

# Living in an Imagined Future: Queering the Southern Artistic Narrative, A Call to Arms

The Southern queer narrative is often one of migration. Get out when you can. Go to California, New York, Portland. (I did actually go to Portland. It was short lived.) Artists often echo this narrative.

*To be a Southern queer artist,  
to be Elsewhere,  
to be living in an Imagined Future.  
An Apparition.*

All my life I've been trying to leave the South, and I just keep getting pulled back in. I grew up in a rural town in Tennessee, and despite dreaming of my escape to a Northeastern college, somehow ended up spending my coed years in Nashville. My assumptions about myself and the place proved wrong. The urban South was very different from the rural town that raised me, and coupled with the shifting culture of this New New South investing in creative industries and bike shares, I fell in love with Nashville. It changed my relationship to the South and that aspect of my identity. Nevertheless, I did leave Nashville after six years, relocating to the Midwest for my MFA. I called Bloomington, Indiana home for four years, and it did offer a vibrant queer scene that Nashville is still notably lacking, but somehow, despite all expectations and plans of where I would be at this point, I have recently landed back in the South, setting up shop in Atlanta.

The current dominant art world model reserves niche group shows or an envied token spot on the wall for selected marginalized artists. Play nice and market yourself the right way, and you might get it. Instead of building community, we are forced into competition. Castrated from each other, we are weaker than ever and have little chance of posing a threat to the art institution as is.

As I so deeply desire compassionate communion and exchange with other queer artists engaged in rigorous practice, my tender heart hurts for how successfully dominant culture has estranged us from one another. How can we use our positions at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities to remodel and restructure our interactions? In a field where the payoff for success isn't even that rewarding (thinking financially, social influence, etc.), it seems strange that we would interact with each other so violently. (Here: violence as the use of power to harm, exploit, control, or oppress others, including but most definitely not limited to brutality.) How do we disrupt that violence, that cutthroat model of doing what you need to succeed or gain power, at the potential expense of others?

What are we trying to prove? What are our goals?

If in our art worlds/communities, we reproduce violent relationships that mirror those in larger capitalist society, we are failing.

What is really our responsibility? Is it to put forth the voice that the dominant culture expects of us to fill the void that they have created through a history of persecution? Is it to allow that dominant culture to continue its complacency without challenging it — to feel as though they can maintain their own identity as “progressive,” “liberal,” “open,” through this guise of tolerance?

What are we really doing here?

Most importantly, as this may become a call to arms or a call to action: what do we have to lose? And what, realistically, do we have to gain? How do we think about success and failure, in terms of our art-making/doing and multiple, intersecting communities (queer, marginalized, artist, local, Southern, etc.)?

How do we deal with the violence of being tokenized? The violence of our unique experiences being erased? Does the dominant culture assimilate us by rendering our difference invisible? Does it tokenize and fetishize it? Is there an option C, wherein we don't have to continue to be objectified in our own artistic lives?

When I make direct statements, I'm called out for being confrontational. Straight white cis people who are “very informed on LGBT issues” say that it makes them uncomfortable. They aren't the bad guys after all!

How uncomfortable it is to confront ourselves!

What do we have to lose?

A burden of always questioning our next words, next step, next mark, next shot? What is okay and what is too far? Does this play by the rules for marginalized artists set forth by dominant culture? Rules like, take up the allotted space (no more! Preferably less!); politely educate your oppressors on your identity; allow yourself to be reduced to a flattened understanding of your identity. Don't expect to participate in abstract, conceptual, or intellectual conversations with the (white straight cis) boys. Don't be fooled into thinking you can get away with brilliant conceptual work. You know — the kind that a dude can get away with because “Genius!” but when done by a woman, artist of color, or queer gets called bullshit? More rules: we can't get by on talent. We have to work hard to prove we can come into the room. But slow down! Being in the room doesn't mean you get to speak.

Through this process of packaging myself for public consumption, how am I still being true to my own experience? Am I respecting myself, my needs, my desires, my goals, my humanity? What have I lost in the process?

What do we have to lose?

How much of me is even left? In my current body of work, I objectify myself, making myself into a toy

for your consumption, for your pleasure, for your entertainment. How much of that toy is me? How much of it is what you made me into?

What do I have to lose?

As a queer arts community, reimagining our relational models means interrogating the flow of power in our exchanges. To whom do we give our power? How do we reclaim our own power? We need to reconsider how knowledge is disseminated through our communities. Mentorship maintains power dynamics and tired knowledge structures that no longer serve our purposes. The standard mentor/mentee relationship is one of unequal power. Moving beyond traditional understandings of mentorship, we can build relationships where all involved are empowered and learning from each other. We learn together through exchange, where power becomes a free-flowing agent between us. Partnership is not mentorship. We grow together.

What do we have to lose?

The queer, the marginal, the outsider, the artists of color, with a range of abilities — we are the Southern artistic narrative, and we always have been. The outsider, shrugged off, invisible, Other. Maybe there is queerness to embrace in our very Southernness, and in that embrace, we discover potential for a radical, beautiful, gritty,

heart-filled, confrontational art. Are you listening?

Many of my experiences as a queer artist parallel those of the Southern artist. Southern artists are slighted for major opportunities like the Whitney Biennial, and how, consequently, the Atlanta Biennial creates its own space for the Southern artists often excluded from dialogue outside the region. Even then, we can question the exact definition of “lives in” for some of the current included artists, I'm sure. Take, for instance, Kalup Linzy who according to the Biennial's information lives in Tampa, yet many other sources accessible online (Art21, Wikipedia, various gallery and museum sites featuring his biography) claim Linzy lives and works in Brooklyn. This is not a mission to sleuth out the legitimacy of Linzy as a queer Southern voice. That is part of his identity entrenched far deeper than where he's currently setting up shop, and the inclusion of Linzy's queer black voice plays an important role in the overall curation of the Biennial. However, Linzy's public image is one of a queer black performance artist living and working in Brooklyn with Southern roots: a Southern emigrant. Did Linzy have to leave so we could hear? Did Linzy have to leave so we could hear?

After all, *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter declared “a star is born” in 2005 in a piece that's as much about New York City as it is about Linzy...and he doesn't

mention the South even once.

Do we always have to leave to find success (whatever that might look like)? What about those of us who stay? And those of us who return? What is pulling us back, and how do we build a world for us here? Echoing the mission of the Atlanta Biennial itself, let's radically build our own communities in our own spaces, find strength in what connects us and makes us unique, and stop fighting with each other for those coveted token spots. Let's be mindful of how and to whom we are giving power, and then let's take it back.

After all, what do we have to lose?

For now, I'll be in Atlanta, a new city, a new home, searching. I'll be looking for you other Southern queers who have the grit and the tender hearts to stay and stand and figure it out day by day. I'll keep asking myself how I can live artfully, openly, and compassionately, while allowing myself the space to speak, to fight, and to grow. After all, if I've got nothing left to lose, then I can start asking, what am I trying to find?

“For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.”



Kalup Linzy, *Art Jobs and Lullabies* (detail), 2016, video suite 3, music video.



Kalup Linzy, Installation View of *The Queen Rose Family* (ongoing; 83 collages), *Art Jobs and Lullabies* (video suite 3, music video, 2016), and *Conversations Wit De Churen IX XI XII: Dayz of Our Ego* (video, 2015)

Liz Scofield Artist, public crier, queer. 70% water, 100% heart.