



The title comes from *Luce Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 258.

¹ Rodney Werden was primarily a video artist, whose work reflected the minimal means of the period (the beginning of the 1970s) when video art was young, with its Warholian stare, unmoving camera and voice-over. Many of his tapes dealt with bondage, sado-masochism or sexual negotiation. Lisa Steele wrote that “Rodney Werden has chosen people who are able to present potentially sensational personal material in quite a commonplace, almost banal manner.” Lisa Steele, “Rodney Werden’s ‘Baby Dolls,’” *Centerfold* 2, no. 6 (September 1978): 95. While in response to Peggy Gale’s observation that Werden’s tapes were “about norms and deviation from norms,” Werden replied, “The norm is me, and the work is a foray into deviation.” Peggy Gale, “Video-view 2: Rodney Werden,” *Centerfold* 2, no. 4 (April 1978): 16.

² Mark the uncanny resemblance, minus the nudity, of a thirteenth-century page from a fortune-telling manuscript by Matthew Paris that figures in Jacques Derrida’s *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, where Plato is depicted prodding Socrates in his back, dictating to his elder, the one who does not write. Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (1980; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Rodney Werden, *Portrait of Jorge Zontal (with Rodney Werden)*, 1974.

Between Whites, Blacks, and Sight

Philip Monk

PART I

THE IMAGE

It all starts with an image, a photograph, actually, from 1974 by the then-Toronto artist Rodney Werden.¹ It is a self-portrait, but not any ordinary self-portrait. The portrait has been enabled in its making by another, who also appears in the image. Two people are portrayed, but only one is the work’s author. *Self-Portrait with Jorge Zontal*, it was originally titled. Jorge Zontal (1944–1994) was a member of the Toronto art collective General Idea. He was their go-to man for anything photographic. But he also had his own studio portrait practice. Like Werden, he was a sideline portrait taker with his images appearing, at the time, in the gossip columns of *FILE* magazine or on the covers of *Toronto Theatre Review*. Here, though, he aids Werden in taking his photograph. “Aiding” might be the wrong description since he seems to be playing a trick. More than an assistant, Zontal seems to act like a sorcerer’s apprentice, stealing the image and usurping the role of the photographer by taking the portrait from behind the scenes. Behind Werden’s back, at least.² He blinds Werden to his task, who, though sightless, still holds the cable release to snap the photograph and capture this blinding image. Whether agreed upon or not, for some reason Zontal covers Werden’s eyes with his cupped hands. The image, with its old-fashioned view camera, is so staged, however, that we believe this must be intentional. Zontal is Werden’s substitute, or supplemental, eye. One eye is in shadow, so Zontal seems weirdly Cyclopean, his exaggerated stare and orbital socket mimicking that of the monocular camera lens. Zontal’s Medusa stare is oddly transfixing.

THE SCENE

The staging of the image was meant to be caught too. The scene obviously was shot in a mirror, so its full apparatus is exposed. The photograph also captures a mirror at an oblique tilt, behind this odd couple, at the back of the room, which reveals that it transpired at General Idea’s then-headquarters, and that of Art Metropole, at 241 Yonge Street in Toronto. This mirror was the prop used in General Idea’s 1971 project *Light On*, transported through the Southern Ontario landscape where General Idea documented reflected sunlight in a series of photographs exhibited at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery the next year. Forty years later, I wrote: “But since only blinding sunlight was transferred in *Light On*, the reflection left a void in the image.... The artists split the scene in order to insinuate another content or concern there, even though it would appear to be a void.... These are all variations of mapping of one condition or situation on another, commonplace to conceptual art, but in General Idea’s enterprise they also importantly led to some form

3 Philip Monk, *Glamour is Theft: A User's Guide to General Idea* (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 2012), 158, 160, 158.

4 General Idea, "Are You Truly Invisible?," *FILE 2*, no. 3 (September 1973): 35.

5 John Bentley Mays, "Miracles of Emanuel Jaques," *C Magazine 2* (Summer 1984): 40, 39. "Their art (which took the perverse, critical forms of video, performance, installation, works in mixed means) had been an art of liberty and criticism, of parody and ambitious appropriation and intense curiosity, and hence an art of proposed healing and reconciliation, if not of ethical or political seriousness," Mays, 45.

of subversive destruction, which operated to secret one thing in another."³ The same year that Werden exposed his picture, General Idea published their photo-text "Are You Truly Invisible?" in *FILE*, where they set up another mirror scenario:

Consider your mirror's feelings. Must it always reflect you? A) Coerce all your mirrors to look at each other. B) Now that you've turned them onto the ultimate narcissism, steal away your reflection while they aren't watching. Carefully. It's all done without mirrors. How they'll talk about you! The vacuum created by your invisibility has got to be filled with words. They'll talk and talk...⁴

Perhaps the two mirrors of *Portrait of Jorge Zontal (with Rodney Werden)* talked about what they saw otherwise, before and after the photo shoot, gossiped about the promiscuous liberties of the period. Documentary evidence is scant, so let's listen to the fictionalized words of a Toronto critic who was a witness at the time to *in camera* performances of "the naked maker of the early 1970s, given to disclosure and the construction of a truth of the radically local."

Steinway [John Bentley Mays's fictionalized critic here] recalled the heyday of that joyful blasphemy against Olympian abstract authority, recalling the spectacles of self-disclosure and self-analysis in the mortal and carnal art of performance, in the spectral, staring examinations of video, and in extravagant deeds of means mixed and impure. He remembered the new perverse artists of those Toronto days—unnatural lovers of themselves, and of the sensual parodies—who went harvesting in the city's secret orchard of desire and forbidden acts, making their art from the harvest; who found their topics on the edges, in the banal happiness of suburbia, in childhood and in sexual awakening, and in the vast flow of medicated images which sculpt and constitute all our desires into vexed, iconic form.⁵

THE SCENE, ONCE AGAIN

Even though we started with Rodney Werden's image, we do not see this photograph in Chris Curreri's exhibition *A Surrogate, A Proxy, A Stand-In*. What we do see, instead, in a weird reversion, is its uncanny recreation in three dimensions—but still in photographic greyscale. *Self Portrait with Luis Jacob* is the same but strangely different. The image now assumes the vexed, iconic form of sculpture. Life-size and enclosed in a Plexiglas cube, the ensemble also assumes the look of a museum diorama—those now discredited displays of costumed mannequins and painted backdrops of our Neanderthal ancestors, so-called primitive peoples, or Indigenous tribes.

Here the diorama's staging reproduces General Idea's studio, with its potted tropical plants signifying camp swishness. But, in another bizarre turn, Zontal and Werden have been replaced respectively by the contemporary Toronto artists Luis Jacob and Chris Curreri, who happen to be partners. Describing the original photograph, I failed to say that Werden was naked. So, too, now is Curreri. Transporting this transparent cube back in time to those natural history museums or human zoos, we might imagine the accompanying label: "Homosexual Artists, Toronto, 1974–2022." The scene makes us stop in our tracks. Then the lights inside the Plexi-cube go off. We are now reflected in its mirror surface. The lights return, the interior scene too. We realize that we have

been caught, between light and dark, in a photographic act, just like the subjects themselves within the vitrine. In fact, isn't the vitrine one big view camera with subjects captured within its hermetic chamber? Curreri is duplicating not only a photograph, but a camera as well in this *mise en abyme* *mise en scène*. Let's take General Idea's advice and steal away our reflections. Let's steal away Werden and Zontal, Curreri and Jacob, too, in order to leave an empty box, maybe a camera obscura, which many take to be the origin of photography.⁶

Before they were portable, camera obscuras were room-sized. Even so, the camera obscura was a model as much as an apparatus.⁷ It was more than a contrivance to capture an image admitted to the room and lodged on its back wall by light passing through a small hole. "For two centuries it stood as a model, in both rationalist and empiricist thought, of how observation leads to truthful inference about the world."⁸ Then suddenly in the first part of the nineteenth century, "the stable and fixed relations incarnated in the camera obscura" were uprooted and instead it became the opposite: a "model for procedures and forces that conceal, invert, and mystify truth."⁹ We do not yet know where *A Surrogate, A Proxy, A Stand-In* is leading us, through this simulacral transformation, from veracity to conjuration, from realistic duplication to substitutive deception, but we sense that Curreri has contrived a narrative between the two.

What were Werden and Zontal demonstrating and fifty years later the figures of Curreri and Jacob commemorating? Through his mannequins, Curreri is commemorating an affiliation of queer kinship, but we don't know what Werden and Zontal were doing. Demonstrating trust perhaps? Blindness has something to do with it. With eyes closed, Werden imagines his photograph while perhaps Curreri dreams a lineage of queer artists to which he belongs.

PART II

THE DARKROOM

By transforming it from two to three dimensions, Curreri has altered the status of Werden's image.¹⁰ He has adjusted its ontological character as a proxy of the real, as only an insubstantial index of it, by making it "real" again. *Fort da*. As a photograph corresponds point by point to its subject, so *Self Portrait with Luis Jacob* corresponds to Werden's image. Yet, entropy tells us that there can be no return, at least not without a difference. (Once the sorcerer's apprentice enters the scene to usurp a wizard's skills, there is no going back; indetermination unfolds and cannot be controlled.) The return to the real in Curreri's sculpture, or at least to the three dimensions of it, introduces an anomaly, though one that is not spatial. Let's call it a temporal anamorphosis.

Like the camera obscura, anamorphosis was an academic and artistic pursuit of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its basis was in the study of perspective—however, a perverted one. "Anamorphic perspective destroys [the natural order] by carrying the same principles to its logical extreme," Jurgis Baltušaitis writes. "Instead of reducing forms to their visible limits, [anamorphosis] projects them outside themselves and distorts them so that viewed from a certain point they return to normal."¹¹ The most famous example, of what was sometimes considered only a technical curiosity, is Hans Holbein's 1533 *The Ambassadors* (another double portrait!), with a distorted, elongated skull obliquely embedded, or rather floating, within its foreground.

6 In the editorial to the *Glamour* issue of *FILE*, General Idea advised us, "Don't be blinded by the invisibility of our stance." General Idea, "Glamour," *FILE 3*, no. 1 (Autumn 1975): 19.

7 Dioramas, though room-sized, too, are also considered models. The word "diorama" literally means "through that which is seen," from the Greek *di-* "through" and *orama* "that which is seen, a sight."

8 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), 29.

9 Crary, 29. Sarah Kofman concurs: "The camera obscura functions, not as a specific technical object whose effect is to present, in inverted form, real relationships, but, rather, as an apparatus for occultation, which plunges consciousness into darkness, evil and error, which makes it become dizzy and lose its balance. It is an apparatus which renders real relationships elusive and secret." Sarah Kofman, *Camera Obscura: Of Ideology*, trans. Will Straw (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca University Press, 1998), 14.

10 In matching the poses to the photograph, Curreri has reversed how they would appear in real life. A vitrine is never as it seems when a diorama is involved. Or, rather, it is as it seems. The diorama's generic clumsiness always gives itself away, no matter how sophisticated what transpires within the vitrine, behind the glass.

11 Jurgis Baltušaitis, *Anamorphic Art*, trans. W. J. Strachan (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healy Ltd, 1977), 1. It could be said that by projecting forms outside themselves anamorphosis abjects the image.

12 Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Anthony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 378–379.

13 *No Tears for the Creatures of the Night* (fig. 1) is a 2004 neon and Plexiglas work by Will Munro. The title is based on the name of a 1979 Tuxedomoon song. See Philip Monk and Emelie Chhangur, *Will Munro: History, Glamour, Magic* (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 2013), 51–52.

14 “Anamorphosis renewed contact with the occult and at the same time with theories concerning the nature of doubt.” Baltušaitis, *Anamorphic Art*, 1. “Just as perspective contained within it the disruptive possibilities of anamorphosis, so the veracity of the camera was haunted by its proximity to techniques of conjuration and illusion.” Cray, *Techniques of the Observer*, 33.

15 Baltušaitis, *Anamorphic Art*, 2. “Perspective ceases to be a science of reality and becomes an instrument for producing hallucinations.”



fig. 1 Will Munro, *No Tears for the Creatures of the Night*, 2004

OPPOSITE

fig. 2 *Puppet*, 2008, DETAIL

fig. 3 *Handle*, 2009

fig. 4 *Proud Flesh*, 2011, DETAIL

Addressing Holbein’s vanity and its subversive skull, Jean-François Lyotard writes that “the simple 90-degree distortion on the axis of vision is enough to dissolve representation. . . . To perform this rotation is therefore an ontological act that inverts the relation between visible and invisible and invisible, signifier and represented scene.” How then to show “this other space, other temporality, other light” without returning to the normative, to representation, and to the mechanics of perspective underlying the photographic apparatus? To do otherwise, to focus on the anamorphic deviation instead, would mean that “the scene disperses and the emblem undetected at first sight (which was a vision) begins to speak.”¹² “Speaking” would not necessarily be guided by of the logic of vision, though—that is, the logic of form—but would act within vision to undo it.

If the Plexi-cube of *Self Portrait with Luis Jacob* functioned like a camera to introduce light to a closed environment, as if exposing a negative, Curreri’s *No Tears for the Creatures of the Night* takes that presumed photographic product—the developing print—and exposes it to a brief flash of light in the photographer’s darkroom. (In the dramaturgy of this exhibition, we, too, are exposed to the red light of the darkroom cum nightclub, as overhead red lights supplement the spotlighting of these photographs.) The result is fourteen unique solarized prints and photograms that “document” the Beaver, Toronto’s legendary queer bar founded in 2006 in the West Queen Street West art community, far from the gay village, by Lee’s Palace manager Lynn McNeill and the late artist, DJ, promoter and queer activist Will Munro (1975–2010).¹³ An habitué, Curreri was given access after it permanently closed in 2020, a causality of Covid-19 lockdowns, to photograph the space, left as it was, as if abandoned. The Beaver was a safe place of comingling and entanglement with its dancing and drinking, DJ nights, drag events and house parties. The photographs show the interior of the empty bar with its stacked chairs and tables, the odd empty liquor bottle, untethered disco balls, and peeling, overlapped posters, accidentally archiving queer histories, pasted on the washroom walls. Exposures were not enough to reveal what still inhabited the space, the Beaver’s now gloomy, lifeless interior being permeable to hauntings. It was in the darkroom, rather, that Curreri attempted to capture the spirit of the place, literally the spirits, to trap them in the mesh of photograms, to reveal them in an unexpected flash of light that led to solarization, like so many ectoplasmic spirit emanations.¹⁴ The unconscious of the space seeps into the image through solarization’s staining, revealing an “other space, other temporality, other light.” The exhibition curator Emelie Chhangur calls these “queer punk spirit photos.” The nighttime freedom of the gay bar elides here with the experimentation, or rather conjuration, of the photographer’s darkroom. What Baltušaitis wrote of mirror anamorphoses applies equally to Curreri’s disco balls: “The gleaming mirror itself takes on magic powers by conjuring up phantoms.”¹⁵ So too, the stretchy mesh of fishnet stockings used in a few of the photograms, as if remnant of some drag ball, shows perspective permanently gone awry. There no longer is a privileged point from which these images ever return to normal. In seeking one’s queer inheritance down the path of deviation, homage is equal part dream and haunting.



16 Georges Bataille, “Formless,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 31.

17 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1993), 166–167. Also see Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

18 Annie MacDonell, “Chris Curreri: Something Something,” *C Magazine* 111 (Autumn 2011): 51.

19 MacDonell, “Chris Curreri.”

EXCURSUS I: NORM AND FORM

Curreri’s work has always deviated from the norm. Deviation was its norm. Deviation was a loosening of principles, a dissolving of strictures of form. His work proceeded by sets, divided by genres with like principles of undoing: photography and sculpture. The deviation, or, rather, dissolution of his work was not merely a reaction to form, setting the formless against form in binary opposition. The “formless,” as Georges Bataille famously defined it, is “a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form.”¹⁶ But as Rosalind Krauss warns us, having popularized the term for the contemporary art world, “It is too easy to think of *informe* as the opposite of form. To think of form versus matter. Because this ‘versus’ always performs the duties of form, of creating binaries, of separating the world into neat pairs of oppositions. . . . Instead, let us think of *informe* as what form itself creates, as logic acting logically to act against itself within itself, form producing a heterologic. Let us think it not as the opposite of form but as a possibility working at the heart of form, to erode it from within.”¹⁷ It is no fault of Bataille or Krauss that art critics sometimes treat the notion of formless as an interpretive formula rather than as like thinking, maintaining ideal oppositions instead of disruptive operations. Curreri’s work is no stranger to these interpretations. But perhaps when form is evacuated in Curreri’s work, something else takes place. What is internal to form, structured and constrained by it, is turned inside out—spilling inside out, unbinding matter from what is only apparently rigid, its normative constraint. The skin of the thing is its only restraint. Tugging at a thread lets it all tumble out; let loose from its casing, all is undone. Undone, form is left behind.

It didn’t start that way, though. At first, themes cohered within a unitary image, represented within its bounds, staged there. For instance, in *Puppet*, a set of five chromogenic prints from 2008, a model is posed with a large ceramic vase (fig. 2). Or, rather, the nude model is shaped around the vase in various positions. As Annie MacDonell writes, “The model contorts around the form in poses that seem to be mimicking it, worshipping it, defaming it, cradling it, fucking it.”¹⁸ But the vase is not merely a prop around which a pose is oddly contorted; both figure and vase are equal, both are protagonists of sorts. In a couple of photographs, the vase is even treated as a prosthesis showing a fetishistic intimacy between animate and inanimate. Both fluid figure and stubborn vase are puppets, potential, waiting to be filled.

Of the photographic series *Handle* (2009), with its puppet fingering of various red glass vases (fig. 3), MacDonell, once again, writes, “The vase is partly the inverted twin of the hand itself, but the way the hand grasps it also transforms it into a cartoon phallus or a shiny glass sex toy, one with the double potential to fuck and be fucked. It is both phallus and orifice, and the hand is brandishing it like a weapon and cradling it like a lover all at once.”¹⁹ But what we see in *Handle*, perhaps, is not so much its flaunting of coy ambivalence as a strain in the relationship, a frustration with the inflexibility of the vases to which the man’s hand must conform in an awkward squeeze, so that this manhandling might rather be violation.

Another relationship between figure and form, let us say, was only beginning to be played out here. The vessel is a proposition in this questioning, a model of the human body, perhaps. While probed in *Handle*, it was punished in *Proud Flesh* (2011), where three of Curreri’s collection of glass vases have been separately embedded in concrete blocks (fig. 4), their mouths and red lips

20 Georges Bataille, "Slaughterhouse," in *Encyclopedia Acephalica* (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 32–33. The translation of this 1929 entry, written by Bataille, which first appeared in *Documents*, is by Annette Michelson.

21 Murray Whyte, "Chris Curreri practices his hand-eye coordination," *Toronto Star*, May 2, 2015.

22 Chris Curreri in conversation with the author.



fig. 5 *Sixes and Sevens*, 2017
fig. 6 *Kiss Portfolio*, 2016

only visible while their invisible interiors evoke an Anish Kapoor–like mystery. So massively encased, they are hardly functional. I say punished, even imprisoned, because are vases not bodies, as they are so designated, with mouths and lips, neck, shoulder, belly and foot? Being hidden, the vase's cavity was even more in question—or in need of protection from probing. It was not only a question of what constituted an interior sculpturally or anatomically. Perhaps the interest here was an unhealthy obsession with insides like that of certain serial killers who disembowel their victims. Then again, perhaps the concrete surround only highlights the blowhole, fetishizes the wound of "proud flesh," singularizes the lips by hiding the vase's base.

In subsequent exhibitions, Curreri began to separate sculptural and photographic elements, while maintaining some sort of dialogue between them. Curiously, this was when the notion of the "formless" began to be attached by critics to his work, starting with *Medusa* (2013). *Medusa* is both the name of a 2013–2014 exhibition at Daniel Faria Gallery and a sculpture (fig. 7) within it. The bust so-named has been modelled from life but using a male body. The face has been sliced off, neutralizing the offending visage of Medusa's deadly gaze. With the statue isolated in the middle of the exhibition space, surrounded by a frieze of photographs, *Untitled (Clay Portfolio)*, the installation was much like a temple interior—except Medusa had entry to these sacred precincts only as a sliced-off face on Athena's shield. Don't think that we are protected by this pristine slice. Bataille tells us that "The slaughterhouse is linked to religion in so far as the temple in bygone eras...served two purposes: they were used both for prayer and for killing."²⁰ So we might think, in the photographs surrounding her absent gaze, that we still see her victims strewn in carnal heaps. They are remains, however, not of her stony stare, but only of lowly discards in the futile search for ideal form. They are student failures in throwing pots, the collectively rejected writhing masses ready to be recycled in new endeavors, the photographs (fig. 8) being a by-product of a pottery course Curreri took at Toronto's Gardiner Museum. Clay pots were a more malleable mass than glass vases, deformable while still conveying the meaning of a vessel, whether functional or not. Moreover, throwing pots and printing photographs converged in practice, tended towards one another in principle. Curreri was quoted as saying, "For me, working in a darkroom, there's this idea that an image is malleable until it becomes fixed. Clay works the same way."²¹ Curreri was not a fixer. In fact, *Medusa*, contrarily, was a guardian of the artist's studio, where things remain floating and nameless, where there was a fear, rather, for the violence of fixing.

With its thrown pots and mashed faces, titled *Sixes and Sevens* (figs. 5) and *Kiss Portfolio* (figs. 6) respectively, Curreri's 2017 exhibition at Daniel Faria Gallery, *Unruly Matter* (fig. 9), reverses the physical relationship of *Medusa*: now with pots in the middle of the exhibition space and a portfolio of figurative photographs surrounding them. Had Curreri learned from clay, in the way he couldn't from glass, getting his hands right into it, dirty up to his elbows? Matter was unruly and messy. Certainly, there no longer is an opposition between splendid erection (*Medusa*) and base materiality (*Untitled [Clay Portfolio]*). Figure and ground, so to speak, are acted on by the same forces, and undergo the same decomposition in what seems to be permanent anamorphosis—albeit in one "holes mingle while in the other bodies with no holes merge."²² Beneath our vision, a slow-motion undulation persists. Nothing operates normally here: liquid cannot be stored or poured from the ceramic vessels; mouths cannot ingest or speak; even faces cannot be individuated from these conjoined, squashed, labia-like masses of flesh, where boundaries are erased. These faces lack articulation in more ways than one. If they could speak what would be said? In what language? Perhaps merely gurgling ululation.



fig. 7 *Medusa*, 2013
fig. 8 *Untitled (Clay Portfolio)*, 2013
fig. 9 Installation view of *Unruly Matter* (2017), Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto





fig. 10 *The Ventriloquist*, 2019
 fig. 11 *Christopher*, 2019, DETAIL
 fig. 12 *Insomniac* and *As Is*, 2019

All installation views of
The Ventriloquist (2019),
 Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto

23 “Refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.” Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

24 “Proper” is what is appropriate or decent. Derrida always drew our attention to this word meaning, at least in French, both what is close to oneself as one’s own but also clean.

25 “There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.... I expel *myself*; I spit *myself out*, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which I claim to establish *myself*. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that *they* see that 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 amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom, shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which, without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects.... If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it is none other than abject.” Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1, 3, 5. In its title and content, Curreri’s 2011 exhibition *Beside Myself* might be thought as an early staging of this affect.

26 Curreri claims that he always adds a third element to the mix that the Daniel Faria Gallery exhibition space doesn’t make obvious, for instance, the cave photographs *Virginia* that were part of *Medusa*.

Yet a problem persists. Despite our fascination, when deciphering any deviation, we always want to return it to what is recognizably its normal look and function: an individuated face; an intact pot or vase. To posit something as deviated we need a baseline of normalcy. Indeed, this reversal seems necessary to reestablish our equilibrium and pass onto the next image.²³ However fascinated and revolted, we are never completely frozen in our tracks by an image’s Medusa stare if it remains only an *object* relation that is scopic, not somatic, external, not internal. To be so frozen, we would need to break down barriers, to breach the psychological boundaries of the body proper, to what is *proper* to *ourselves*, to get to the heart of the matter, and maybe its other organs.²⁴ We defend ourselves from any threat of violation and evisceration, except, contrarily, when spilling inside out is our defense—as in *abjection*.²⁵

Curreri’s 2019 exhibition *The Ventriloquist* tread this difficult terrain with its fraught psychological boundaries. Finally, we are stopped in our tracks by images that are hard to bear: the eviscerated guts of slaughtered animals (*Insomniac*, 2019). Our delayed gag reflex follows, a defensive reaction that turns us away. Repelled, we follow another path than Curreri’s earlier oppositional installations to piece together a scenario, now led by three figures as if through a labyrinth.²⁶ After this narrative turn in Curreri’s work, we must set our bearings anew. This figural path is not as secure as that laid out before in the oppositions between photos and pots or between the elevated and debased, for instance, because we are not on the solid ground of metaphysical oppositions but afloat on personal interpretation, indeed, the psychology of the artist, or, at least, the symbols he sets forth—for the figures here are proxies of the artist. First there is a BDSM harness lying on a red event carpet, supine on the floor in front of the abattoir images (fig. 12). It has been oddly modified: extended by chains that terminate in appendages cast, and slightly enlarged, from Curreri’s hands and feet. *As Is*, its title flatly states, as if anyone would want to buy this used device for role playing, tainted as it is by the shame of damaged goods. Before we encounter the next figure, we see Curreri blowing an immense bubble, which is about to burst on his face (the photograph *Bloom*, 2019). It is as if he is expelling his own mucous membrane, extruding his insides. Turning around we then witness *Christopher* facing the wall (fig. 11) as if being punished, or, at least, a life-size puppet of him, its slack body drooping, insides voided, its appendages—head, hands and feet—cast from Curreri’s body, though enlarged ten percent. Pallid grey skin, glass eyes, and hair implants complete its uncanny effect. The puppet is called *Christopher*, though whether this is a nomination, or an admonition spoken by another, we are not sure since another eerie figure, *The Ventriloquist*, sits visible in an adjacent room (fig. 10), head and torso ominously covered with a moving blanket. Curreri’s legs and feet dangle under the blanket. As if in storage, it awaits a role. We can imagine this figure, under its blanket, calling “Chris-to-pher.” In a winking dissemblance, a ventriloquist speaks from elsewhere while at the same time animating a dummy, fingering and fisting it up its backside. A ventriloquist’s voice haunts its dummy, which thereby seems to speak, but what is emitted from its mouth is no more than inspired effluvia. What is Christopher “saying” here?

27 Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 38–39.

28 Kofman, *Camera Obscura*, 14.

29 Unknown artist after Jan Sadeler I and Rapheal Sadeler after Maerten de Vos, *Friardum* (copy after *Sylvae Sacrae Monumenta ... Anachoretarum* 1593–94, no. 17) probably seventeenth century; *Paulus* (copy after *Solitudo Sive Vitae Patrum Ermicolarum* 1585–86, no. 1); *Zoerarde* (copy after *Sylvae Sacrae Monumenta ... Anachoretarum*, 1593–94, no. 24).



fig. 13 *St. Sebastian*, 2015

fig. 14 *Paulus*

fig. 15 *Zoerarde*

EXCURSUS 2: A CAVE, A LABYRINTH, A TOMB

Installed adjacent to Curreri's exhibition, and opening midway through it, *The Dark Room* was a collaboration between Emelie Chhangur, Suzanne van de Meerendonk, curator of Agnes's European collection, and Curreri. *The Dark Room* juxtaposed seventeenth-century hermit prints in the Agnes collection to Curreri's *As Is* and *The Ventriloquist*.

The title panel to the exhibition explained the function of and fascination for these prints, indeed, of their popularity among patrons of a certain class:

Portrayed in simple dwellings and cave-like crevices, inhabiting trees and pondering waters, the main protagonists in this exhibition are hermits based on designs by Flemish artist Marten de Vos (1532–1603). They were created to invite learned male urbanites to imagine themselves ensconced within such remote and secluded places. Mostly representing early Christian saints whose renunciation of bodily comfort served as examples for spiritual emulation, these intricate engravings functioned as aids in the cultivation of an interior capacity for meditative and imaginative retreat.

Without saying exactly so, Jonathan Crary emphasizes how akin the camera obscura was to the sanctuary of a hermit's cave or the cabinets, closets or studiola of later scholars and dilettantes: "First of all, the camera obscura performs an operation of individuation; that is, it necessarily defines an observer as isolated, enclosed, and autonomous within its dark confines. It impels a kind of *akesis*, or withdrawal from the world, in order to regulate and purify one's relation to the manifold contents of the new 'exterior' world."²⁷ Meanwhile, Sarah Kofman writes that the dark room, the camera obscura, "was also, in certain monasteries, the place where monks disciplined themselves, a dark place where sexual prohibitions were transgressed and where everything that was meant to be hidden took place."²⁸ In one case, light obscures the messiness or temptations of the outside world; in the other, darkness allows one to luxuriate or experiment in punishments or pleasures without being seen or judged.

Simply juxtaposing Curreri's work to these hermit prints is enough to pervert them. Or, rather, doing so manifests how perverted the practices they represent already were! Look at the BDSM harness *As Is* in relation to any of the engravings of hermits depicted prostrate on the ground, such as *Friardum* (copy after *Sylvae Sacrae Monumenta ... Anachoretum*), where the abject hermit cradles a log and his rosary. So too Curreri's *Ventriloquist* easily could ensconce himself within Paulus's hermit cave (fig. 14) or the weird, masochistic torture chamber *Zoerarde* (fig. 15) constructed for himself in the base of a hollow tree.²⁹ During a talk, Curreri admitted that he wanted to draw out the latencies of these prints. Then again, what can these prints tell us about the latencies in Curreri's own work?

30 Evan Moffit, "Chris Curreri," *Daniel Faria Gallery 10* (Toronto: Daniel Faria Gallery, 2021), 43. He adds, "Jesus was the best of subs—he surrendered to his Roman tormentors, offering up a transgressive ideal of masculine perfection. In Curreri's practice, bodies are often shown to lose control and exceed their limits, becoming holier—full of holes—and thus more human."

31 One could interpret this exhibition through a series of Caravaggio's paintings, as if they were screen memories. In part one, *Medusa* would reenact the moment of the freezing flash; in part two, *Narcissus* would register the reflective act of printing a positive from a negative; in part three, *The Conversion of Saint Paul* would mimic our reception of the dazzling light.

32 The bodysuit appears to cover the silicone sculpture but is part of it.

33 Submission is part of the masochist's subversive humour. "The element of contempt in the submission of the masochist has often been emphasized: his apparent obedience conceals a criticism and a provocation. He simply attacks the law on another flank. What we call humor—in contradistinction to the upward movement of irony toward a transcendent higher principle—is a downward movement from the law to its consequences." Gilles Deleuze, *Sacher-Masoch: An Interpretation*, trans. Jean McNeil (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), xx.

34 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

35 Kristeva, 8. "The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing," Kristeva, 8. Such deviation is perverse: "The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them," Kristeva, 15. (Compare Deleuze: "The masochist is insolent in his obsequiousness, rebellious in his submission; in short he is a humorist, a logician of consequences, just as the sadist is a logician of principles." Deleuze, *Sacher-Masoch*, 78.) Contrary to the fetishistic cleanliness of the shower room, "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," Kristeva, 4.

PART III

THE LIGHT ROOM

The Dark Room was not so much a detour as a declared affinity. Curreri had been to these rooms before, or at least knew its denizens, subjects, sufferers, penitents and transgressors. He had scrutinized their distressed bodies in abject prostration. Look at the prone bodies of Christ and St. Sebastian (*Corpus* and *St. Sebastian* [fig. 13], both 2015) photographed in curative repose in the Art Gallery of Ontario's conservation lab. Evan Moffit has suggested that for centuries such saintly representations "have provided cover for queer fantasies of male penetration."³⁰ Penitent objects were diverted for purposes of pleasure (*concupiscentia ocularum*) in churches or museums, safe spaces to gaze and imagine; it was expected, this looking on privately while still being exposed in public.

To reverse, all within sight, black to white and public to private, would take a recalcitrant figure, one who at the same time would refuse prying penetration and yet still be visible. After we have tunnelled our way through the dark corridors of *No Tears for the Creatures of the Night*, we meet this cave or closet creature. But at the entrance to its enclosure, we are dazzled by light, knocked on our backs with hands in the air, blinded much like Saint Paul in Caravaggio's painting *The Conversion of Saint Paul* (1601). Very Baroque that! Such an image prepares us for the abasement of *The Thing*, the work that is posed curiously like Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (1597–1599) (fig. 17), which would make Saint Paul its inverted reflection.³¹ That is, if Narcissus and Saint Paul could co-inhabit in the incongruity of this tiled shower room, the pristine white environment of *The Thing* (fig. 18). Or if the Thing, on all fours, could see its own reflection in the gleaming floor, which it cannot, covered as it is fully by a black BDSM bodysuit, every opening shuttered.³²

The Thing and its shiny, white tiled room are in stark contrast; yet the light is so dazzling that the figure-ground boundary is erased. Bedazzled, we struggle for meaning. Yet, the strangeness of this installation seems to refuse any, the figure of the Thing too. The Thing refuses any ascension to light, trading its self-imposed blindness for supposed enlightenment, for anything that transcends its own abasement and downward submission.³³ On our part, the light contrarily ensures opacity not clarity or transparency. Julia Kristeva unwittingly offers an uncanny interpretation: "Deprived of world, therefore, I *fall in a faint*. In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away."³⁴ As tightly bound as it is in its masochistic submission, the Thing here is Kristeva's figure of abjection: it spills out by expelling boundaries. In its own world, the Thing is a borderline artist: "A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the *deject* is, in short, a *stray*."³⁵ Devising territories like the Thing, Curreri deviates us in turn as we follow the artist's fluid paths through the zones of his exhibition. Straying, *The Thing* completes the exhibition but refuses any wrapping up.

36 What Rosalind Krauss writes about Giacometti is pertinent here, especially thinking of a work like Curreri's *As Is*. "But these prone figures led to a further move into the terrain of undifferentiation and Giacometti imagined a sculpture that, instead of using the pedestal or base to lift the body off the surface of the space in which it stood, would be nothing but pedestal or base. It would be pure horizontal field, unlike any sculpture before it. Inassimilable to vision, inassimilable to form, it would inhabit the conceptual terrain of the labyrinth. It would go below the origins of form, below the gestalt." Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 171.

37 Curreri insists that this history is messy, since, as he says, queer spaces are messy states of experimentation, and cannot be cleaned up, which, for instance, is the function of a shower room.

38 When you intuit a scene, you bring along with it a larger complex. Such is the case of Curreri's interest in the Rodney Werden portrait where Werden is portrayed as if blind, or at least with his sight obscured. Curreri's mimicry was not necessarily Werden's intuition, but it aligned uncannily with themes in his own earlier work that *A Surrogate, A Proxy, A Stand-In* brings into focus. Such as: blindness as castration [Samson "is not only a figure of castration, a castration-figure, but, a bit like all the blind, like all one-eyed men or cyclopes, a sort of phallic image, an unveiled sex from head to toe, vaguely obscene and disturbing." Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 106]; Medusa's stare as a flash of light or camera exposure, also as castration and the fixation of fetishism ("A click of the shutter and Man Ray enacts the institution of the fetish: the 'glance' that refuses what it sees and in this resistance turns black into white, or rather, insists that black is white. In the logic of the fetish the paradigm male/female collapses in an adamant refusal to admit distinction, to accept the facts of sexual difference." Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 162, 165); and, curiously, the camera obscura as propagator of the fetish yet defense from blindness and castration ("Fetishism: might the camera obscura, as an instrument of transparency, not be that fetish which serves to deny the darkness of the other chamber and that which it conceals? Might it not be the substitute penis offered to the mother?"; "Is the camera obscura not that blinding which strikes us all so as to save us from an eventual loss of sight, a preventative remedy which allows us to remain serene?"; "The camera obscura is that magical apparatus which serves to placate horror: it functions as an *apotropaion*. Freud reminds us that the proliferation of symbols of the penis signifies castration and the defense against castration." Kofman, *Camera Obscura*, 34, 47, 48.) Perhaps this is the moment to ask about the penis, the one that has disappeared in Werden's photograph and is similarly protected or castrated in Curreri's reproduction.

39 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 12.

THE OTHER SCENE

The installation *The Thing* might be opaque, but it must answer to its (allegorical) position within a narrative that began with *Self Portrait with Luis Jacob*, and before that with *Portrait of Jorge Zontal (with Rodney Werden)*. We learned from Curreri's previous exhibition, *The Ventriloquist*, that if figures carry the narrative, it remains a subterranean one.³⁶ Here, each figure also brings its own environment or frame with it. These sets of figures and frames link together, though not necessarily in a clear narrative progression, sometimes in opposition to each other. In constituting an exhibition, Curreri establishes, he says, an anchor—here *Self Portrait with Luis Jacob*—then later conceives its opposite—here *The Thing*—though the relation between the two is always more intuitive than logical. Light shares in this narrative, with each zone having its own quality: *Self Portrait with Luis Jacob* alternates between light and dark; *No Tears* is dark; *The Thing* is blindingly bright.

Curiously, *The Thing* brings us full circle to a 2008 series of photographs that Curreri made in collaboration with Jacob, when both were relatively young artists, also called *The Thing* (fig. 16), one photograph serving as a model for the 2022 sculpture, also co-authored with Jacob. The trajectory between them is almost that of the Beaver, give or take a couple years. Curreri wants to link this trajectory of queer experience, which mingles art practice with sociality and sexuality, onto an earlier one, having chosen 1974, the year of Werden's self-portrait, not so much as the commencement of a Toronto queer art history that can be chronologically surveyed, but as a positing of a state of being or, rather, as a state of existing together as artists.³⁷ *Portrait of Jorge Zontal (with Rodney Werden)*, thus, is an emblem in this allegory. Its recreation in *Self Portrait with Luis Jacob* is an homage. Jacob and Curreri substitute for Zontal and Werden in the same exchange of power and vulnerability, blindness and trust.³⁸

This history cannot be easily assumed, fractured as it was by AIDS, the before and after of which are still distant for a current generation of queer artists. It is as if the museum vitrine of *Self Portrait with Luis Jacob* sets it off as an unreachable ideal, a past model that can only be mimicked not matched. An homage only. This is no fault of younger artists: AIDS intervened, and changed everything, taking much of an older generation of queer artists with it (Zontal included). Even one's own immediate pre-history must be searched out, conjured even. *No Tears* traces this quest for peers, illusive as it is. *The Thing* embodies the existential dilemma and warns us of a too-easy summation. Identification is difficult for deviant queer strays, yet it is sought after. Separating, situating and straying, the Thing withdraws to the ambiguous, in-between, fluid state of Werden's blindness, perhaps to dream. In Curreri's search for the history of a queer scene, homage and dream elide in memory. "It is such a memory, which, from stopping point to stopping point, remembrance to remembrance, love to love, transfers that object to the refulgent point of the dazzlement in which I stray in order to be."³⁹



fig. 16 *The Thing*, 2008
 fig. 17 Caravaggio, *Narcissus*, 1597-1599
 fig. 18 Installation view of *The Thing* (2022) in the exhibition *A Surrogate, A Proxy, A Stand-In*, Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University, Kingston

