

Close Shaves: Vulnerability and Hypermasculinity in the Barbershop

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Abstract

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This thesis is a written accompaniment to a series of 36 paintings that were created in partial fulfillment of my Master's of Fine Arts degree. This thesis explores the barbershop as a complex site of identity formation, negotiation, and contradiction, particularly for queer Filipino men navigating hypermasculine spaces. What began as a personal exploration rooted in my experience of getting my long hair cut and stepping into a traditionally masculine domain evolved into a broader investigation of how intimacy, vulnerability, and identity are expressed and repressed within barbershop culture. Drawing from interviews and direct engagement with Filipino barbers, my work examines the lives, spaces, and gestures that define these environments, each shaped by layers of postcolonial history and personal aspiration.

Through representational painting informed by ethnographic practices, I document the tensions between care and performance, visibility and concealment. I use vibrant, synthetic palettes inspired by Filipino "banig" weaving, and apply paint in ways that capture both presence and ephemerality, echoing the duality of tenderness and hypermasculinity found in these spaces. The barbershop becomes a site of

double consciousness, where the comfort of touch and transformation coexist with the anxiety of surveillance and conformity to hegemonic norms. My work reflects on grooming not simply as an aesthetic act but as a practice loaded with colonial legacy, racial identity, and gender politics.

Ultimately, this body of work seeks to queer the barbershop by revealing its contradictions and possibilities as a space of mentorship, community care, and subtle defiance against the rigid boundaries of masculinity.

Close Shaves: Vulnerability and Hypermasculinity in the Barbershop

Over the past two years, my art and I have undergone a transformative journey. I had long hair from adolescence to adulthood, and with it came questions about my gender. Then, I asked my ex's brother for a haircut, a moment that marked my entry into the world of being "one of the boys". In shedding my hair, I lost a part of myself to gain another. I grew to embrace the new look, even taking pride in my appearance.

I had been hesitant to go to a real barber, as queer people in typical barbershops must negotiate with their identity within that space. I didn't tell her brother that I was bi, but he figured it out. To be outed made me want to mask even harder in the company of strangers; discussion of sneakers, fashion, sports, but never sexuality. I then focused on capturing Filipino masculinity, so I went to three Filipino barbers: Justin at the Kingdom Barber Shop, Glen at Hair Mechanics, and Rex at The Roosevelt Barbershop. All three had different working situations. Justin, being the newest to the barbershop business and rents a chair at Kingdom Barbershop. He was a marine. In his youth, he got mixed up with the wrong crowd and sought the structure the military would provide. Glen owns his own business, but at his establishment, he is the only barber. He has a family of two daughters and a wife. Although Hair Mechanics is set up to be a man cave, with concert memorabilia, an engine block table, and a pool table, you can see his daughter's doll house and toys throughout the shop. Glen used to be a mechanic but wanted to be his own boss and picked up the craft of haircutting. Rex is the most established barber, with 26 years of experience. He owns his own business and employs three other barbers to work alongside him. I chose to primarily work with Rex because of his openness to my research and the convenience of his location.

My painting process begins with visual research: collecting photographs, recording interviews, and drawing from observation. I move between ink and oil painting, engaging in an ongoing dialogue

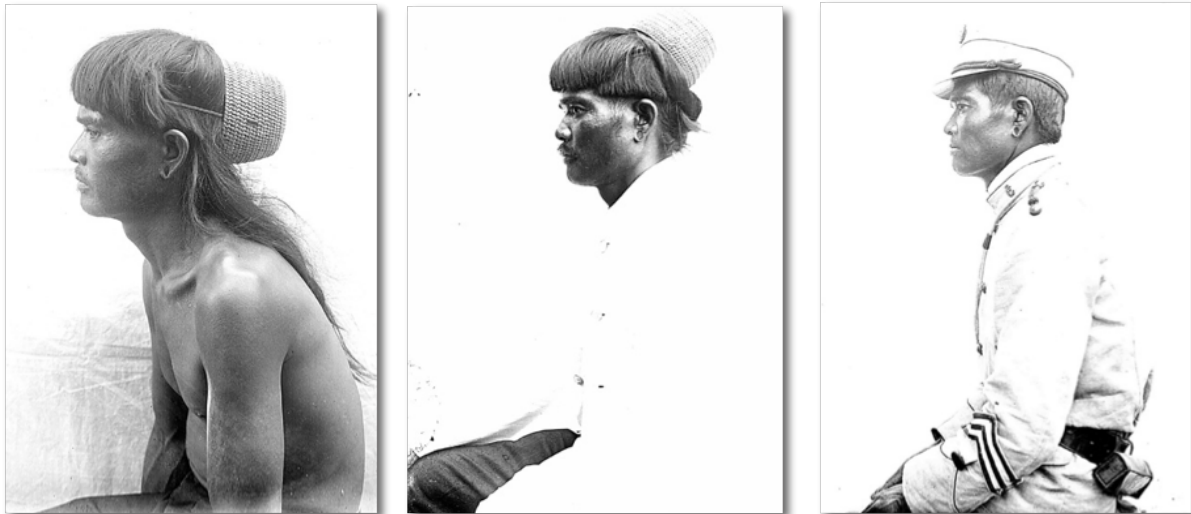
between mediums. My paintings often need preliminary sketches to resolve composition and gesture. I create representational and figurative paintings that emanate from ethnographic practices and focus on interpersonal relationships.

I premix large piles of paint and often do alla prima paintings, manipulating them to represent the tension between the subjects and objects. I deploy high-key color pallets to signal contradictions between the feelings and observations that I paint, such as the contradictions between hypermasculinity and intimacy among men in my artwork on barbershops. I make paintings that bring to light the contradictions of gender performance in very gendered spaces, like men in the barbershop physically touching each other in defiance of heteronormative expectations. I apply thin passes of paint to create an ethereal, almost ghost-like, depiction of the people I paint. In these spaces, I do not reveal their full selves; instead, I portray a fragmented version of them. The vibrant electric color palette is inspired by the intense chromatic “banigs” (woven mats) from the Philippines. Sensations are captured through paint application and paint reduction, the touch of a barber, the removal of hair, and the buzzing of clippers.



Every 2 Weeks, Oil on Canvas, 2024-2025

Haircuts feel loaded as there is a history of benevolent assimilation tied to the very act. As I paint, I recall pictures taken by Dean C. Worcester, visual evidence of Filipino men's hair getting shorter and shorter, signaling their transformation into soldiers, subtly documenting through these visual cues. These photographs were tools of colonization, serving as the justification for the occupation and assimilation of the Philippines. The photos of before and after colonization were popular, showing the masses that one can cultivate the brown body and create a white mind, the creation of the brown little brother as a soldier from a savage.



There are portrayals of the archipelago, stewarded by Uncle Sam as the White man's burden. One political cartoon depicts Uncle Sam holding large shears ready to cut the next colony's hair. The shears are inscribed with "Education" and "Civilization," tools of transformation meant to tame the "unruly" into something more acceptable, a brown little brother. Superficially, that looked like a haircut and a change into a uniform.



“Civilized” Filipinos already existed, particularly among the Christian lowlands of the Visayas region, which complicated the narrative needed to justify westward expansion. The division between those who practiced indigenous beauty standards vs those who were held to Western beauty standards created this tension and conflict of identities.

White bodies and black and brown bodies have different histories, and so the socially informed corporeal adornment of these bodies looks different. This is not to say that men of color don't have their history of wanting to look good, but rather that these sorts of practices are associated more with the repudiation of racial and ethnic marginalization than with the preservation of social advantage. (Barber, 2)

This manufactured division between those adhering to indigenous beauty standards and those conforming to Western ideals created a lasting tension around identity. As Barber (2002) notes, grooming practices for men of color are often rooted in negotiating racial and ethnic marginalization rather than preserving privilege.

Many Filipino-Americans across the United States draw from barbershop and hip-hop culture to create their own distinct sense of identity; an identity forged, much like that of African American

communities, in the fires of diaspora and postcolonial oppression. We wear flamboyant sneakers and color-coordinated outfits, expressions of style and pride that are accepted only in certain spaces.

What does it mean to get a haircut, if not to conform to a standard one never agreed to? A haircut can feel good, comforting even, but it's through the lens of double consciousness that the act becomes fraught, revealing layers of mixed emotions and identity conflict.



The moment the barber holds a mirror to one's face to reveal the transformation can be a jarring experience. The moment can be a recognition of either relief or shock.

Double consciousness is an experience shared across marginalized groups where one must constantly consider how they are perceived through the eyes of the hegemonic group, often white society (W. E.B. Du Bois). This will only be layered once people or artists from oppressed nations leave their homelands and relocate to the colonizer's country. The dominant oppressor controls the narrative through

visual culture. Once one develops this awareness of their double consciousness, it can result in a decolonized art practice.

Being bisexual in a manly space can be disorienting. Connell (2005) emphasizes that social rules on what it means to be a man or how a man should behave, once firmly entrenched in society, are responsible for consolidating a certain pattern of masculine conduct. Thus, in all societies, there is a conception of ideal or hegemonic masculinity, i.e., a model that is used as a reference for what it is to be masculine, which dictates the "most honorable way of being a man," and thus establishes the masculine condition as dominant and superior to others (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 245). What comes from this, is a general attitude in which presenting as feminine or queer is frowned upon or flat out rejected.

The barbershop creates a space where those that don't conform, or perform these aspects of masculinity appear to be queer which can prove to be dangerous. As there are hypermasculine performances in barbershops, such as aggression, self-reliance, dominance, and sexual prowess (Brannon & Juni, 1984) serve to mask the emotional vulnerability that emerges through acts of care and intimacy, like grooming. For queer men or those who deviate from these hegemonic norms, barbershops can become hostile spaces. Pereira and Ayrosa (2012) demonstrate how gay men strategically navigate consumption and identity within these environments, either signaling, concealing, or confronting their queerness.

I argue that because there is Intimacy among men in the barbershop, men can overcompensate with heteronormative behaviors, while subscribing to male beauty standards. With the perceived risks of vulnerability, it is often followed by a performance of toxic masculinity to counteract the perceived "feminine" acts of care.



Initially, my work explored the awkwardness of being a bisexual man in a hypermasculine barbershop environment. I wanted to show the toxicity of the barbershop by using synthetic and jarring pigments. Over time, the focus evolved toward capturing the tenderness and comfort men offer each other within these socially acceptable spaces. The vibrant color choices signal a queering of intimacy, celebrating moments of care and emotional connection often overlooked in a heteronormative space.

As I started to build rapport with Rex, I came to understand that it was far more than a haircut. The barbershop became a space for mentorship, community care, and for men who are touch-starved to experience connection through physical touch. Bryant Keith Alexander shares a similar experience in his own reflections.

“Luke leans his body against mine when he is trimming my facial hair. I am not sexualizing Luke or the experience, for he is a father figure. But I find that it is one of those few moments when men—and for me, Black men— come into an unacknowledged yet sanctioned intimate contact with each other. We understand the meaningfulness of the engagement, not only in the functionality of the action but in the knowing. The knowing—that a black man who knows and understands the growth pattern of Black hair and the sensitivity of Black skin—is caring for another black man.

Alexander reflects on the intimacy shared between Black men in barbershops, recognizing moments of trust and care during acts of care, like trimming facial hair. The barbershop is a beautiful space, an experience important to capture. If one peels back the layers, they will find that it is tender in the center.

The social environment within these barbershops is multifaceted and layered. On one level, it often upholds Western norms related to gender roles, grooming expectations, homophobia, and hypermasculinity. Prior to colonization, gender and its expression were understood more broadly in the Philippines. At the same time, these barbershops can also be deeply personal spaces, marked by tender physical interactions between men and moments of emotional openness, where trust is placed in another to shape one’s appearance. They also serve as sites where immigrant entrepreneurs pursue their own visions of success.

My paintings explore the nuances and tensions within the barbershop environment. They investigate how intimacy, sensitivity, and sexuality among men are negotiated within a specific hypermasculine space. Through painting, I aim to capture the interplay of tension and tenderness present

in these environments as they are; spaces shaped by colonial history, race, gender, and the complex performance of masculinity.



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