

A month ago I returned home to a broken refrigerator in my New England studio. I was away for two weeks, and in my absence fruit flies proliferated within the petri dish of their thawed and fermenting buffet, magically appearing from nothing. I never put one in the fridge, definitely not a mating pair, and suddenly hundreds frolicked in the sugary decay. Maybe they were always here with us? Like some bacteria or fungus living on our skin in perfect symbiosis until one day, when the conditions are perfect for ultimate procreation, the fungus awakens and takes over by wrapping our flesh in spongy patches or growing colonies in our intestines.

* * * *

I first visited Matt's studio overlooking the Mascoma River in Lebanon, NH, in January of 2020. We were both recently displaced adjuncts teaching one short semester at the nearby college, and we had become fast friends. Half arranged throughout the studio sat assorted pieces of detritus I recognized from the local co-op grocery store—*that* same type of green-bean bag, *that* expensive eco-detergent bottle you can occasionally get on sale—twisted into a reconstitution, a noble garbage. A queer repurposing, turning and perverting the quotidian. Like a blooming fruit fly colony, I suddenly saw these hidden beings in full light.

A sequence of folded fabric and tarp triangles were suspended between a series of tall bamboo poles: an allusion to a bamboo sex hut at Black's Beach in San Diego that Matt planned to visit in March of 2020. This paradise, glimmering with naked asses, would remain a mirage. Unextracted and unmined in the quarantine refusal of travel, the plans were thwarted like so many things, ideas of ourselves, goals and ambitions, rolling forward head-tucked into a protective pose to stave off a certain decay. We both ended up staying in New England, and the cloth structure folded, a queer sex fort in the California sun, a collection of sand and seaweed, leather and skin, salted and rare, never harvested.

The form I first saw in his studio, the fabric stretching over the bamboo like a skin, has now dissolved to lay bare the essence of its skeletal structure. Only the poles remain. In a scrap of email, Matt said to me, "Artwork made in nostalgia for the Pacific's edge that then decomposed and rotted under COVID quarantine." These boney earthworms collected and attracted the castoffs of a more organic life, their outer layers holding peeled skins of other forms, matter folded and fitted upon themselves—*wasted plastics (Poland Spring Sparkling Water, Xanax Rx, Seventh Generation Dishwasher Gel), bathroom reading materials (local publications for VT green living, queer leather journals brought from LA home), a CD, Tetra Paks for soup stock, etc*—lightning rods magnetizing our junk.

Yet there is an ordinary alchemy in being with our decomposing things: a compression of time creates a sort of talisman to our knowing. The kind of grounded spiritual reveal that comes from, for example, digging out an ancient Roman garbage dump (a midden) and finding scraps of torn pornography detailing sexual positions, olive pits, and wine bottles. This flotsam populates our lives and is cast off into the pits of refuse, not to remain stoic and unchanging on hearths and altars. Pressure builds inside these mounds of decomposition, and like carbon turning into diamonds, we see something transformed, and also still itself.

* * * *

I don't like to kill bugs, and if I was to guess, Matt probably does not either. But, confronted with the reality of a fruit fly storm infiltrating my every corner, in combination with my propensity for leaving sugary fluids on the counter, I found myself needing to attack the swarm with deliberate and concentrated slaughter. I worked through a sadness following these murders by convincing myself that, given their swift procreation and sizeable numbers, perhaps one fruit fly was the same as the other fruit fly, and maybe if one survives, more mushroom than mammal, the collective DNA of the fruit fly colony could also survive. For queers to survive, maybe we just need to repopulate our ideas? This was something Matt and I would discuss as teachers in an environment rural enough that queerness could be seen as a type of suspicious virus. Teaching *a twisting of our senses to engage with a new type of perception*—? We would try to infect our students, through such formal repurposings. Putting the garbage on the plinth.

And then there is the perceptual bend of finally panning out, the act of traversing the land and giving a vector to what had been a hibernation, a perpetual snow in New England over eight months. Matt and his boyfriend Nolan, after months of lockdown, finally drive back to their home in Los Angeles in the two weeks before the election. Matt kisses the land in consistent intervals, Maybelline lipstick, a different color for each day of the performance—today is "Fuchsia For Me"—a photograph. I want to talk about a plastic bag here, and I know, with small embarrassment, I will start to think about that scene in *American Beauty* when the repressed son and video artist shows the beauty in the bag floating on the suburban wind, framed against the black asphalt. A sort of polyethylene body dancing on the edges of the American mundane. Matt's face, clear and closely framed against the changing backdrop, as American as a concept, a bounded land, comes in and out of view. Are we on the brink of civil war? What are the smells of all of these places?

Matt and I talked as he drove to Ogunquit, ME, the eastern terminal of the artwork, about the problem of photographing performance works—setting up the camera, getting the angle right, the accoutrements of a staging—when all we want to focus on is the experience of the kiss. How is it possible to get beyond the odious task of documentation and settle at a place where the work can be immediate and visceral? Meantime, the next day he and Nolan are leaving the Atlantic Seaboard to begin their trip west. Driving through Maine's York County, he reports the battleground for political signs: *Black Lives Matter*, *DRAIN THE SWAMP*, *Dump Trump*, *Keep America Great!*, or *Goodbye Susan*. Clear squares against the haze.

A few days later and a world apart, in the middle of a pandemic, Matt gets out of his car and kisses the dirty ground, snaps a picture. He and Nolan continue to crawl across the country, stopping every 100 miles to lick the dirt, like the poles or worms, inching from the East Coast to the West and collecting waste, a camera through a sewage pipe. A skeleton of what this country may be, and through a twist and twirl down the tubes, there is something raw and honest in these actions. Something that is always around us all, like a vibrating plume of fruit flies attracted to our sugary rot.

Jules Gimbrone is an artist and composer living in New York City.