

SOFT PROCLIVITIES

by

Elijah Ruhala

Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2021, Maryland Institute College of Art

An MFA Thesis Statement

Submitted to the Faculty of

College of Fine Arts

Texas Christian University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts



May

2025

APPROVAL

SOFT PROCLIVITIES

by

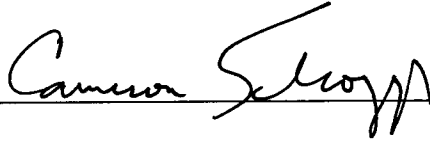
Elijah Ruhala

Thesis approved:



ADAM FUNG

Major Professor



Cameron Scheopp



Dan Jian

Copyright by

Elijah Ruhala

2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to family and friends that believed in me and supported me through this journey. Adam Fung, Cam Schoepp, and Dan Jian, your guidance over the past three years has been invaluable. Thank you, Austin Lewis, Mckee Frazier, and Raul Rodriguez, for being so supportive during these three years. Also, to all of my peers whose challenges to my thinking pushed me to grow, I am grateful.

And finally, a special thanks to Aaron Parazette for starting this investigation by explaining to me, "the paint heals the wall." Those words sparked something in me that led to this thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	ii
List of Figures.....	iii
List of Tables.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Layout.....	3
Queer Figuration and Disidentification.....	8
Materiality and Gendered Constructs.....	10
Layout.....	13
Conclusion.....	17
Bibliography.....	19
VITA	
ABSTRACT	

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Installation view of *Clipping*, viewed from front

Figure 2 Detail of *Laying*, viewed from back

Figure 3 Installation view of *Swimming*, viewed from front

Figure 4 Installation view of *Swimming*, viewed from front

Figure 5 Installation view of *Washing*, viewed from front

Figure 6 *Playing*, viewed from front

Figure 7 Detail of *Spreading*, viewed from front

Figure 8 Detail of *Screwing*, viewed from front

Figure 9 Detail of *Spreading*, viewed from back

Figure 10 Installation view of *Pulling*, viewed from front

Figure 11 Installation view of *Laying*, viewed from front

Figure 12 Detail of *Pulling*, viewed from front

Introduction

A proclivity is often seen as an unwanted tendency, something innate and difficult to change. But in *Soft Proclivities*, I treat these facets of identity as soft and shapable. This body of work explores the intersections of materiality, memory, and immediacy through paintings constructed on drywall and wooden studs. Detached from the gallery walls and made freestanding, the pieces become architectural forms the viewer must navigate.

Figures drawn from memory emerge through joint compound and universal tints. Bedding, carving, and patching into drywall leave physical traces, embedding time and touch into the surface. These figures are mutable and ambiguous, emotionally charged, yet resistant to specificity. Their androgyny reframes gender and sexuality as shifting, performed states rather than fixed identities. My practice centers on identity and relationships, and how they transform over time. In this work, I seek to express queer experience without relying on explicit representation. Ambiguity becomes a space for projection, mirroring how gender operates: fragmented, contextual, and in flux.

Using labor-intensive materials connects the body of the artist to the body of the work. Construction terms like “bedding” and “screwing” reveal parallels between acts of building and acts of intimacy. Materials such as joint compound, drywall, and wood become metaphors for the emotional and physical weight of queer relationships. Drawing is both additive and subtractive, each surface recording gestures—cuts, seams, and patches, that blur boundaries and suggest fluidity.

The figures act as placeholders for experience rather than representations of individuals, allowing viewers to engage on their own terms. Rooted in domestic and hypermasculine materials, the work questions how space holds presence. A palette of native tones, hand-selected lumber, and nontraditional paint application with a mud knife ground the work in process and transformation. These forms remain suspended in becoming, shaped by gesture, material, and the moment. The decisions culminate in an immersive labyrinth, where each wall speaks to a unique personal history.

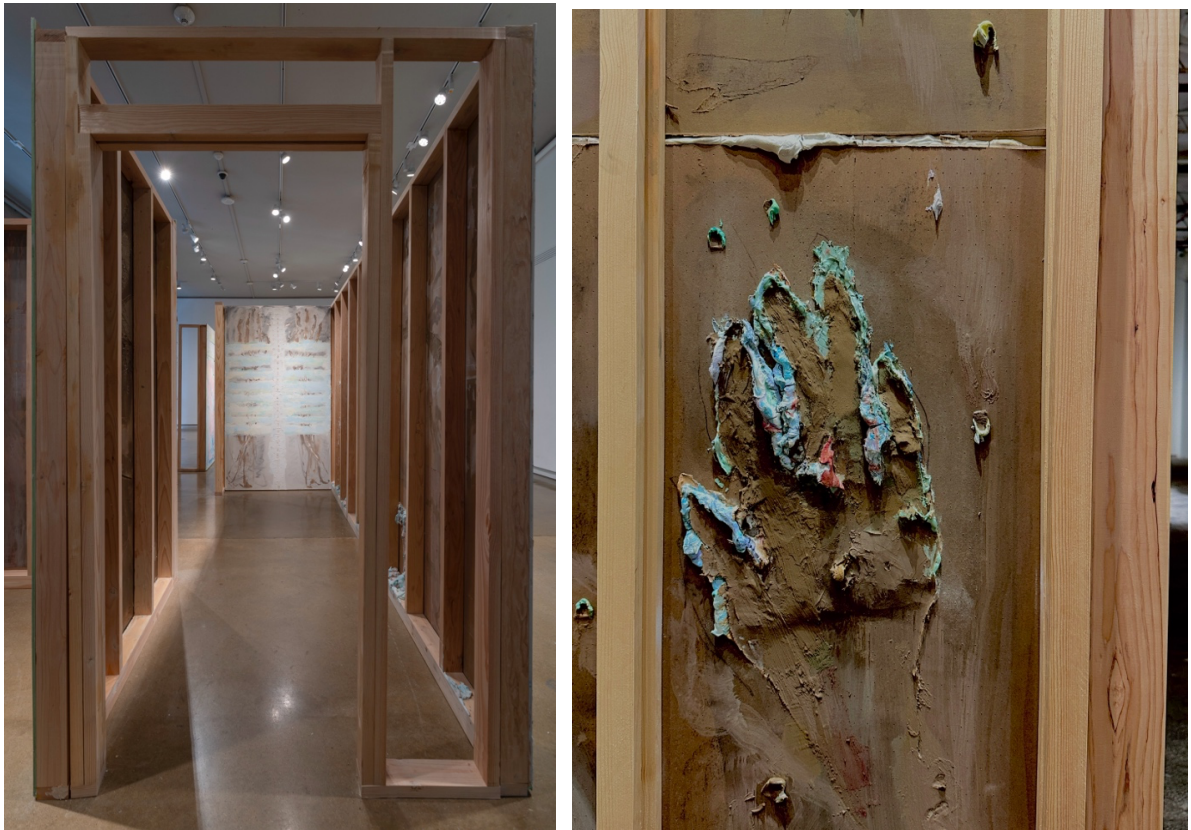


Figure 1 Installation view Clipping, viewed from front

Figure 2 Detail of Laying, viewed from back

Layout

Upon entering the gallery space, the viewer is immediately greeted by a triptych of swimmers, whose forms are disjointed yet somehow connected. The panels, each measuring seven feet tall by four feet wide, present three swimmers in various states of movement. The first swimmer, painted in oil, is framed in a moment of calm yet rigid progression, swimming left. The second swimmer, painted in water-soluble colors, appears to be in turmoil, splashing violently, perhaps in pleasure, perhaps in distress. A cut hole where the swimmer's mouth should be adds a layer of ambiguity, suggesting both the violent rupture of the body and the breath of life or death. The third swimmer, painted in joint compound, swims out of the frame entirely, never acknowledging the other figures.



Figure 3 Installation view of Swimming, viewed from front

This fragmented portrayal of the body, in various states of movement, introduces a fundamental theme of the exhibition: the body as a site of resistance, both to external forces and to the expectations placed upon it. The use of oil, water-soluble colors, and joint compound highlights the fluidity of identity and the different ways we inhabit our bodies in the world. Each material choice mirrors the swimmer's state of being, capturing both the physical and psychological states that we experience in intimate moments.

In the same gallery space, there is a stud wall with a door frame design, a recurring architectural motif throughout the show. The back of a piece of drywall has been sanded and painted, revealing a window-like shape that suggests an intimate space, a scene of two figures seemingly playing or interacting. The reference to construction and architecture here is not just structural but symbolic: the door frame becomes a threshold, marking the boundary between different states of being, between intimacy and isolation.

As the viewer continues through the space, they encounter a path divided by walls, offering three distinct directions—much like the swimmers, who each follow different courses. The layout of the gallery itself becomes part of the narrative, allowing the viewer to choose their path and thus engage with the work in a manner that is both subjective and personal. The figures are not static; they are embedded in the walls, moving within their confines yet striving toward something beyond.

In this section of the gallery, we encounter a niche containing three scenes that expand on the ideas of fragmentation and relationality introduced by the swimmers. On the right side of the niche is a figure that blends into the drywall, its form flat and almost iridescent due to the reflective nature of the joint compound. This figure is partially eclipsed

by a larger figure behind it, creating a sense of layering, of bodies interwoven and coexisting. The punctured area, dripping with joint compound, serves as a reminder of the body's vulnerability and its constant interaction with the world around it. The dripping joint compound, in its slow descent, evokes the passage of time and the erosion of the self, much like the figures in the triptych.



Figure 4 Installation view of Incorporating, viewed from front

The middle scene of the niche features a damaged diptych that seems to hold itself together through the use of joint compound. The damage, caused by hands and fingers, recalls the act of both creation and destruction, of repairing what has been broken while simultaneously acknowledging the imperfect, unfinished nature of the work. The diptych's fractured structure mirrors the fractured identity of the figures it portrays, suggesting that the

act of self-repair is not linear or clean but rather messy and disjointed, much like the material itself.

On the left of the niche, the diptych of two swimmers introduces a new layer of ambiguity. While the figures appear to be in the same body of water, the architectural elements that separate them create a tension between them, blurring the lines between interior and exterior, land and water. The swimmers are embedded into the wall, not merely represented but physically entangled within the surface. Their bodies are not just depicted but integrated into the material, suggesting that identity is both a construct and a site of intense physicality, malleable, embedded, and always in flux. The interaction between water and body in my work reflects the tension between stability and transformation. Water, in its many forms, erases distinctions, making its way between, through, and around bodies and materials.

The figures within my pieces are constantly in a state of flux, resisting definition, and embodying the transitory nature of gender and identity. Water, as a medium of fluidity and change, exemplifies the constant negotiation between containment and release, between the body as a fixed entity and the body as an ongoing, transformative process.

Two added walls form a corner creating a small, intimate nook. On the outside of this corner hangs *Pulling*, a painting that recalls Willem de Kooning's women. Knife pulls and heavy gestures obscure the figure into abstraction—hands, feet, and faces appear roughly in expected places. What's disorienting is the crowding of multiple figures on a single plane. Two hands reach toward the center, where waves of drywall mud crash through the

composition. It's unclear whether a single body is being torn apart or if two are splitting—one with long hair, the other short.



Figure 5 Installation view of Washing, viewed from front

Inside the nook, an oil painting on a sealed drywall panel faces the back of Pulling. Its reverse is ominous: a towering figure looms from above, seen only from the waist up. Two ascending lines form a V, positioning the viewer as if looking up from below.

The oil painting evokes Pierre Bonnard, luminous, transparent color and layered gesture, but the architecture of the shower remains ambiguous. I use semi-transparent mediums to allow marks to interact with those beneath them, preserving the painting's memory. Steam obscures the portraits, inviting viewers to see anybody, or nobody, inside. I came to oil paint because I never felt 'man enough' for the jobsite, or for the assertiveness of the art store.

As the viewer moves deeper into the gallery, they encounter a quadriptych, large blue paintings that depict figures locked in a violent yet tender clash. The figures are engaged in a physical struggle, but the absence of a clear ball or object around which they are fighting speaks to a more intimate, less defined conflict. The use of joint compound tinted blue, extruded through holes in the wall, serves to break the barrier between the surface and the space behind it. This dripping material suggests the fluidity of bodily fluids and the act of vulnerability, creating an immediate connection between the figures and the materials that compose them.

In this scene, the clash between the figures can be read as a metaphor for the complexities of queer relationships, where desire, intimacy, and power dynamics are not easily categorized. The rainbow that stretches across the panels, subtle yet ever-present, serves as a nod to queer culture, both as a symbol of diversity and a reference to the fluid, mutable nature of queer identity. The figures' struggle, then, becomes an allegory for the ways in which queer individuals must navigate societal structures, fighting against them while also shaping their own forms of resistance and belonging. Another reading of this piece invites the viewer to consider nuances in the dynamics across different queer relationships. Each figure having an action and reaction with no fixed identity allows for these experiences to become more accessible.



Figure 6 Playing, viewed from front

Across from this quadriptych is a diptych that further explores the theme of vulnerability. Two figures, reclining with their faces pointed away from the viewer, interlink pinkies, suggesting both connection and separation. The ambiguous space in which they lie, whether water or land, is less important than the sense of emotional and physical intimacy that it evokes. These figures, with their faces turned away, seem to embody the quiet, private moments that queer individuals often share in the face of a society that demands they conform. There is an absence of clear sexual or gendered markers here, reinforcing the idea that queer intimacy does not rely on rigid definitions but on a more fluid, experiential understanding of connection. This fluidity extends beyond the figures and into the architecture of the exhibition itself, how the viewer moves, pauses, and negotiates presence through material thresholds.

Materials and context

In this space, the intimacy of construction materials confronts their assumed neutrality. One can be extremely proficient and not care at the same time, revealing how mastery alone does not ensure meaning or connection. Building materials are deeply entangled with the machismo of job sites, where physicality and roughness dominate. My point of departure for this body of work lies in the tension between these rough, utilitarian materials and the tender, vulnerable forms of human bodies. Just like how one can break a nail clumsily, carrying drywall requires a significant amount of care to preserve its corners, surface, and integrity. This juxtaposition mirrors the performative nature of gender, not as something fixed, but as something enacted through labor, movement, and interaction. Gender, like the act of building, is something one does rather than something one inherent¹.

In my experience, building processes are inherently sensual, loaded with verbs such as penetrating, bonding, filling, sanding, and layering—terms that readily bridge the domains of construction and intimacy. I relate this overlap through a shared purpose: creation, transformation, and the unification of disparate parts into a cohesive whole. In this way, construction materials serve as a metaphor for physical and emotional experiences, particularly those tied to the relational dynamics of queer intimacy.

¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).



Figure 7 Detail of Screwing, viewed from front

Referencing Mark Bradford's framework in *Painting After All*², I consider how his use of paper, a material both ordinary and layered with social meaning, creates a dialogue between personal history and broader cultural narratives. Bradford's layering, sanding, and erasure transform endpapers found across Southern California neighborhoods into a medium that disrupts and redefines the hierarchy and context of painting. Since painting through a western bias favors mediums like oil on canvas, my approach using drywall and wood recontextualizes their function within domestic and labor-driven spaces and challenges

² Mark Bradford and Huey Copeland, "Painting After All: A Conversation with Mark Bradford," *Callaloo* 37, no. 4 (2014): 814–826.

traditional mediums. Materials are not passive; they are active participants in storytelling, embodying histories of labor, memory, and identity.

In my work, drywall, gypsum, and lumber become more than building blocks; they are imbued with human actions, emotions, and relationships. My actions in the studio, such as sanding drywall or planing a 2x4, come from construction, but in my practice, have become something more personal and poetic. These aren't just tasks; they've become a kind of language that helps me explore memory, identity, and material. Through this, I've developed a deep appreciation for the qualities in the building materials I use.

Instead of smoothing everything out, I work by adding and removing material, allowing a push and pull to emerge. This way, the surface shows both change and the trace of my hand, revealing the material's ability to hold and endure physical transformation.

This formal language evolves further through the physical assembly of panels, which lean and intersect in ways that challenge traditional modularity. Cuts in the drywall disrupt the illusion of a flat picture plane. These disruptions emphasize the openness of both the material and the narrative, inviting viewers to reflect on their own relationships to space, body, and construction.

Through this material framework, my thesis work points outward, much like Bradford's does, extending beyond the immediate physicality of the objects to engage with larger questions of transformation and identity. My work not only deconstructs the materials of construction but also reveals the layered dynamics of creation, intimacy, and labor that underpin both building and being. Identity is negotiated through materials, process, formal choices, and subject matter—but also through lived experience. My practice, then, does not

exist in a vacuum. It emerges from, and is in dialogue with, the broader trajectory of queer figuration. To understand the stakes of this lineage is also to recognize the tensions it currently faces.

Queer Figuration and Disidentification

Contemporary queer figurative painting has reached a critical juncture where its radical potential is being called into question. Critics³ have noted how the genre, once at the margins, has increasingly been absorbed into institutional and commercial frameworks, risking a loss of its subversive charge. What was once a site of resistance, bodies depicted in flux, destabilized gender performances, and acts of visibility that challenged heteronormative structures, can, in some cases, be repackaged into digestible, market-friendly aesthetics. However, rather than viewing this assimilation as a totalizing erasure of queer radicality, I frame it through the lens of José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification⁴, which suggests that minoritarian subjects engage with dominant culture not by outright rejecting or fully assimilating into it, but by subtly warping it from within. In this sense, my practice does not abandon queer figuration but instead works against its domestication by pushing the material and conceptual boundaries of painting itself.

My use of drywall and building materials as surfaces for painting is a deliberate response to this tension. These materials hold deep familial and personal significance, I come from a background where drywall, as a substance of labor and construction, is intimately

³ Barry Schwabsky, "Beyond Zombie Figuration," *The Nation*, December 19, 2022,

⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

familiar. Yet, within cultural and gendered frameworks, I am othered from it due to my queerness. The construction industry is historically coded as hyper-masculine, reinforcing rigid gender roles that exclude or diminish queerness. By repurposing drywall as a site for queer figuration, I engage a dis-identificatory act: I neither reject my personal history with these materials nor conform to their traditional cultural meanings, but instead, I manipulate them to serve a new, queer narrative.



Figure 8 Detail of Spreading, viewed from front

Figure 9 Detail of Spreading, viewed from back

The fragility of drywall, its potential to crumble, crack, and expose its underlying structure—mirrors the instability of identity and the precarity of queer bodies within heteronormative spaces. Unlike the traditional canvas, which provides an illusion of

permanence and containment, drywall is inherently impermanent, structurally weak, and meant to be hidden beneath the surface of finished spaces. By choosing to paint on it, I amplify its material vulnerability and insist on its visibility. This choice resists the sleekness and commercial appeal that queer figurative painting has increasingly adopted in institutional settings. Instead, it asserts that queerness exists in tension with the structures that seek to both accommodate and contain it.

Just as my material choices challenge the institutional domestication of queer figuration, my approach to the body in my work engages with queerness as an unstable, contested space—one that is continually negotiated rather than fixed. The queer body, like architecture, is shaped by external pressures, expectations, and limitations, yet it also has the capacity to resist, expand, and redefine itself through gesture, movement, and material transformation.

Muñoz's theory of disidentification is crucial in understanding how my practice engages with both body and material. Rather than fully assimilating into dominant narratives of queer visibility, or outright rejecting traditional materials of labor and construction, I work from within these systems, repurposing drywall, a material of structural stability and concealment, as a surface that foregrounds instability, visibility, and rupture. Queer bodies exist in spaces that were not built for them, much like drywall functions as an unseen framework, necessary but unacknowledged within larger architectural systems. By making drywall the site of queer figuration, I force a confrontation between queerness and the conservative traditions that attempt to erase or obscure it. This material choice is not only spatially charged, but also deeply tied to questions of identity and embodiment.

Materiality and Gendered Constructs

As I build the conceptual framework around the imagery and decisions, I also turn to Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which suggests that gender is not something inherent, but rather a set of behaviors and actions that we perform repeatedly. Butler's work, particularly in *Gender Trouble* (1990), posits that gender is not a fixed identity but an ongoing act, shaped by the social, cultural, and material forces surrounding us. This idea challenges the notion of gender as a biological or essential trait and instead places emphasis on how it is enacted and performed within specific contexts.

In my work, this performative aspect of gender is mirrored in the way I engage with materials. Just as gender is not a stable, pre-existing identity but something that is continually reconstituted through language and action, the materials I use in my art (drywall, joint compound, oil paint, etc.) are also unstable, shifting, and open to reinterpretation. Through the layering of materials and the manipulation of the space between the figures and the wall, I aim to deconstruct the roles these materials—and by extension, the gendered subjects they represent, are forced to play in a conventional context.

By engaging with the materials in an intimate, performative way, I challenge the boundaries between the self and the material world, reflecting Butler's assertion that "gender is what is inscribed in the body" (Butler, 1990). This inscription, however, is not static but fluctuates, much like the marks I make with joint compound, paint, and other materials. These marks don't simply represent a fixed identity but embody the ongoing process of becoming, in which identity is continually remade through the acts of marking, forming, and erasing.



Figure 10 Installation view of *Pulling*, viewed from front

Butler's understanding of gender as performative becomes crucial when applied to the concept of materiality in my work. In each piece, materials like drywall and joint compound, typically associated with construction, masculinity, and labor, are repurposed to challenge these associations. By engaging with drywall in ways that subvert its conventional use—sanding it, painting it, and embedding it with figures and gestures that embody queer identities—I position these materials not as passive backdrops but as active participants in the performative creation of identity. As Butler writes, "the body is a medium through which cultural norms are enacted, re-enacted, and sometimes resisted" (Butler, 1990)⁵. In my

5 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

artwork, the body is not merely a subject of these materials but is embodied within them, constructed and deconstructed through their interaction.

This concept of gender as an ongoing, dynamic performance extends to the figurative works in the exhibition, where the figures themselves are in states of flux. They are neither static representations nor fixed identities, but figures in motion, between the walls, the materials, and the space they inhabit. Just as gender cannot be understood as a single, fixed category, neither can the figures in my work be understood as singular, isolated identities. They are always in the process of becoming, shaped by both the materials that construct them and the viewer who engages with them.



Figure 11 Installation view of Laying, viewed from front

Through this approach, I seek to reinject queer figuration with a sense of friction and resistance, to ensure that it does not merely exist within dominant institutions but continues to challenge, disrupt, and infiltrate them in ways that refuse easy consumption. Rather than resigning to the critique that queer painting has lost its edge, I explore how its radicality can persist through material interventions that resist assimilation while embedding themselves within existing structures. Muñoz's disidentification and Butler's gender as performance both offer pathways for thinking through how queerness can persist as a force of rupture by unsettling the status quo.

Conclusion: Building Intimacy

Informed by these frameworks, the exhibition becomes a site where queerness materializes not only in form but in relation, disrupting fixed meanings and inviting new modes of intimacy. The architecture of the installation becomes an active participant in shaping memory, emotion, and form—each surface carrying the residue of labor, touch, and gesture. Throughout the exhibition, the figures depicted on drywall and stud walls engage in a complex dialogue with both the materials that compose them and the spaces in which they reside. The act of constructing and deconstructing the body, whether using paint, joint compound, or the structural elements of the wall, mirrors the experiences of queer individuals who must navigate both their internal sense of self and the external pressures placed upon them by society.

Each material choice, the soft, vulnerable joint compound, the hard, structural drywall, the fluidity of oil paint, becomes a metaphor for the ways in which queer bodies are shaped by both the world and their own desires. The exhibition itself, with its complex layout

and shifting perspectives, challenges the viewer to consider the ways in which queerness is embodied, performed, and constructed in a world that often seeks to define and control it.

In the end, the works in this exhibition do not offer a singular narrative but rather a series of fragmented, intimate moments that suggest the complexity and fluidity of queer identity. The materials, the figures, and the space itself all contribute to a larger conversation about the body, vulnerability, and the search for belonging. In this way, the exhibition becomes a celebration of the queerness of materials and bodies—both as they are, and as they might be reimagined.



Figure 12 Detail of Pulling, viewed from front

Bibliography

Bradford, Mark, and Huey Copeland. "Painting After All: A Conversation with Mark Bradford." *Callaloo* 37, no. 4, 2014.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Schwabsky, Barry. "Beyond Zombie Figuration." *The Nation*, December 19, 2022.

VITA

Elijah Ruhala, was born in Dallas, Texas in 2000. He graduated *summa cum laude* in 2021 with a BFA in Painting from the Maryland Institute College of Art. In 2025, he earned his Master of Fine Arts from Texas Christian University, where he was awarded a fellowship and served as a gallery technician, teaching assistant, and instructor of record for Drawing I. He exhibits with nonprofit community art centers such as The Center for Contemporary Art in Abilene, Art League Houston, and Arts Fort Worth to foster engagement with diverse local communities. Ruhala's thesis work was also featured in *Open University*, curated by Matthew Higgs at the Dallas Contemporary.

ABSTRACT

SOFT PROCLIVITIES

by

Elijah Ruhala

Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2021, Maryland Institute College of Art

Adam Fung, Associate Professor of Art--Painting

My Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, *Soft Proclivities*, examines how spatial interventions challenge traditional modes of representation. By situating the queer body within immersive environments, the work disrupts rigid narratives of identity and visibility. Drawing from historical and contemporary practices, the research investigates how materiality, scale, and site-responsive strategies contribute to an expanded queer aesthetic. The inquiry also considers societal expectations of masculinity, using construction-based methodologies to explore themes of labor, structure, and embodiment. Through a synthesis of painting and installation, this project proposes a new framework for understanding queer figuration—one that moves beyond the canvas into lived, participatory space.