Henry

A Conversation with Josh Faught

On the occasion of his exhibition *Sanctuary* at the Henry, Josh Faught spoke with Henry curatorial assistant Em Chan to discuss his artistic practice and process. In the exhibition, the titular work *Sanctuary* (2017), a large-scale tapestry, is accompanied by more recent hand-woven basket pieces as well as artist-made sweaters. Together these works engage different scales of intimacy, exploring individual and collective safety and identity formation.

This interview has been edited and condensed for length and clarity.

Sanctuary ***was originally commissioned to be on display at Seattle's Saint Mark's Episcopal Cathedral before it entered the Henry Collection. Many references in the piece are rooted in the specific locality and history of Seattle, and are combined with elements that extend and expand beyond that geography. What was your process for developing the work?***

Josh Faught (JF): As a gay Jew from the Midwest, I always describe this piece as my Whoopi Goldberg in *Sister Act* moment. Around 2015, Western Bridge[1] asked me if I could conceive of a project for Saint Mark's. It came right on the heels of the completion of another project I had done for the Neptune Society Columbarium of San Francisco.

When I first arrived at Saint Mark's, I was struck by the collision of various architectural forms in the cathedral – the commanding Gothic structures, the mid-century brick facades, the stained-glass entrance, all compounded by what felt like 1990s-inspired rose tinted windows. There was also the presence of these towering 70-foot columns that I thought of as not only a way to unify the cathedral visually, but also to provide structural and maybe even metaphorical support to the congregation.

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1 Founded in 2004 by Bill and Ruth True, Western Bridge was an art exhibition space and initiative located in Seattle's Duwamish Industrial District.

I started thinking about ways that I could make a correlation between what I experienced at Saint Mark's and the themes I explore in my practice, and began researching the cultural reception of some of my favorite pop records. I did a quick Google search around Belinda Carlisle's 1987 album, *Heaven on Earth*, and I realized that there was a subculture of bloggers that had analyzed the album as this thinly veiled hymnal where a listener could at once find entertainment and spiritual transcendence. Every song can oscillate between otherworldly eroticism and sacred devotion.

I was also in the midst of binge-watching the first season of *Passions*, which is this campy daytime soap opera which articulates a battle between good and evil through the lens of suburban dystopia in a fictitious town called Harmony. It first debuted in 1999, and I fondly remember skipping class in college so I could watch it. I started thinking about the relationship between these two archives of information, *Heaven on Earth* and *Passions*, and the ways that they could form this obtuse narrative that could be brought together using the language of weaving.

The work is composed entirely of hand-dyed, hand-woven gold lamé, cotton, and hemp – materials that somehow feel at once hippie, craft fair, drag queen, and ecclesiastical all at the same time. I employed a number of techniques that speak to a sense of doubling or reversibility. I thought about the ways that most albums have an A-side and a B-side. The A-side is typically all the hits, while the B-side contains all the weird rarities and deep cuts. For me, I wanted to organize the A-side as everything red with blue streaks, and the B-side would be the indigo with red streaks.

I could display this big piece in one tall vertical column in the cathedral. When it came time to redisplay the work, I could bisect the piece in half and hang the two pieces side by side or parallel to each other. As I started working on the piece, I really felt like it needed something to ground the

fiction of the work to something local or real. It was at that time that Anne Fenton[2] and Eric Frederickson[3] and I discovered the archives of Peter Hallock, the founder of Saint Mark's Compline Choir, and the archives of Tim Mayhew, a Seattle gay activist.

The title of this work, *Sanctuary*, actually comes from the name of an early queer club that was founded in a deconsecrated church on Boren Avenue in Seattle. In memorial articles found among the Mayhew archives, past attendees remember The Sanctuary[4] as both a den of sin and a safe haven, sometimes as both. All of these disparate elements – songs, melodrama, political ephemera – they're all juxtaposed on the surface of the cloth.

Your work engages with and incorporates found and archival materials. What is your relationship with the archive, specifically its function when it comes to documenting gay history and activism?

JF: I always describe the process of collecting as like shopping for a dress before you're invited to the prom. Many of the objects and archives are scavenged from Palm Springs thrift stores, queer internet sellers, or things I find in second-hand stores in my weekend pursuits. For me, found objects often exist as immediate antidotes to the otherwise glacial parts of my production.

A lot of my work is produced in a tone that shifts between humor and support, and much of the ephemera in my work attempts to identify and locate gay male culture through outdated and often problematic language. These materials summon, produce, and circulate an articulation of gay

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2 Collections manager for Western Bridge and Bill True
3 Director and Curator for Western Bridge
4 The club was officially named The Monastery, but was often colloquially referred to as The Sanctuary.

culture that has historically centered on the experiences of cis white men with disposable incomes. As a white artist and educator, I'm interested in the ways that we can simultaneously celebrate and reject the archive and question how gay identity does not absolve white male privilege. I think about how we can sift through the waste of cis and white gay male subjectivity and expose these cross-sections of erasure and harm.

Your Center for Experimental Sweaters works are new, and this is the first time you've shown them in a museum setting. How did the project come about? How does it feel to be working within the intimate dimension of the wearable object?

JF: Right after the COVID lockdown, I started knitting sweaters for myself as a hobby. Within that time, I was also diagnosed with a chronic neuromuscular disease that was forcing me to consider making work on a more intimate scale. At first, the Center for Experimental Sweaters began as a side hustle, a way to pay off some escalating medical expenses. I soon realized that the motifs and concerns I had for my sweaters were similar to those that I had in the rest of my work. All the sweaters are sized to fit my own body, and have also become another form of doubling or projecting within my practice.

My early experiments led to a series of editions that highlight the symbolism of flowers that have been used to summon queer people throughout history. I have produced the pansy and lavender sweaters, which are included in the exhibition, and there will be a green carnation sweater and a violet sweater later this year. I like the way that these flowers have been used as both a way to denigrate queer people, and a way to retaliate or resist homophobia or transphobia. I like that there is a bit of that duality. There is something interesting about repeating a motif today versus repeating a motif in, say, the 1990s, when it was very

common for a gay man to be called a pansy in a derogatory context. Now, me repeating that over and over can be seen as a potential tool of reclamation.

The sweater works are all knit on a Brother KH 940 knitting machine, released in 1988, which works by passing a threaded carriage over a bed of latch hooks to produce the desired fabric. By incorporating low-tech circuitry, the machine allows users to store hundreds of designs in its memory. I really love that the knitting machines of the ‘80s and ‘90s produced this generation of vivid graphic knit sweaters that I think of as anthemic apparel that fashioned two decades of political, personal, and corporeal upheaval for queer people. These machines were discontinued by 1997, which is coincidentally the same year that protease inhibitors and combination therapies radically altered the trajectory of the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

I like to think of these sweaters existing within these obscure technologies as ways to challenge the politics of taste by celebrating the gaudy, the misshapen, and the unfashionable. They also bear witness to a generation caught between illness and survival and speak through what I consider to be illegible codes of community signification.

All the patterns on the sweaters are only on the front side. In the world of fast fashion, that’s known as a coffin sweater because you can wear it while you’re lying on your back, I guess, in your coffin. To me, using that strategy is a really interesting way to call forward the way that the death drive and queerness have always been historically linked to each other. There is always this specter of death that looms in the background, which I want to think about and play with in the work.

You've discussed before how you're interested in engaging with tensions between the individual and the collective within processes of identity formation – what is your interest in this process? How do materiality and scale inform this exploration?

JF: I love the ways that textiles can capture the dissonance and resonance of individual and collective expression and identity construction. Textiles are an inherently sensual material; they challenge the hierarchy of senses which privileges sight over touch and make us think about the ways we engage "feeling." To work in textiles is to me, an act of speaking. Given that the history of textiles is so connected to histories of marginalized labor and identities, there's a specificity to the ways in which speaking through textiles correlates to speaking through the construction of identity.

In this regard, textiles complicate our modes of communication: I'm interested in asking how we can say something urgently through the slowest means possible. In this slowed-down space of making, how does the construction of identity occupy a space that could connect seemingly antithetical sentiments, like desire and ambivalence, making and unmaking, calamity and perseverance?

A lot of my work addresses ways that language is fabricated and weaponized within the current political landscape. It feels appropriate to engage with a proliferation of found text and language, such as song lyrics, pamphlets, books, and archival documents, as a means of queer world building, but perhaps also as a way to speak to the precarity of language and the construction of identity at large.

In the Henry exhibition, you can see how I'm also thinking about the ways that you can mirror yourself within a space in different scales. The sweater works are almost an exact

double or second skin to my body, while *Sanctuary* suggests a larger collective echo, creating tension or vibration between the way that you express yourself and the way that a collective speaks for you, or the way that someone outside of that collective sees you.

The pretzel and the candlestick are recurring motifs throughout your practice – they appear in your earlier sweater pieces – and they seem to in part engage with themes of time and memorialization. In your work, how does repetition and the concept of passing time relate to the other central themes of identity, safety, and memory?

JF: I think motifs are fascinating in general. I had an instructor in school that once described the difference between a motif that's repeated versus a motif that's recalled. Rather than a repeat, where you see an exact copy of the same thing over and over again, a recall invokes a phantom – the sense that you've seen something before, but maybe it's just a suggestion or an invocation of a thing.

Candlesticks have often been used as surrogates for vigils in my work, as spaces of mourning or remembrance, even when the subject of that mourning remains in flux. Pretzels are probably one of the most ubiquitous snack foods that I can think of. Unlike meals, snacks are an embodiment of time that exists between other times. Snack time is marginal time, and snacks are a minor means of survival, but also can feel like something to be avoided. There's a way that we indulge in snacking, like it's evil, but it's also completely comforting at the same time.

I'm really interested in the idiosyncratic ways that we fill time, as well as these parallel cultural moments between today and the 1980s and 1990s, when conversations around the body politic overlapped with multiple existential illnesses and shared feelings of paranoia.

How do you engage with the contradictions of safety and sanctuary in your work? These nuances feel especially apparent in* Sanctuary*, which includes references to spaces and practices that are both nurturing and risky, but also resonate through the basket and the sweater pieces, which map vulnerability and concealment across the space of the body.

JF: I think there's something paradoxically subjective about the experience of safety itself. Safety does not feel the same from person to person. If you read the Mayhew archives about the *Sanctuary* club, it was characterized as a den of sin and a safe haven almost in the same breath. A lot of the elements in the work offer means to construct safety, but I think there are other components that are disrupting or threatening to that very safety.

Elements like the evil in the *Passions* soap opera, questionnaires about sexual proclivities in the *Sanctuary* tapestry, and the ashtrays and obituaries in the basket works, cast a kind of threat that complicates traditional notions of safety and visibility. On the one hand, visibility has the ability to produce representation. On the other hand, visibility invokes the risks of exposure, the feeling that someone can know you, consume you, or appropriate you by simply seeing you. Exposure leaves us vulnerable or perhaps gives us the false sense that we're more legible than we want to be in the world.

You mentioned this specter of death, and not wanting to be over-celebratory in ideas of reclaiming histories or identities. Why is it important for you to foreground that tension rather than skewing into a celebratory mode?

JF: [chuckles] It's my Jewish neuroticism, or something like that. There's something that is generationally located in that question, which I find really fascinating. I was really surprised that, starting in 2016 or 2015, I started seeing my

own students respond to threats to their bodies in ways that felt more joyful and indulgent. In a sense, brilliant color or pleasure became like an antidote to threat. I think that history is rhyming in this way, especially for queer people – something that's perceived as harmful or risky is actually the means by which we can find liberation, so sanitizing risk also does harm in this way.

I used to say being gay is like existing in a haunted house… it was scary and fun at the same time. I always want to keep that edge; I always want there to be something that's a little bit menacing about being queer. If queer isn't scary, does it lose its potency?

What does it mean to you to be presenting this work now, and how do you see the reflected histories resonating with discourses surrounding pleasure, safety, and identity today?

JF: *Sanctuary* was initially displayed at Saint Mark's in the early spring of 2017, just as sanctuary cities were emerging throughout the United States in response to horrific executive rhetoric and policymaking around queer people and immigrants. Now that we're eight years later, it's weird to present this work when this rhetoric has come back in an even more violent manner. I don't think this work can be equated with direct action protest. But, if political rhetoric is at its core a desire to communicate, I hope that the structure and language of textiles can teach us to embrace a kind of collective and individual expression that's at once inclusive, fragmentary, experiential, radical, and physical.

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