

# Excursions

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Making Space at the Queer Intersections of Sex and Gender

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Queering the Fens: an exploration of land, supernatural,  
folklore and queer reproduction as art making

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# Queering the Fens: an exploration of land, supernatural, folklore and queer reproduction as art making

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## **Abstract**

This essay refers to a body of work and research that considers the connections and intersections of the supernatural and Queerness. The project began with an exploration of ghost stories and their connection to repressed sexuality and identity, mediumship and its relationship to transgression of gender. This revealed notions of supernatural Queer male birth and how making art can embody this. A specific personal geographic location: the Lincolnshire Fens became important in its: liminality, landscape, wealth of folklore and connection to Queerness, politics, and the queer body's relationship to the land. Working in a transdisciplinary manner I have produced charged and evocative time based media, using methods of creation related to mediumship and the supernatural. Particularly: performance, sculpture and drawing, woven into video installations. I have proposed speculative queer futures that challenge hegemony, examine queer identity and celebrate the downright weird.

**Keywords:** queer; reproduction; birth; supernatural; horror; art; video; drawing; sculpture; transdisciplinary mediumship; folklore; ghost stories; landscape; the Fens; Lincolnshire; marsh; coast; identity; gender; liminality; feminism; queer theory; politics

## Overview

All images in this photo essay are video stills from *Darklins* (2021-), a transdisciplinary body of work.

In this practice-based research I have explored art making as a form of queer reproduction and queer male birthing. Particular media in the video such as drawing, sculpture and animation have expounded this. Transgressing tropes relating to mediumship, whilst working with performers, has also been a method of production. The Lincolnshire Fens (fig. 1) are my birthplace and I have queered this landscape, relating queer bodies to the Fens' liminality. Creating and birthing dough sculptures in the video performance responds to Julia Kristeva's writings in *Powers of Horror* (1980), considering abjection and deviating from the boundaries of the body, being distasteful. The sculptures were made using flour from the Lincolnshire fens, on location. The supernatural has been integral in imagining Queerness as otherworldly and artmaking as a magical process (fig. 2). Like the manifestations in ghost stories and folktales, the sculptures and drawings resemble offspring and the phallic (to be further explored below). Marxist feminism has been integral to this research in conjunction with readings of queer futurity. The work challenges heteronormative places and spaces, gender expectations, inner colonialism and elucidates theories of queer reproductive and societal futurity.



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

## Supernatural Reproduction

Supernatural fiction, in particular the ghost story and science fiction, has historically been an outlet for queer expression, coded or otherwise. Gothic horror embedded the notion of the (queer) outsider defined by monstrous same sex attraction, lust and sin. The Victorian and Edwardian ghost story featured the repressed yearnings of the lone male, often in settings of the East Anglian coast and marsh, his fear and desire materialised through spectral manifestations. In E.F Benson's story *The Thing in the Hall* (1912), two gentleman dabble in the fashionable, spiritualist practice of table turning, resulting in the production of a large, slug-like 'thing'. The manifestation can be read as phallus and baby. This was explored in practice via the ritualistic production of sculptures.

Many of the male spiritual mediums of the era appear to have had homosexual experiences and are known for their production of matter. Molly McGarry (2008) suggests that they found new freedoms in gender transgression through their mediumship. The spiritualist medium Leslie Flint (1911-1994) was famed for his 'direct voice mediumship'. He claimed to produce a skin-like, ectoplasmic being, that attached to his person and

acted as a voice box for the dead, through his child spirit guide 'Mickey'. Often the spectral visitor was a famous woman, such as Marilyn Monroe. Flint and Mickey, through the manifested organ, performed what could be likened to a spirit drag show. I have used themes of mediumship in my work, particularly in drawing and animation (Fig. 3). Just as automatic drawing is a device used in mediumship to channel spirits and energies, so too was this adopted as an art-making method (see Fig. 4 and 5).

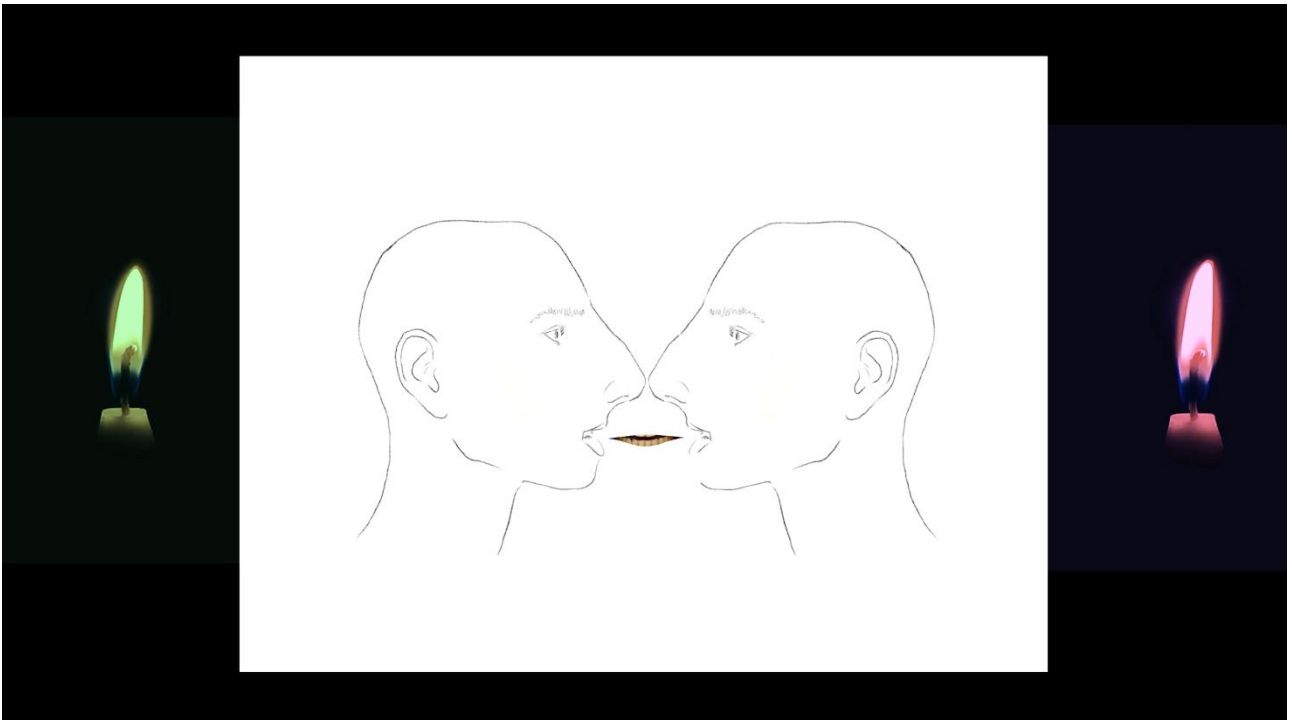


Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.

The Molly Houses of 18th century Britain were brothels that provided a community for queer male sex workers, illegal but largely tolerated. Mock labour and birth rituals were commonplace, attributed to an expelling of anxiety (Norton, 1992). I have explored ritualistic methods

of art production as birthing, see Fig's 7 and 8. This has taken place in locations that were once rural places that queer people would meet, which were known to me when I was younger as 'gay places'. In doing so, I challenge the binary and toxic masculine environment that I experienced in the rural locations. (Fig. 6)

Supernatural ideas of male reproduction date to at least the 2nd century. *True Story* (translated 1958), a work of proto-science fiction by Lucian of Samosata, contains an all-male population that reproduce through gestation in the thigh following sodomy, as well as by burying testicles in the ground and harvesting babies from the resulting tree. I have imagined a Queer futurity in which I can produce artwork alongside a community of Queer and Feminist people in which artwork becomes the offspring (Fig. 6). The output and the ritual here become legacies that might challenge hegemonic histories.



Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.

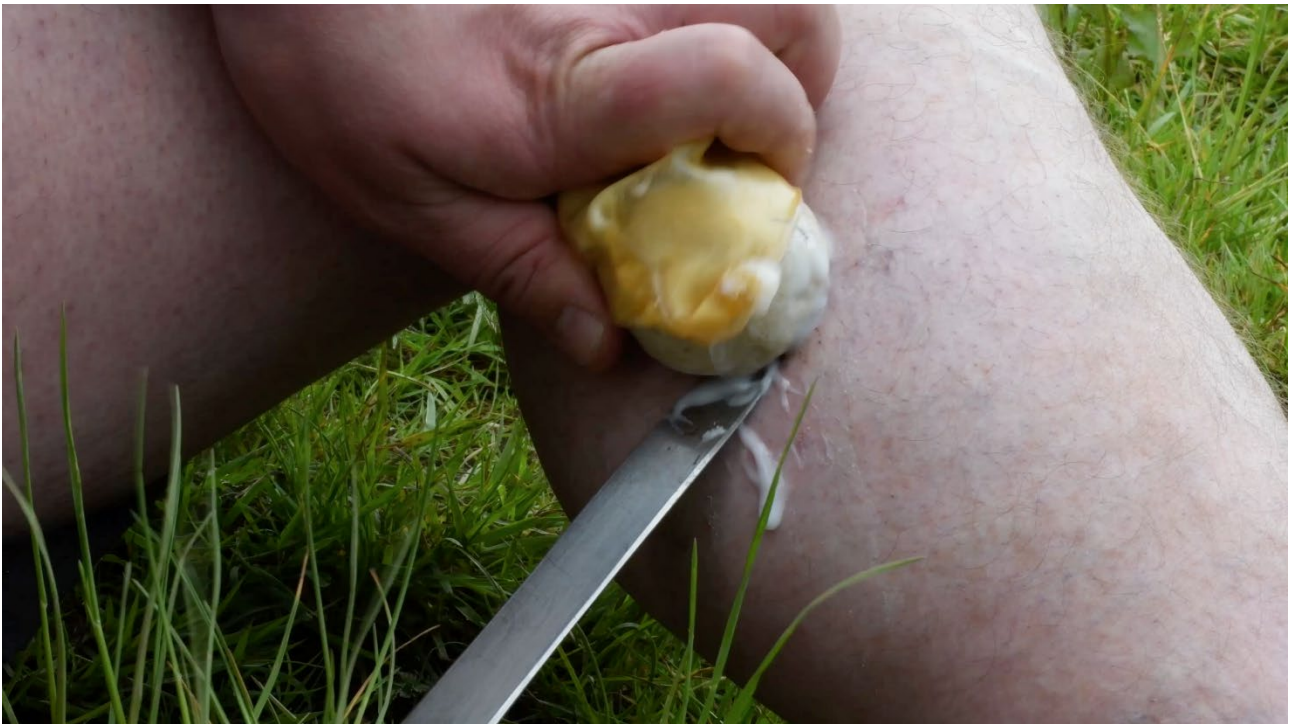


Fig. 8.



## Folk Action

I have invoked the folkloric creatures of the Lincolnshire Fens; the ‘Tiddy Mun’ and ‘Tiddy People’. In Lincolnshire Fenland folklore, as recounted by M.C Balfour in *Legends of the Cars* (1891), a supernatural male creature, the Tiddy Mun reclaims the land and waterways for displaced people after a period of pestilence. This happened after the draining of the fens for capitalist purposes in the 17th century and is comparable to the recent loss of queer spaces. Tiddy Mun was also believed to be connected to the spirits of babies that haunt the fenland waters. The Tiddy People and Tiddy Mun are malevolent, benevolent and can be interpreted as queer.

“O’ summer noights tha da’anced i’ tha moonshine o’  
th’ great flat [...] smeared ’un wi’ blood, an’ thowt a  
deal more on ’un than o’ th’ pa’asson bodies”

(Balfour, 1891, p. 49)

Darklins is the term used in Lincolnshire dialect for *night* and is found in folklore. Video vignettes that document the artmaking process and creative use of video became a fragmented collection of works known as *Darklins*. References to the folklore run throughout *Darklins* and particularly relate to the sculptures, in which some of the dough babies become folkloric creatures in their own right.

Using flour from wheat grown in the fens I made sculptures on location. The intention was also to queer the land in a bold and performative manner, a disruption. I created a costume using a fur coat that was my grandmother’s and a cape, fashioned from a plastic tablecloth (Fig. 8). It felt important to link with female familial possessions to explore queerness and transgression, in the place that I am from. There was also an exploration of theory by Julia Kristeva:

“...”I” am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which “I” become, I give birth to

myself...without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects.”

(Kristeva, 1980, p. 3)

“The same condemnation of hybrids and migrant beings can probably be read in the prohibition against leavened bread...”

(Kristeva, 1980, p. 103)

Using the above texts and Kristeva’s suggestion that emissions from outside the boundaries of the body are perceived as abject in relation to a woman, I extended this to the queer body. These tracts provided a key framework for making the work: the bread became symbolic of the abject as, in a dough state, they appeared reminiscent of bodily emissions. During the performance this dough was manipulated and seemingly pulled from the body (Fig. 9). Dough itself is an interesting sculptural media, it is fleshy and pliable and forms changes constantly. Reminiscent of the domestic, I used containers and tools that also had been my grandmother’s. Once baked the bread become sculptures and were shown alongside video in exhibition installations. There were interesting opportunities to explore birth and rebirth through digital media. For example, I manipulated images of the sculptures and used animation software to bring them alive. Using text from actual folklore – Balfour’s ‘Tiddy Mun’ – the bread ‘babies’ become folkloric creatures themselves, narrators in the artwork (Fig. 10).



Fig. 9.



Fig. 10.

Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), referencing the transbiological and citing various 'B' movies, dismisses the notion that alternative forms of being are necessarily naive and utopian, and considers that a focus on work and money can be exchanged for sharing and cooperation. This has provided a frame of reference when making work, in terms of Queer futurism and working within Queer collectives. Through performing I have challenged gender expectations and explored how liminal rural lands may be claimed for queer people. The production of artwork and cooperation with other artists have become magical allegories of alternative reproduction and community.

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