

I LIVE AT HOME

By

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A PROJECT IN LIEU OF THESIS PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF THE ARTS
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This paper is for me. You didn't think you could make it, but you did.

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Summary of Project in Lieu of Thesis
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By

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Chair: Lynn Tomaszewski

Members: Meghan Moe Beitiks and Dr. Jillian Hernandez

Major: Art

I Live at Home, is an installation that considers the relationship between queerness, craft, body image, and domestic space. I employ textile craft processes for their historical ties to femininity, women's work, and leisure activities within the domestic space. Found fabrics that have been previously used in domestic spaces and other artists' craft are used to include their histories into the ongoing conversation. They speak to concepts of gender roles, labor, and gender presentation. The dense histories of the materials make them rich as purposeful mediums to make space for queer definitions of femininity in *I Live at Home*.

Introduction

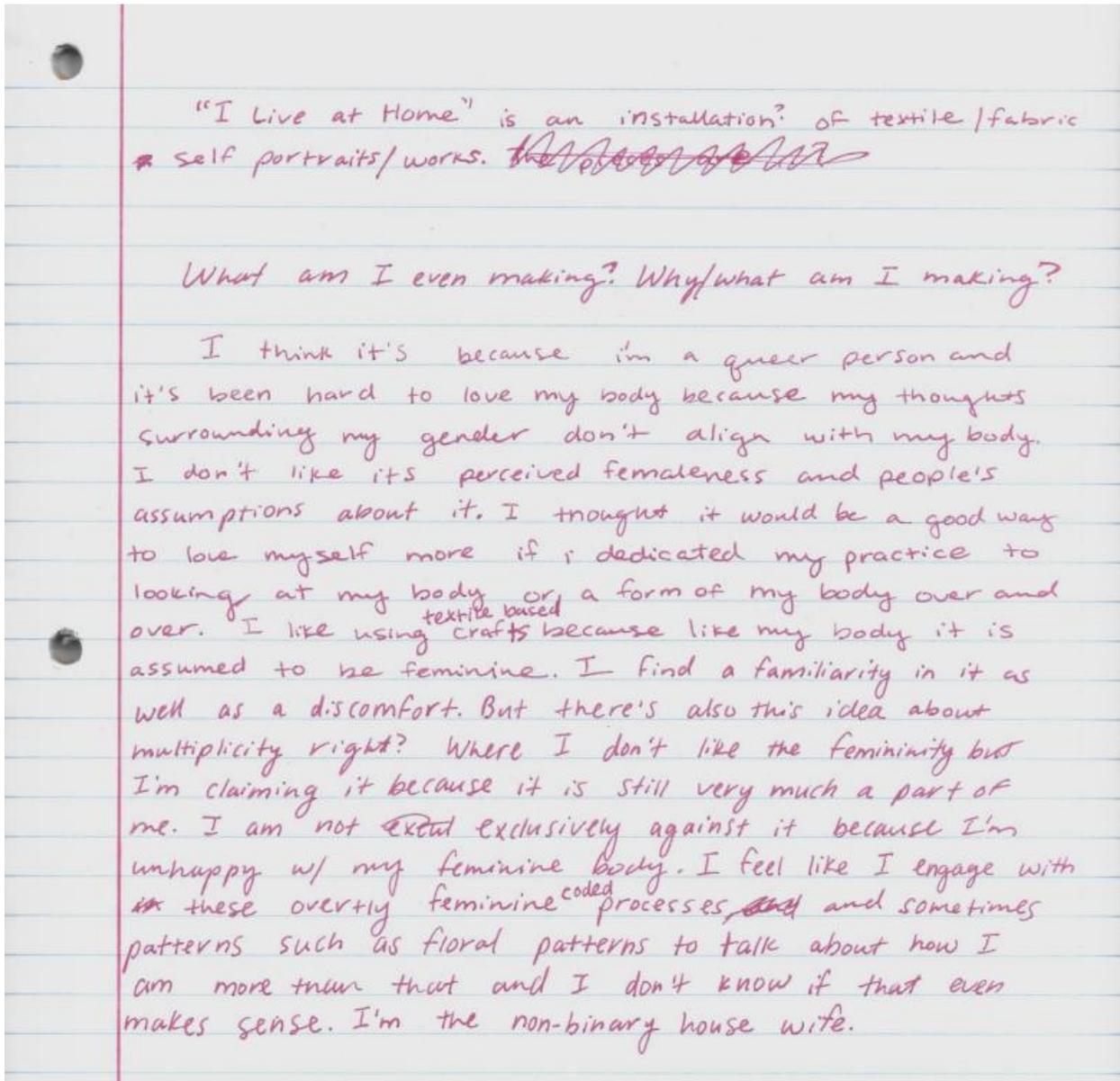


Plate 1. Introduction

Queer

The word queer is one that needs to be defined whenever it is brought up in research. The word's interpretation varies vastly by date, theorist, and individuals that identify as such. Its use can be attributed to identities, movements, academics, subcultures, literature, and so much more. Within the span of fewer than fifty years, its meaning has changed, from being used as a derogatory slur for gay men to now being positively re-appropriated and re-contextualized by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities.

In the context of this paper, I will use the definition linked with identity and art. Adam Pilcher uses the word queer as an "umbrella" term otherwise described as "word encompassing anyone who could be described as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, transgender, third gender or intersex"¹ or any identity that pertains to non-heterosexual sexualities and non-binary gender identities. Though this definition of the word is frequently used, its use as an umbrella term is limited and does not fully encompass what queer can mean. Additionally, it can be argued that using an overall term for a broad spectrum of individuals neglects and erases distinct sexualities and genders.

A more thorough explanation of the term is given by Martin Büsser who, unlike Pilcher, believes that queer is not a synonym for gay or a new term that covers multiple identities, but rather a word that is oppositional to both heteronormativity and homonormativity. Büsser references Andreas Kraß, author of *Think Queer*, by saying that queer "aims to denaturalize normative concepts of masculinity and femininity, to decouple the categories of gender and

¹Pilcher, *A Queer Little History*.

sexuality, to destabilize the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality and to acknowledge sexual pluralism.”² With its potential for multiple meanings, queer is difficult to perfectly define. For my research, Kraß’s definition fits well, yet it still leaves out an essential component that is important in my practice which is the idea that queer is a work in progress. Ideally, all the ideas and institutions that Kraß hopes queer will dismantle would be successfully deconstructed to finally have a true queerness. That has yet to be accomplished and, coupled with the ever-changing definition and use of the word queer, it is important to note it as a work in progress, that which possesses potential. Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz states, “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not queer yet.”³

My own queer identity is one of the central parts of my practice. For myself as a gender non-conforming, agender, non-binary person there is a lot of tension about what I look like, what I think I should look like, and how others perceive me. It is more than a tension; in fact, it regularly causes me emotional pain. *I Live at Home* was made in response to the intense gender dysphoria I feel daily. My body is female presenting to most. It is “voluptuous,” my hips are wide, and my breasts are large. My body makes people refer to me as “ma’am” and “miss,” every time this happens the pain swells inside of me and I do not know what to do with that pain. I hate being called “ma’am”, it reminds me that people have assumption about what certain shapes and features mean about a person and it does not even give me the chance to tell them who I am.

²Erharter et al., eds., *Pink Labor*.

³ Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

Queer Crafting

It is difficult to navigate identity when much of the society we live in is funneled into binaries. Heterosexual or queer, cisgender or transgender, masculine or feminine, which can be viewed as normative or non-normative and subversive in each respective pairing. As a queer artist forever navigating their gender expression and sexuality, who enjoys and finds a home in the craft processes associated with the feminine, demolishing those binaries has assisted in my understanding that personhood is plural and consists of multiplicities.

It might be obvious to say that people are not their stereotypes and that they are instead complex, multi-faceted beings, but I found that growing up to believe that things are either one way or the other has influenced how I view myself. By dismantling that thought process within myself I acknowledge that I am a worthy person despite of and because I do not fit societies ideas of normative. I am a queer who is both masculine and feminine and neither, I find joy in stitching and mending and I both embrace and resent craft methods for the same reasons I resent my body: because it is feminine coded.

Craft, queer identity, and even queer theory share the trait of being malleable. Queer identity is in constant flux as sexualities and genders move around their spectrums. Queer theory continuously critiques itself to push forward its insight and adjusts itself to the everchanging modalities of queer understanding. The understanding of craft is also continually changing and can be defined by a plethora of arguments.

One of the reasons I have chosen to engage with craft is because I believe that due to their similarities, queer theory can serve as a fundamental point of reference for the modeling

of a critical craft theory. Not only does queer theory contemplate issues of gender and sexuality, but it also includes race, socioeconomic status, and other situations of personhood to discuss layered identity and multiplicity. In queer theory the term “queer” is reclaimed to dispute its degenerative use when used by oppressive systems. The word once reclaimed takes the power out of the oppressor’s hand. Artists and makers that work with craft have the ability to and often choose to use their materials to highlight the stereotypes associated with craft.⁴ “Craft is positioned as a potent agent to challenge the very systems that create and proliferate stereotypes to maintain hierarchies of visual and material culture.”⁵ Through its intentional reclamation, makers can continually subvert the determined pre-conventions of craft.

I Live at Home was created in response to the shared feelings I have about my gender identity and femininity and their correlation to craft. I consider the process of making the pieces a meditation on my body where I can encounter my dysphoria through craft processes as a means of finding worth in my self-image. I create images based on documentations I take of myself while I am alone. Craft methods are then employed to create fabric versions of the intimate documentations via applique and embroidery. I consider the time taken to create the textile documentations meditations on my body because of the time and mental space devoted to interacting with a body I am dysphoric about.

I Live at Home gains its title because the work was made inside my home away from my studio, and because I find home to be the one place where I am most comfortable in my body. The domestic is a private space where I am away from the prying eyes of others. It is the place

⁴ Chaich and Oldham, *Queer Threads*.

⁵ Roberts, “Put Your Thing Down,” 243-259.

where I allow my body to just be a body and where I feel comfortable in my nakedness. It was important to me that the work created for *I Live at Home* was made in my personal domestic space so that I could feel safe and comfortable when stitching together representations of my body. The space also ties into the craft materials and processes used in creating this work. Traditionally, hobbies and household labor related to sewing, quilting, embroidery, and needlework are delegated to the women of the home. Therefore, constructing the work at home is a choice to engage with the histories and stereotypes placed upon me as an assumed female person.

Craft and the Domestic

When making *I Live at Home* it was important to use materials and processes associated with craft and the decorative because of its historical classification as inferior to what we call “fine arts” and because of its ties to femininity and domesticity.

We can trace back the division of fine arts and crafts or decorative arts to the Renaissance and the emergence of academies and theories of the time. Categories arose to differentiate craft-based work from intellectual work. The categorization extended to distinctions between gender where art practices dominated by women were scrutinized. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock give the example of women who engaged in flower painting in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶ The paintings, although excellently executed, thought provoking, and conceptually dense in the history of still-life, were reduced to feats of craftsmanship and no intellectual demand as more and more floral still-life painters became women. Additionally, women had and have been historically linked to nature and their engagement with floral subject matter in the still lives was simply reduced to extensions of their femininity.

Therefore, craft methods such as quilting, sewing, embroidery, and knitting which were typically done through women’s labor were easily seen as categorically lesser than the so called “fine arts” created by men because of both their supposed undemanding nature and the gender of their creators. Often associated with craft is the decorative. The decorative can be said to consist of craft items meant for ornamentation and are sometimes considered devoid of

⁶ Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*.

artistic intent. (cite Extra/Ordinary) It is often a pejorative when used to describe an artist's work as "the decorative, the feminine, the beautiful, in short, the minor." (cite) Further conflating the ideas of fine art and masculinity as "good" and craft and femininity as "bad." In her account of the Whitney's denial to use Andy Warhol's screenprint wallpaper (*Cow Wallpaper*) in his retrospective, Elissa Auther argues that Warhol's embrace of the decorative is an embrace of the decoratives' association with femininity and queerness.⁷ The embrace here is important in that it speaks to a rejection of something else, it rejects the normative, the male, and the standard.

As discussed, craft, especially textile-based crafts are coded as feminine processes of making because of their historical ties to women's labor and have therefore been considered categorically lesser than in a male dominant society. This encodes the materials used in those processes such as fabric, yarn, and thread as feminine materials. By the same implications, working with textiles can be considered queer and the materials themselves a queer choice as opposed to a hierarchically categorized medium such as paint. Queer artists often choose to work with craft processes and materials deliberately when making work with queer content. The materials' dense histories lend to their use as purposeful mediums in queer artworks. They speak to concepts of gender roles, labor, and gender presentation.

I use materials such as cloth, placemats, cotton batting, and thread to allude to the feminine spaces I have felt hesitant to exist within as a queer person. Of these materials I like to choose and find material with pre-existing histories. My preference is to use found objects and

⁷ Auther, "Wallpaper," 115-131.

fabrics to construct my pieces. Scrap fabric is integral to the completion of my works. I like that they come from other crafters that have already used them to make and have now been discarded or donated with the hope of aiding someone new in their process. This is important to me because my thinking relies heavily on the history of craft and women's place in the domestic sphere, and I like to think that by incorporating used materials into my finished pieces I am using a literal part of the history I am speaking about. Found pieces such as placemats and sheets have existed in a domestic setting on their own before coming into my possession. They could tell me stories about what happened in those spaces if they had voices. Then they become part of a larger art context within my practice and with the voices I imagine they have, they enter into dialogue with the other materials and imagery I incorporate in my work.

The fabric I use for the skin is not from found material. I use white cotton fabric and dye it to achieve a color I feel is similar to my skin tone. This process is important to me because it requires more time and care with the object that will come to represent my body. It is like handling my skin in a sense. My process when dyeing the fabric reminds me of the way my grandmother used to cook. She would never measure any ingredients, instead she used as much as she saw fit and tasted as she went. When I dye, I set a pot of water upon the kitchen stove and add dye little by little, stirring and testing it with strips of cotton and adding more of each dye as needed. Once the desired color is achieved, I add the fabric into the dye soup where I watch it turn from white to brown. There are differences in the color of the fabric every time I create a new dye bath because of the method I use, and it is visible in the finished pieces.

The pieces are put together following the process of applique with details done in embroidery. Although I follow some traditional methods of making, I also like to use the

material in non-normative ways as a way of further moving the medium into queer dialogue. This is visible in pieces where I let the fabric fray by choosing not to hem the edges, hide the seams or secure them in anyway. This is done both at the edges of the applique figures and at the edges of the cut fabrics they are sewn onto. Other traditional expectations are distorted by omitting the figures face and by using stuffing to give the bodies dimension and presence.

The subject matter of my work is also non-normative as I choose to represent my body in various states of nudity. The poses of the figures range from mundane tasks to positions of empowerment and are reflective of the emotional state I was in relative to my body in the instances they were documented. Some are inviting and sexy, while others show my back turned on the viewer. Those that obscure my face reflect days of emotional pain and intense body and gender dysphoria. Most importantly, they all document me in my home and reflect experiences I have felt while alone.

Installation

Before taking up residence in University Gallery, the collective pieces used in *I Live at Home* saw many iterations of display, but none engaged the curved wall effectively. Referencing a maquette of the curved gallery wall and suggestions from my committee, I decided to entertain the idea of wrapping the wall in some manner as a means from which to hang the pieces. My original thought was to use the same type of embroidery floss used in the stitching of the appliques and embroidery, but soon realized that it would not only fail to support the weight of the fabric adequately, but it would not create a significant visual impact in the gallery space. In a search for a stronger material, I settled on cotton rope for its ability to be dyed. I dyed the rope in the same way and with the same dyes I used to make the fabric used for the bodies. The rope could then serve as an extension of the bodies that bind the curved wall and can be seen upon entering the gallery.

During the installation process I used the rope to bind the wall multiple times. To create tension on the line from which to hang the works I used my full body weight while pulling the rope around the structure. Once taut, I used the rope as support to pin, hang, and tie the fabric pieces to. Once paired with the artworks, the purpose of the rope as an extension of my fabric bodies becomes clear. As they meet, the rope forms a continuation of the queer body as it takes up space and commands attention.

This installation also aims to queer the methods typically used to display textile work especially applique and embroidery work. Those works might traditionally be displayed in embroidery hoops or thoughtfully attached to cushions and clothing. In this installation though, they are secured to the web of rope and to each other through knots, string, and sewing pins.

Frames are included to draw upon typical methods of display within the home but are filled with stuffed fabrics that seep past the edges and are hung where compositionality fit instead of at average eye level. Placemats are also included as reminders of the domestic yet removed from their place on the table in favor of being integrated amongst fabric with rough frayed edges.

Beyond those choices I broke other conventions of display. I chose to overlap pieces and obscure others in shadow to create dimensionality and texture. Pieces were hung that touched the floor and that met the wall at its edge to engage the viewer and their movement as they navigate the pieces spread throughout the space. These decisions were made to distort the viewers sense of the appropriate way of displaying artwork in the gallery. By pushing the boundaries of installation, I create an overt statement that deconstructs ideas of the normative and instead introduces a queer way of doing and of being.

Conclusion

I hypothesized that making the pieces for *I Live at Home* and holding dedicated times of reflection and meditation would help me to find comfort in my body and aid in my dysphoria. While it did help me to see my skin in a new light, I still face discomfort surrounding my body's appearance and my gender. Despite that, I have come to see my body as worthy, healthy, and privileged in its ability. The process of research and making have allowed me to navigate more thoroughly my gendered experiences and my gender identity.

Throughout the making of *I Live at Home*, I have considered the connections between queerness through gender identity, craft, and the domestic. To reflect upon my lived

experiences of gender and body dysphoria I used craft materials and techniques to create fabric recreations of my body. By doing so I engage with materials that are deemed feminine because of societal constructions in the same manner that my non-binary body is coded. The work is an embrace of the feminine and queer in protest to normative, male-dominated society and art.



Plate 2. *I Live at Home*, installation view.

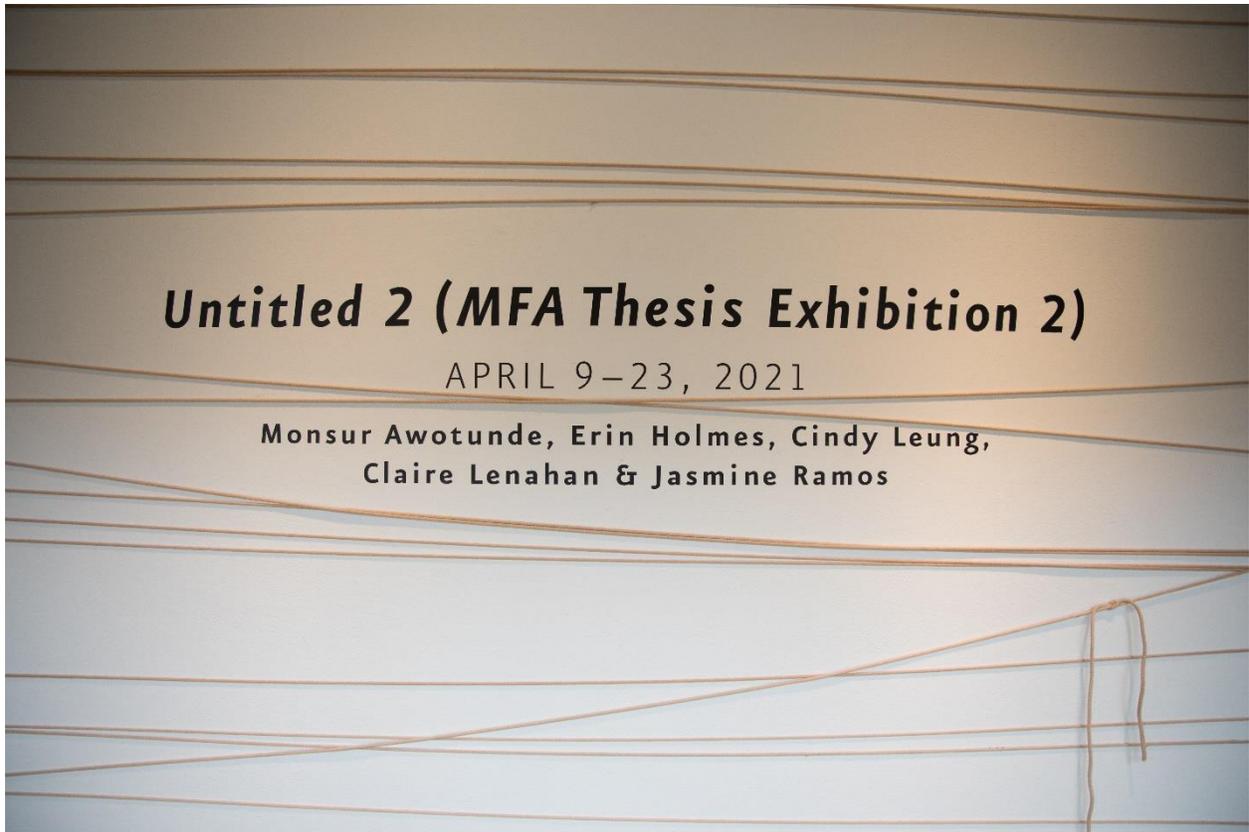


Plate 3. *I Live at Home*, gallery entrance detail.



Plate 4. *I Live at Home*, detail.



Plate 5. *I Live at Home*, detail.



Plate 6. *I Live at Home*, detail.

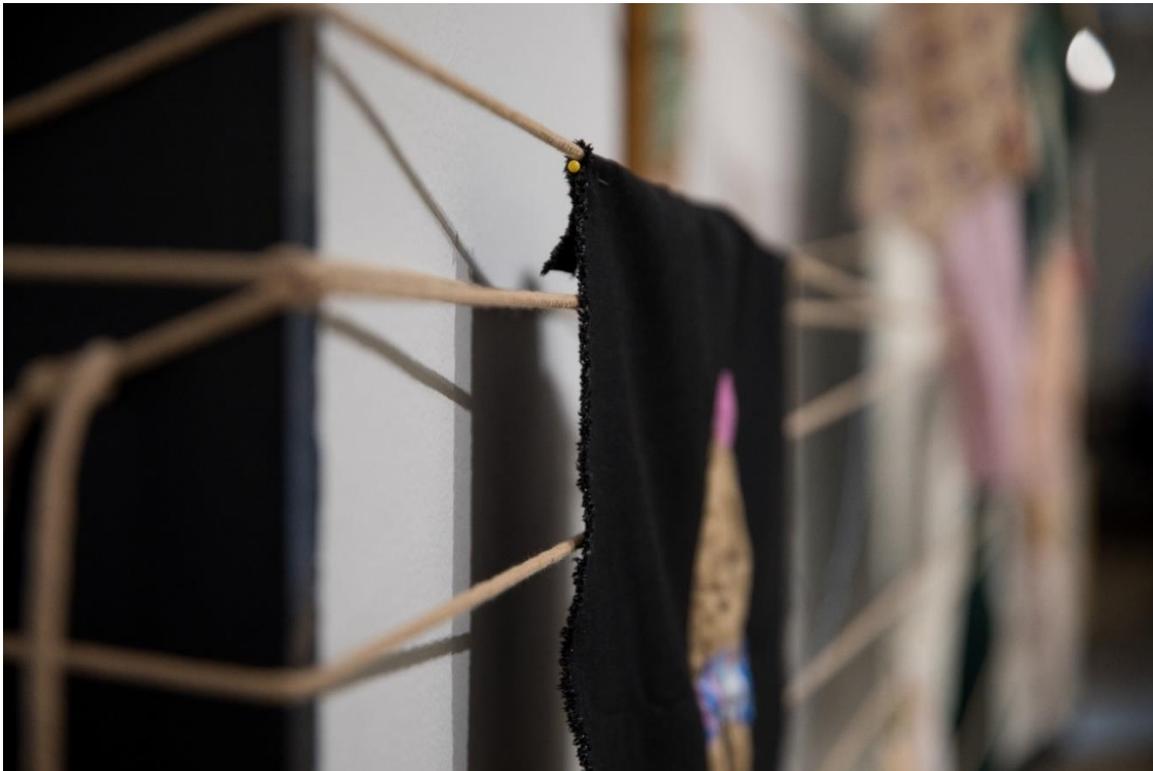


Plate 7. *I Live at Home*, detail.



Plate 8. *I Live at Home*, detail.



Plate 9. *I Live at Home*, detail.



Plate 10. *I Live at Home*, detail.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jasmine Ramos was born and raised in Central Florida. They received their Bachelor of Arts from Stetson University in DeLand, Florida in 2017 and their Master of Fine Arts in studio art from the University of Florida in 2021.