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Bold, brawny, beautiful



the space in which we have dissolved
Brendan Hendry, Jessy Kitchen, and Eli Nolet
Curated by Alexis Moline

This catalogue is published on the occasion of the group exhibition, *the space in which we have dissolved*, on view from August 28 to November 20, 2021 in Hamilton Artists Inc.'s James Gallery.

Brendan Hendry is a born and raised Hamilton-based artist/musician. His collage work blends fragmented, hyper coloured, 70's/80's gay porn, together with personal stories and places. Main sources of inspiration throughout his projects range from themes of identity, sex and body politics, self destruction, to nostalgia, and barren landscapes.

Jessy Kitchen is an interdisciplinary artist currently working on her Master's degree at York University. Kitchen's research explores the emotional and material intersections of grief, identity, and objects as intertwined with art and working-class labour. Through research-creation she seeks to address the complexity of relationships between identity, objects, and loss. Exploring how visible and invisible aspects of identity are constructed and deconstructed through objects and location, in particular the home.

Eli Nolet is an interdisciplinary artist from the occupied territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Mississaugas (otherwise known as Hamilton, Ontario). Currently in their third year of studies at McMaster University towards a B.F.A. in Studio Art, Nolet's artistic practice explores identity and selfhood through performative activations of static image and text work.

Alexis Moline is an independent curator, arts professional, and community services coordinator who has worked in Vancouver, Toronto, and Hamilton. She received her Master of Museum Studies in collaboration with Sexual Diversity Studies from the University of Toronto. She was recently the Curator for the Building Cultural Legacies project at the Hamilton Arts Council.



Eli Nolet, *PUBLIC GESTURE*, 2021. Digital prints on pink copy paper. Installation view.

the space in which we have dissolved: disidentification in the steel city
Alexis Moline

You like the changes, but also feel them as a sort of compromise, a wager for visibility, as in your drawing of a ghost who proclaims, *Without this sheet, I would be invisible.* (Visibility makes possible, but it also disciplines: disciplines gender, disciplines genre.)

— Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

the space in which we have dissolved explores how place influences the visibility of identity in works by emerging Hamilton-born artists Brendan Hendry, Jessy Kitchen, and Eli Nolet. Historically, Hamilton can be viewed as a microcosm of Canada’s rigid and ongoing colonial project of “civilizing” and disciplining personhood. In 1959, Mayor Lloyd Jackson expressed opposition to the progressive ideas found in experimental art directly when the city backed out of a government-sponsored art show: “The people of this city have made it abundantly clear that they

want no part of this modern art... We can't let the arty crowd run things."¹ Instead, Hamilton marketed its identity as working class, masculine, and cisheterosexual, celebrating conservatism in politics, culture, and personal life. These dominant ideals and strict categories of experience were passed on through the generations, inherited by Hendry, Kitchen, and Nolet today. The lived realities of the artists bely these constructed narratives. Their work depicts other ways of being.

Growing up with the pressures of an overdetermined identity, the artists experienced a sense of dissociation with their hometown, and thus with the stabilizing force of identity itself. The stark, concrete colours of Kitchen's sculptural gestures are juxtaposed with the neon vibrancy of Hendry's collages and Nolet's fragmentary texts to display tenuous, vexed relationships between the multiplicity of identities that inhabit a body. The result renders visible the tensions that each artist has experienced living in Hamilton. Place, family, and societal expectations become amalgamated and distorted for each artist in unique ways. The supposedly stabilizing pillars of identity, family, and place heighten a sense of disconnection and isolation when an individual feels no identification with ideals they represent. As a result of this dissolution, the body becomes a more tangible, visible space where identity can be made one's own. Through creative expressions of gender and sexuality, Hendry, Kitchen, and Nolet explore how visibility can both liberate and discipline identity.

Hendry's *No Man's Land* (2020) collage series explores technicolour dreamscapes against a landscape devoid of queer representation. Growing up in Hamilton

1 Stuart MacCuaig, *Women's Art Association of Hamilton: The First 100 Years* (Hamilton: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1996), 66.



From left to right: Jessy Kitchen, *While bodies become whole calluses*, 2019-2021. Steel, concrete, chain, and inkjet prints; Brendan Hendry and Jessy Kitchen, *The ol' ball and chain*, 2021. Disco ball, chain, and cast concrete with the text 'STELCO STEEL MADE BY MY DAD.' Installation view.



From left to right: Brendan Hendry and Jessy Kitchen, *The ol' ball and chain*, 2021; Brendan Hendry, *No Man's Land* series, 2020. Collage. Installation view.

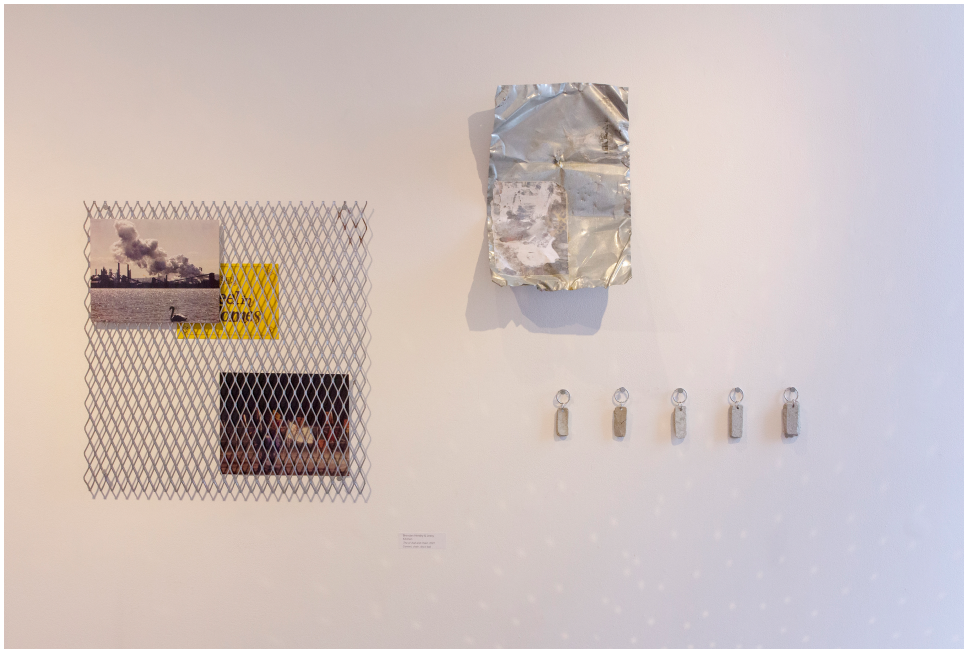
suburbia, Hendry felt no connection to queer communities because he did not see them in his surroundings. Turning to the only resource he had, Hendry used the internet to make visible his internal feelings as an isolated queer kid. Online, he became exposed to a hyper-sexualized vision of what it means to be gay. These experiences inform his work, aiming to capture the essence of how he viewed the world in youth. Gay porn from the 70s and 80s superimposed with familiar images from Hamilton culture becomes a fantastical vision of growing up queer in this place. Hendry creates the world he did not live in, imagining secret places with vibrant bodies that toe the line between surreal and real.

Kitchen's *while bodies become whole callouses* (2021) explores the rigidity of Hamilton's roots by looking inside the steel plant. As the daughter of a Stelco worker, she draws parallels between the body of a steel worker and her own body as a child, considering both as byproducts of the industry. Through Kitchen's eye, the masculine figure of the labourer becomes intertwined with the machinery he manipulates, hardening into a narrow identity with little room for deviation. Contrasting images taken by a Stelco worker inside the factory with images made public by the company, Kitchen reveals hidden aspects in the life of the archetypal steel worker with the tenderness of a family member.

Nolet's *Public Gesture* (2021) deploys handwritten messages and images digitally printed onto vibrant pink paper. These posters appear in various stages of disintegration, some leaving ghostly pink stains where others present full, confident clarity. Nolet depicts the queer child as a ghost, their desires and identity in various stages of invisibility to themselves as well as the world around them. A participatory element of the show encourages the public to take multiples of these posters beyond the gallery space and into the city. Additionally, the artist will be

pasting copies around Hamilton throughout the exhibition period to further activate the work and expand the visual presence of their identity in Hamilton. With these “gestures,” Nolet presents a bright challenge to the cisheteroenormative landscape of Hamilton with humour and honesty.

Through candidly personal artistic expression, Hendry, Kitchen, and Nolet examine how visibility can both liberate and discipline identity. However freeing the assertion of identity can be, *the space in which we have dissolved* challenges the limits of representation. As with any binary system, visibility/invisibility neglects the layering of identity, how it is expressed, and to what degree. The foundational impact of one’s home, in this case Hamilton, can often feel like the most essential and unexpressed defining factor in identity formation. Taken as a whole, the exhibition visualizes disidentification and place through works by these Hamiltonian artists, asking viewers to consider how what is made visible comes at the expense of what is left invisible.



Jessy Kitchen, *While bodies become whole calluses*, 2019-2021. Steel, concrete, and inkjet prints. Detail view.

Copy Editing: Derek Jenkins
Documentation and Design: Abedar Kamgari
ISBN 978-1-926454-10-8



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Hamilton Artists Inc. would like to acknowledge the generous support of
its funders, donors, sponsors, and programming partners.

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Cover: Brendan Hendry, *Embassy is Burning* and *City Motor Hotel #2*. From *No Man's Land* series, 2020. Collage. Detail view.



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