



TENDER LIKE A BRUISE

Pleasure, Pain, and T4T Transcendence in *TENDER LIKE A BRUISE*

by Adrien Crossman

“In a glance you would memorize the wounds on my body like a road map – the gashes, bruises, cigarette burns.”
– Leslie Feinberg, Stone Butch Blues¹

pinkish, red, swollen, tender to the touch
blood vessels break after experiencing a trauma –
a force strong enough to cause blood to leak,
leaving the skin intact

purple, blue, and black
colours change as the body begins to heal

violet to green, pale yellow
until eventually, the wound disappears

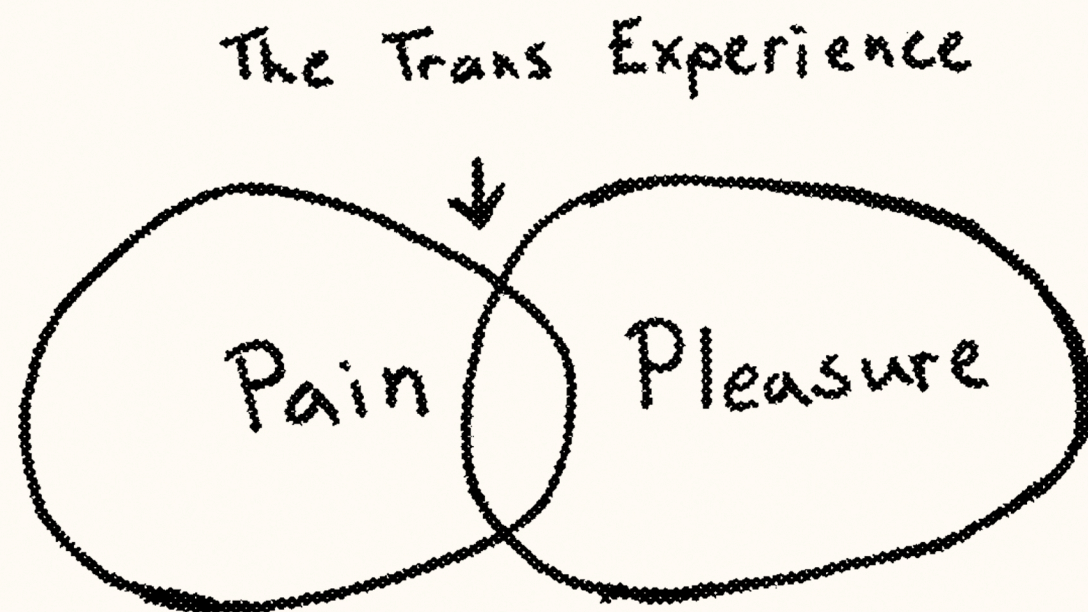
The visual imprint / trace / marker of a trauma, a bruise can be the outcome of pain but also of pleasure. When speaking of the liberatory potential of kink, C. Jacob Hale points to “the soft, permeable edges” of gender, stating that this permeability can create “sites for creative production of new, more just genderqueer discursive locations” that counter the binary structures ubiquitous to our current world.²

In *TENDER LIKE A BRUISE*, Ardyn Gibbs and Eli Nolet inhabit this space of permeability, embracing the complexity of living as out queer and trans people in this political moment. To live authentically as a trans person asks us not only to see beyond the external barriers that enforce the omnipresent cisnormative binary gender systems of our day to day lives, but to peel away the internalized barriers that prevent us from embracing and sometimes even seeing our true selves. Gibbs articulates their experience of being trans as feeling like being stuck behind glass: “You see what’s in front of you, but you can’t reach it.” The only way to safely access the other side of these barriers is by seeking little windows or cracks – portals to another way of existing.

Here, the desire to traverse is tempered by the potential for injury, either by a new trauma, or the reopening of wounds already present.

The cut open chain link fence dividing the James gallery from the rest of the space serves as both barrier and entryway. An opening – a pulling back of these edges that divide trans folks from ourselves and from the world around us. The act of trespassing – to go where it is prohibited despite potential danger: an invitation to enter at one’s own risk. The fence has already been cut – evidence that others have come before you; you are not the first to forge this path. Once transcended, the fence’s impression remains through the shadows it casts.

Being trans feels like being on both sides of the fence – being outside and looking into a self that might be unimaginable; being inside and feeling protected, while knowing that you must open up to let others in. When we cut away at chain link the metal becomes sharp. Moving through creates the risk of wounding. Yet what (or who) greets us on the other side? Identities are formed through this shared transcendence – creating a space for connection, of safety, of being seen (T4T³). Pain and pleasure are not at odds here; rather, overlapping and mutually informing one another.



This exhibition signals a perceptible shift in the collaborative practice of Gibbs and Nolet. Previously having relied on a maximalist approach made up of an excess of monitors, coloured light, and numerous animations, the gallery seems sparse by comparison. In *untitled* and *feel*, Gibbs has rendered their previously colourful 3D animated works as 3D printed sculptures, painted white to match the colour of the walls; while in Nolet's *THE WALL IS A WOUND*, carved text (also painted white) creates a ghostly aura on the east wall. The spectre of transness – hidden in plain sight – evidences a letting go of former strategies and safeguards in exchange for a space that invites a deeper and more intimate relationship between artist, artwork, and audience.

Both artists spoke to the challenge of working in a paired down way. Maximalism provides an opportunity to hide – the moments of intimacy are still there but are obscured by monitors and visual overstimulation. In *TENDER LIKE A BRUISE*, Gibbs and Nolet are putting their internal worlds on display, choosing vulnerability over comfort, connection over control, slowing down and allowing each work to inhabit more presence through the quiet surrounding them.

TENDER LIKE A BRUISE is the fourth collaborative exhibition by Gibbs and Nolet and is perhaps the last for the time being. While the pair have developed and grown exponentially in their collaboration, working so closely together comes with its challenges. Community takes work, and relationships go through many stages. As Nolet says, “being in relation contains many multitudes – it can be tender and wonderful, but also painful.” A bruise is tender when poked. Relationships with others, especially those with whom our traumas overlap, have the potential to poke in uniquely painful ways – and often do. Yet tenderness doesn't always result in pain. To be held by a lover who truly sees you, to be embraced by queer/trans community – this is what affirms our existence. T4T care embraces the messiness of inhabiting both the pain and beauty of existing authentically in this world. It's our traumas as well as our shared insistence on survival that make these bonds so sacred.

Two small charms created by Nolet, not credited as works, hang from the chain link entrance. Made of different variations of chainmail weaves, each object is a talisman in honour of two of Nolet's most impactful T4T connections. A traditional weave for Gibbs, and the Orchid weave for me. For queer and trans folks, it is often these bonds that keep us going. Chosen friendship, chosen family, interwoven in the co-creation of our community.

¹ Feinberg, Leslie. *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1993. p.4

² Hale, C. Jacob. “Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex without Women or Men.” *Social Text*, no. p. 234-235

³ Trans for Trans

Adrien Crossman is a queer and non-binary artist, educator, and curator. They co-founded and co-run the online arts publication off centre, and act as director of Orchid Contemporary, an independent gallery they run out of the garage in their backyard. In their creative work, Crossman is interested in the affective qualities of queerness (what queerness feels like). They are an Assistant Professor in the School of the Arts at McMaster University.

Ardyn Gibbs is a Queer and Trans, Settler-Indigenous (Mohawk) Artist, Designer and Arts Worker located on the territories of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and the Mississauga's of the Credit First Nation otherwise known as Hamilton, Ontario. Using digital new media technologies Ardyn's work explores the themes of Queer Futurity, Digital Dreaming and Visibility/Legibility of Queer bodies in public spaces. Ardyn is passionate about collective dreaming, place keeping and fostering meaningful connections. Their work is constantly shifting, adapting and growing with the world around them.

Eli Nolet is a queer trans settler-Indigenous (Metis/Mi'kmaq) artist and arts worker from the occupied territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Mississaugas (otherwise known as hamilton, ontario). Their work explores how technology, DIY publishing, and affective materiality can function as vessels for queer potentiality. Across their practice, Nolet is interested in investigating the many layered histories of queer culture and desire, and questioning the binaries of visibility, legibility, and normativity.

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Design by Eli Nolet
Writing by Adrien Crossman



HAMILTON ARTISTS INC.