life," 1976

Ana Mendieta

They become silhouetted imprints in the earth's surface or camouflaged bodies in the earth from which they are abstracted. "I use elements that produced me – using the earth as my canvas and my soul as my tool." The way in which Mendieta presents the female figure is, for me, is objective – in this series, she removes identity but, somehow relates it all to exactly what identity is: we are human, every one of us, and we will die; we will be placed back into the ground from which we came. This is the most inspiring part of Mendieta's work. Similarly, second-generation feminist artist, Hannah Wilke, approaches queerness as being "in-between" identities or religions. Wilke began as a sculptor who used unorthodox materials such as bubble gum, laundry lint, pencil erasers, and play dough. Wilke's sculptures allude to both representations of the natural world and the body. Her delicately folded organic forms in terra cotta evoke female genitalia as a symbol of female empowerment.



"S.O.S. Starification Object Series," 1974

Hannah Wilke

S.O.S. Starification Object Series was one of Wilke's first performance pieces. Deeply ambiguous, it embraces sensuality and mocks gender stereotypes. While posing like a pin-up, Wilke is covered with lumps of small, chewed and kneaded gum that are meant to look like vaginas, and that blemish her otherwise flawless back. According to Wilke these "lesions" represented women as second-class and as objects. The work plays with the words "star" and "scar" in the title, which suggests and questions at the same time ideals of beauty, implying that glamour is related to pain. Although Wilke was Jewish, some theoreticians have claimed that the "scars" relate to stigmata from the Christianity. A high percentage of all stigmatics are women, which could be because of the suffering women bear in childbirth and the burdens on a woman's body from child-rearing. Like menstrual bleeding, stigmatas have been known to bleed, and only stops after one receives Holy Communion. Wilke's piece is quite ambiguous, but one can associate the pain and suffering that Christ endured with women's suffering in today's society.

TRANSGRESSION

Queerness goes beyond the conventional boundaries around sexual normatively that society has established. It complicates the traditional representations of beauty, the grotesque, nature and spirit. The artists described above, with whom I align my work, all do not allow one side of their identity to outshine the other. They combine each side of their identity in a negotiation that creates an alternative space.



Chalice, 2016

Unfired clay, wine and video

CHALICE

The chalice is defined by the negative space of two facing profiles. It is made of fragile, unfired clay. The video begins with wine being poured into the chalice. The porous clay absorbs the wine, is weakened then starts to disintegrate. It ultimately collapses.

The doctrine of the Catholic church states that only a heteronormative relationship between a man and a woman can be constituted as substantial. The transformation of the chalice symbolizes the Church's laws regarding same-sex unions as not sacramental and structurally weak. The asymmetry of the form is in contrast to the traditional symmetrical chalice, referring to the non-normative or the queer space.







Lamenting Lovers," 2016
polymer clay, acrylic and tinted water

LAMENTING LOVERS

Two small fonts are hung side by side on a wall. In contrast to traditional Catholic holy water fonts, these are flesh-like and embody feminine form. The residue visible leaking from the vessels represents holy water, tears, or body fluid.





Cor Carneum, 2016, installation and performance
polymer clay, acrylic, cord, and stones

COR CARNEUM

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” — Ezekiel 36:26

Cor Carneum connects body to earth and to God, through interpretation of scripture. In the performance, my bound flesh mimics the fleshy rock entity. Throughout the performance, a meditative prayer is sung “this is the one thing that I know.” Bound pairs of rocks are handled with care and attempted to be cleansed. They are pushed toward the large congregation of rocks stacked below the large flesh rock, which represents Christ as the ultimate “other.” A pure white space has been mud-stained and filthy after this attempt to unify the scattered community.











*INTERIOR INDULGENCES FOR
THE FOUNDATION OF SALVATION*

Three various-sized circles have emerging fleshy folds situated on the wall. Traditional Catholic sculptures are inherently beautiful and sensual. The institutional foundation of the Church rejects the sexualized body. An indulgence, historically, is a grant by the pope of remission of the temporal punishment in purgatory still due for sins after absolution. Also regarded as the act of doing something you enjoy that is typically thought of as wrong, a special pleasure. When bodily form is removed, does the flesh become grotesque? How do we incorporate the positive aspects flesh within an institution that views it as sinful?



*"Interior Indulgences for the Foundation of Salvation," 2016
joint compound and acrylic*

FLESH FONTS

Two viewers are invited to participate in the ritual at a time. Prostrate kneeling on the floor in the corner, face to face with the font in front of them. Intimacy is present within the ritual when the participant's bodies are forced to touch. Fingers enter the vessel, which evoke sexual acts while also relating to Thomas – as he doubted Christ after the resurrection and stuck his finger in his side.

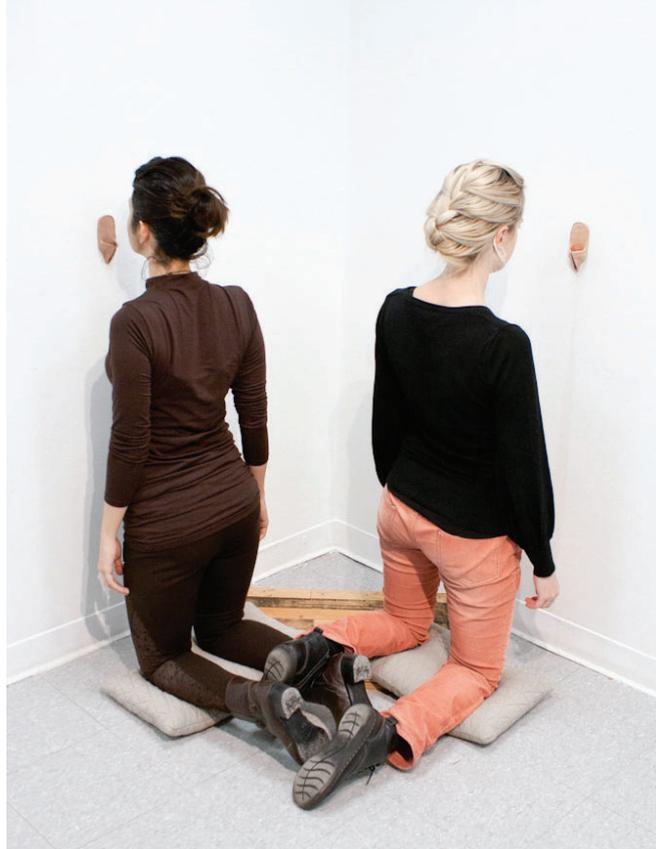
The origin of the font is the ritual of blessing. By dipping fingers into holy water and re-creating the crucifixion of Christ on one's body to push away evil when entering a sacred space. Traditionally made of marble or metals, these are made of clay to relate to pre-monotheistic times when people worshiped idols made of clay. "Flesh Fonts" deal with the portrayal of sexual and spiritual desire. Acting upon a homosexual desire is not acceptable in the faith.



"Flesh Fonts," 2016
installation and performance
ceramic, acrylic, wood, tinted water and pillows







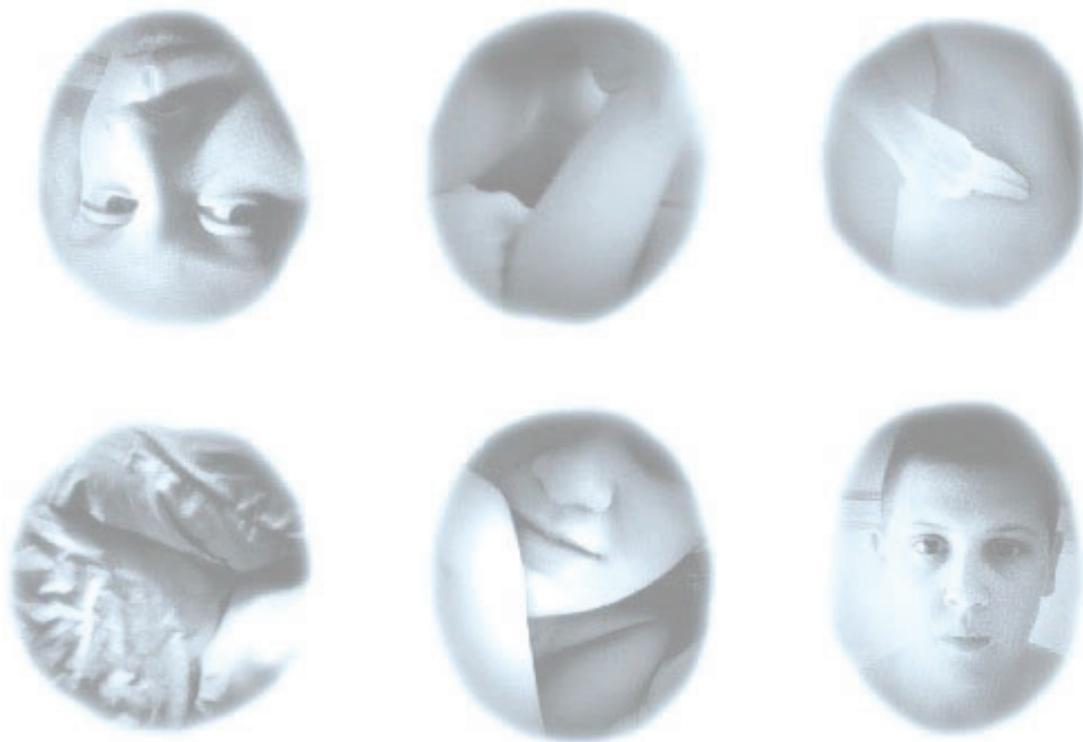
FLOS CORPREALITY

Meaning-making through interpretation allows me to depict a mental state, the “reality” of gay Catholics who are trying to navigate their way through this space. The creation of a positive experience of sexual identity and religious aspirations are possible; there is no limit in one’s participation, it embraces both identities. In order for the church to be progressive, we must be open to ways of interpretation and understanding. Growth is desired by individuals who do not fit within the normative views of the church. This installation shows how growth can manifest by taking the structure found within the institution, deconstruct them, in order to open the space for growth. The video depicts an inside look into my own queer Catholic reality.



"Flos Corporeality," 2016
installation and video projection
muslin, brass, marble, fabric dye, natural plants, wax and polymer clay





video stills, Flos Corporeality, 2016



A CONVERSATION WITH SISTER
JEANNINE GRAMICK

MEAGAN GREEN: Sister Gramick, you have ministered LGBT Catholics for over 30 years. First, I want to thank you for giving hope and compassion to those who may have lost their faith otherwise. In the time you've spent ministering, how would you describe the spirit of the LGBT community in the midst of a faith that doesn't agree with their lifestyle? How has it changed since you began?

SISTER JEANNINE GRAMICK: Well, I'm not sure it has changed—the faith of various people may have changed, but overall what I have seen since the beginning is LGBT Catholics, very devoted, very faith-filled, and who believe in God and who love the church, but who need a church that really will welcome them. Fortunately, many of the LGBT Catholics that I know have found pockets of acceptance in the Church. The Church is bigger than just the Vatican. I see a great deal of them cling to the Church, the Church of the gospel.

MG: I am frequently asked—“Why not find another faith/church—one that accepts you... Why stay a Catholic?” What do you think is the reason some LGBT Catholics remain in a faith that rejects them?

SJG: First of all, I think Church is local and if you don't have a local Catholic community that accepts you. I think that it's important that you find a faith community that does nourish your spiritual life. But increasingly, as I have been in this ministry we have lots of parishes that are LGBT friendly. I think they remain in the faith because they see the faith is bigger than the Vatican. In fact, only with this Pope, is he trying to change the tone of the bishops in the Vatican. But Church is local, your worshiping community are the people that nourish you life and they are the people that are around you. The Vatican is not going to affect your life. Unfortunately, I see a lot of LGBT Catholics who let the Vatican affect their lives. They let the established teaching, which they don't agree with, force

them away from the Church that nourishes them. So, my job is to let people know, “No, you don't have to suffer through that, you don't have to let doctrines rule your life.” The important thing is, the spiritual nourishment.

MG: The Church considers homosexuality “un-natural.” I know that against theological and philosophical discourse, you disagree. In *Building Bridges: Gay & Lesbian Reality and the Catholic Church*, you have gone to great lengths making sense of what is deemed “natural.” What would it mean for the discourse of the Church if homosexuality was accepted as natural—how would doctrine change?

SJG: The doctrines would change radically because unfortunately, well let me say, fortunately, theological teachings of the Church do rest on the natural law. But if you would read Margaret Farleys book *Just Love* she would say what the problem is that the theologians of the Vatican have not updated their understanding

of what is natural. They are still working on a natural law theory that is rooted in the 13th century. If we would look at the science that we have available to us now, they would understand that homosexuality is natural. Therefore, those who are naturally oriented and attracted to members of their own gender, should be accepted, blessed, and valued, just as we accept and value heterosexual attraction. There would be no distinction in making ethical determinations or ethical judgments based on heterosexuality and homosexuality, because both are very natural depending on the natural dispositions of the individual. So, the ethical evaluations would be based on love, the quality of the relationship. It would be based on whether there is commitment, caring, and a willingness to be present to that individual when they are in need. If there is any abuse to a person, taking advantage of a person for their own selfish reasons, then that kind of relationship is not a good one ethically. The ethics of the relationship depend on the quality

of the relationship and not on the gender of the persons involved in that relationship.

MG: That makes a lot of sense. How do you see homosexuals as a part of God's plan for creation and as a key component of the family?

SJG: Well, I see LGBT people just as part of God's plan. Let's look at all the different kinds of flowers, look at all the different kinds of trees, the different kinds of water; you know, salt water, fresh water, lakes and so forth—there is such variety when you look at creation. Also, what makes us think that there is just lock-step of uniformity in human beings; there isn't. If we acknowledge and give thanks to God for the variety in all of creation then we should give thanks to God for the variety in human beings. Whether that be a variety of gender, sexual orientation, there is just this variety. So, to me its not something that needs to be proven, to me its an axiom—something that we just accept. Why should there be uniformity in

sexuality? Therefore, we have to expand how we look at family. Family is not just a nuclear family of a husband and a wife and 2.2 children. There are a lot of varieties of families and we've seen that divorce has opened our eyes to that. In fact, there are a lot of families that are headed by single parents, and that kind constitutes a family too. There are families that are headed by LGBT parents, there are families that have a mother and a father and LGBT children. Again, I would just say, open our eyes to the variety in creation.

MG: To expand off of that, I am a child of divorce and I have such a love for my faith community back home—they were my home, my refuge growing up. I built some of the strongest relationships that I ever have had there, that I still continue to have. I have about 20 “moms” and it's those things that keep me grounded to this day in the faith.

SJG: That's great.

MG: For many years now, I have chose not to receive Holy Communion. I am still uncertain as to why I choose not to partake. My girlfriend does, every Sunday. I am curious to know how other LGBTQ Catholics respond to this sacrament—why do we feel unworthy to participate, or what is the mindset of those who do and do not receive?

SJG: I would say most of the LGBT Catholics that I know respond to the Eucharist. Actually in the way that Pope Francis would want them to. He has this habit of calling people up when they write to him. There is a story of one woman in South America, who contacted him to say that she's divorced and going with a man who is divorced and they can't get married in the Church. She goes to her parish priest and he won't give her communion, but Pope Francis said, “Just go to another parish; forget about it.” All of these little, itty, bitty laws and regulations I know he thinks, that I think too, are ridiculous. And what he keeps saying about

the Eucharist, which I believe, the Eucharist is not meant for people who are perfect, who follow all of the rules—the Eucharist is meant for all of us who are hurting. And why do we go to communion? To receive Christ, who will give us nourishment, that is the point—to be closer to the Lord. So, he advocates, as I do, that if you want to be closer to God, go to communion. Don't say, "Oh, I haven't been to confession," or "I'm outside the Church's regulations on divorce and remarriage," or "I'm LGBT." Francis would say, and I would say, if you want to nourish your God life, go to communion. That is where we most intimately meet Christ.

SJG: Your girlfriend has it right.

MG: She usually does, I'll let her know you said that. After Pope Francis's recent statements, do you think that there is any possibility for change?

SJG: With or without Pope Francis, there is certainly a possibility, and not only that most probably the doctrine will change. I don't think it's going to change in my lifetime, probably not in yours. Francis is not interested in changing doctrine, because first of all, politically that would cause a seismic change. It would be a tsunami. Now think of this, if you are the head of any organization, whether its a religious group or not; if you are the responsible leader of some group, things don't change quickly or lightly. They don't change until most of that group wants the change. So, he has a lot of hurdles to overcome, he's not about to change anything in the doctrine—he has said that. What he's interested in, which is really more important, is changing your hearts and minds. Changing peoples attitudes and its not until peoples attitudes, hearts and minds change that you can change any kind of legislation. That's what he's trying to effect and I hope he does. I have seen a lot of change already in the couple years he's been Pope. I have been working

toward the Church's change in sexual theology, but I am realistic enough to know that's not going to come until we have a change of heart and mind. In the U.S. Catholic community, not the worldwide community, because that is still very conservative. When you look at polls you see that there has been a huge attitude shift. More than 75-80% of Catholics do not feel there should be any kind of legal discrimination against LGBT people, that's a big shift. When they ask the question on same sex marriage, it's over 50% now. The majority of Catholics in the U.S. support civil marriage. I've been looking at these polls since the 1990's and since then there were not quite 20% of Catholics that supported same sex unions. So, getting back to change—we have to be patient to see change on the universal or broad level, because that only happens when the leaders see that a majority of Catholics have changed. Here in the U.S. that's more dramatically evident than in other parts of the world.

MG: Do you support gay marriage within the Church?

SJG: Oh, absolutely. If we believe what we say, that all people have human rights, human dignity, and that we should treat all people equally in the Church and we say that - that's the general statement. Yes, I believe that LGBT people have a right to be married within the Church, just as heterosexuals do. And to apply it again, if we are to say that male people can be ordained priests, then so can female people—if they have the calling.

MG: I know, getting older, and being in a relationship, that marriage is something I reflect upon. I am not certain if I want to be married, if the Church doesn't approve. So I may be holding off on it for a really long time or never do it at all, because I would want to be married in a sacramental way. But I am committed to my girlfriend, so it's more about our commitment to one another than anything else right now.

SJG: But it's important, I think to celebrate that with family and friends.

MG: I agree. Thank you for all of your time in conversation and I truly am grateful for your service.

SJG: Thank you, I am glad to be a part of your project. Blessings to you and your girlfriend.

SISTER JEANNINE GRAMICK (BORN 1942) is a Roman Catholic religious sister and advocate for LGBT rights as a co-founder of New Ways Ministry. Many publications written and edited by Sr. Jeannine explain further her positions and ministry, including “Homosexuality and the Catholic Church.” She is the co-author with Fr. Robert Nugent of “Building Bridges: Gay and Lesbian Reality in the Catholic Church.” Sr. Jeannine has served on the boards of The National Assembly of Women Religious and The Religious Network of Equality for Women. In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick’s Journey of Faith, by Barbara Rick is a documentary film that details her decades of ministry with the LGBT community and controversies with the Vatican.



“Spoil,” 2016

glass and gelatin

A F T E R L I F E

Queer spaces, for myself, negotiate belief and aspects of identity.

It is an in-between; neither here nor there.

Where two opposing worldviews intermix.

I am compelled to materialize my own reality.

There is no one utopian vision.

Seek your truth...

A F F I R M A T I O N S

For Amanda, my soulmate and partner in life. Words cannot describe how grateful I am for you, I love you.

Taylor, my best friend, for dreaming big with me.

My family, who has always supported my artistic outlets, however weird they seemed.

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The friendships that I have developed with my MFA peers, I am blessed to have had you by my side through this program.

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Thank you all,

Meagan

B I O G R A P H Y

MEAGAN GREEN is an interdisciplinary artist born in 1986. She received her Bachelor of Art in Painting from McNeese State University in 2012 and her Masters of Fine Art from Montclair State University in 2016.



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