



MAKING MISCHIEF

Making Mischief

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

Making Mischief is a series of mixed media paintings about deviating from the norm. The creative shift that I went through in making this body of work mirrors my journey as a queer person, rejecting both the confines of traditional realism as well as the norms of a heteronormative society. In doing so, I have developed a new visual language that juxtaposes bold, graphic shapes with areas of realistically painted forms. My new paintings rely on the use of symbols to get my ideas across, allowing the viewer to bring their own associations and life experiences to my images. Some recurring themes in this body of work include sexuality, identity, and the celebration of human vices. I treat all these conceptual ideas in a playful way through my use of specific symbols, bold color, and patterns, creating a unified look throughout this body of work.

DEDICATION

To my mom and dad for their continued support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

MAKING MISCHIEF	1
DESCRIPTION	1
RESEARCH	7
METHODOLOGY	15
CONCLUSION	18
WORKS CITED	19
APPENDIX	20
ARTIST'S NOTE	32

TABLE OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1	<i>Hollywood Forever</i> , Agostino Vaccaro, 2020	2
FIGURE 2	<i>Satisfying Vices</i> , Agostino Vaccaro, 2021	4
FIGURE 3	<i>Who's Aroused by Red, Yellow, and Blue</i> . Agostino Vaccaro, 2021	5
FIGURE 4	<i>All That Glitters</i> , Agostino Vaccaro, 2021	6
FIGURE 5	<i>The Floorshow</i> , Agostino Vaccaro, 2020	9
FIGURE 6	<i>Heaven, Earth, Hell</i> , Agostino Vaccaro, 2020	10
FIGURE 7	<i>Walking Through a Daze</i> , Luke Pelletier, 2016	11
FIGURE 8	<i>Last Legs</i> , Agostino Vaccaro, 2020	12
FIGURE 9	<i>Selected Grapes</i> , Patrick Caulfield, 1981	13
FIGURE 10	<i>Preliminary Sketch for Who's Aroused by Red, Yellow, and Blue</i> , Agostino Vaccaro, 2020	15
FIGURE 11	<i>Preliminary Color Study for Who's Aroused by Red, Yellow, and Blue</i> , Agostino Vaccaro, 2020	16
FIGURE 12	<i>Linocut Border for Illusion of Truth</i> , Agostino Vaccaro, 2021	16
FIGURE 13	<i>Inked Linocut Border for Illusion of Truth</i> , Agostino Vaccaro, 2021	17
FIGURE 14	<i>Progress Image of Illusion of Truth</i> , Agostino Vaccaro, 2021	17

TABLE OF PLATES

PLATE 1	<i>Hollywood Forever, Agostino Vaccaro, 2020</i>	20
PLATE 2	<i>Satisfying Vices, Agostino Vaccaro, 2021</i>	21
PLATE 3	<i>Who's Aroused by Red, Yellow, and Blue. Agostino Vaccaro, 2021</i>	22
PLATE 4	<i>All That Glitters, Agostino Vaccaro, 2021</i>	23
PLATE 5	<i>Heaven, Earth, Hell, Agostino Vaccaro, 2020</i>	24
PLATE 6	<i>Shoot from the Hip, Agostino Vaccaro, 2021</i>	25
PLATE 7	<i>The Mystic, Agostino Vaccaro, 2021</i>	26
PLATE 8	<i>The Lover, Agostino Vaccaro, 2021</i>	27
PLATE 9	<i>The Dick Head, Agostino Vaccaro, 2021</i>	28
PLATE 10	<i>The Fool, Agostino Vaccaro, 2021</i>	29
PLATE 11	<i>Stairway to Heaven, Agostino Vaccaro, 2020</i>	30
PLATE 12	<i>Smoke and Mirrors, Agostino Vaccaro, 20020</i>	31

MAKING MISCHIEF

DESCRIPTION

During the Summer of 2020, in a makeshift studio at my parents' house amid a global pandemic, I stumbled upon a Wikipedia article that prompted a shift in my work. The article was for the word "Queering," which is the verb form of the word queer.

Prior to the 1940's, the word 'queer' was used to describe something odd or strange. Today, the word "queer" refers to a sexuality that deviates from heterosexual norms and is often used as an overarching umbrella term when talking about the LGBT+ community. In literary critic Michael Warner's *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, he states that "'Queer' gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual..." (Warner, 30-31). Warner's definition was an epiphany for me and the way I see myself as a queer artist. Discovering this quote by Warner was a catalyst for me to create my own queer style of painting, free of any rules and standards that realism imposes.

This new body of new work juxtaposes realistic painted forms with flat, graphic shapes that include symbols and decorative patterned borders. I have been able to utilize a variety of mediums including oil paint, acrylics, encaustic wax, and printmaking. The experimental nature of the work not only keeps me interested, but it also keeps my options open, allowing me to problem solve and work through challenges in an intuitive way, unlike I was able to do when I was more concerned with achieving only a high level of realism.

While earning my BFA at LCAD, I was taught to paint in a very classical way, depicting the forms naturally with a high degree of realism. During the first two semesters of my master's program, I started to deviate slightly from this style of realism by creating paintings of figures on theatrical stages, emphasizing the artificial, manmade nature of the theater as well as pushing saturated color to allude to the artifice of the scene. One of my paintings that best illustrates my early deviation from classical realism is *Hollywood Forever*, 2020 (Figure 1). This is a self-portrait painting that depicts me dressed like a flamboyant



cowboy on a theatrical stage, raising my arm to adjust my yellow-tinted glasses while I stare out into a rowdy

Figure 1. Agostino Vaccaro, *Hollywood Forever*, 2020, Oil on panel, 24 in. x 30 in.

audience. I am wearing a black western shirt adorned with white appliques and gold embroidery, trimmed with white fringe. I am wearing a black cowboy hat decorated with a band embellished with shiny silver studs, while around my neck, I am wearing a red bandana.

Behind me, a blue theatrical backdrop with a hand painted depiction of the Hollywood sign has been splattered with a rotten tomato thrown by a rowdy audience member, covering it in tomato pulp while its juice drips down the fabric. This painting is a coming-of-age piece representing the fading sense of security and fantasy of childhood, represented by the Hollywood sign on fire. My costume is not only a reference to the gay archetype of the cowboy, but it also is representative of the idea of playing pretend. The splattered tomato comes dangerously close to soiling the flamboyant costume, representing the threatening realities and responsibilities of the real world.

While my new body of work carries less complex conceptual narratives than my previous work, the images and symbols that I chose to juxtapose create my conceptual narratives. Some themes in my new body of work include a sense of identity, sexuality, breaking away from Catholicism, embracing human vices and pleasures, as well as the symbol of the Devil. Because of the visually bold and playful nature of this body of work, I can discuss these more serious topics, while maintaining a mischievous sense of humor.

An example of my playful treatment of otherwise serious subject matter would be my painting *Satisfying Vices*, 2021 (Figure 2). In this painting, graphic depictions of vices (including bright green smoke, white dice, and a bright red skull) are surrounded by three decorative borders. The border closest to the outside edge is a bright red, the next interior



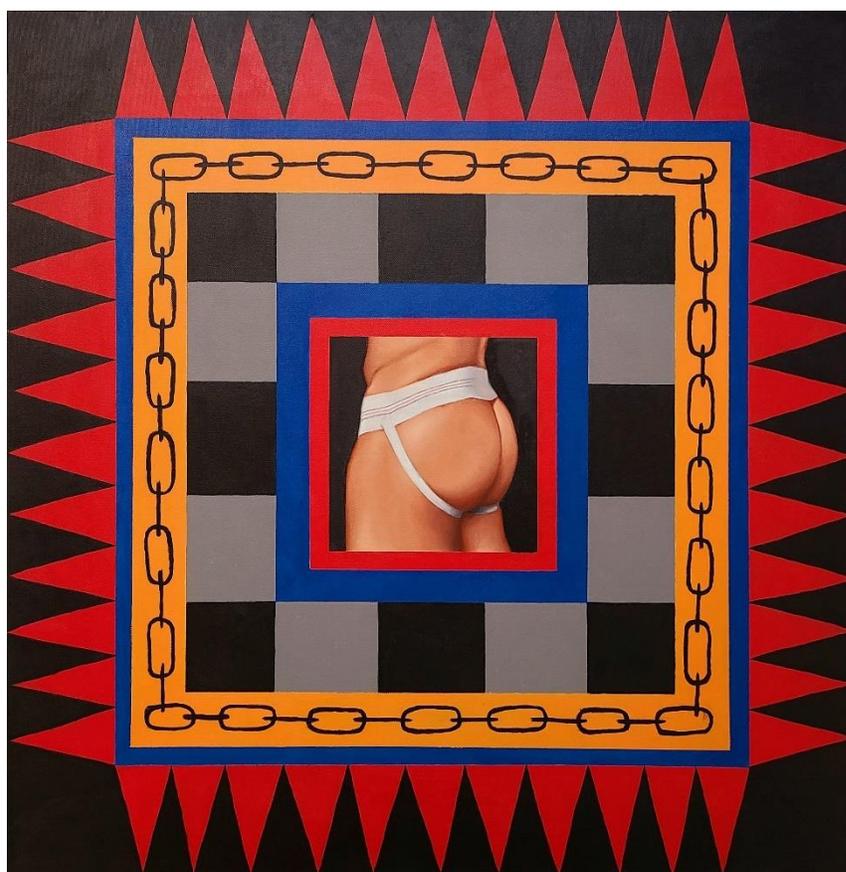
Figure 2. Agostino Vaccaro, *Satisfying Vices*, 2021, Oil on panel, 20 in. x 16 in.

border is a zig zag pattern made up of alternating off-white and black triangles, and the inner most border is purple. These borders make up what appears to be the edges of a painting hanging on a grey wall. The upper left corner of the painting features the letter A, while the upper right corner features the letter V, forming my initials. The lower left corner of the painting features the number 20, while the lower right corner features the number 21, forming 2021, the year

that the painting was completed in. While this painting may not carry a complex conceptual narrative, the bright colors and festive patterns in the borders and the still life objects were chosen to keep the overall mood of the painting playful, while it depicts objects that often are associated with death and addiction. These bright, candy-coated colors add to the inciting nature of the vices, removing the danger from them while presenting them as being enjoyable. While I am not sure what the painting-within-a-painting *trompe-l'oeil* means yet, I believe I will start to figure this out as I go further with this body of work.

In terms of using decorative borders in my work, I find that the patterned borders help to energize my paintings to create a sense of vibration. When using high chroma borders, I am able to direct my viewer's eye to exactly where I want them to look. These borders also help add a sense of importance and emphasize the subject matter that I put within them. I find that by adding more borders around a painting, I can make the viewer more interested in what I put in the center.

I take advantage of the utility of these borders in my painting, *Who's Aroused by Red, Yellow, and Blue*, 2021 (Figure 3). Named after Barnett Newman's series of



paintings, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue* (1966-1970), my painting challenges the viewer to look at a part of the human body that they may or may not find sexually attractive. The painting itself consists of six large borders stacked on top of each other, surrounding an image of a male butt in a jockstrap. From exterior to interior, there are a large border is made up of alternating red and black triangles, a thin blue border, a yellow border that features a chain-link pattern, a black

Figure 3. Agostino Vaccaro, *Who's Aroused by Red, Yellow, and Blue*, 2021, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 36 in. x 36 in.

and grey checkered border, a blue border, and finally a red border that surround the image of the butt.

I want to entice the viewer by rendering the male butt with a high degree of realism, while pushing the value contrast and saturation to achieve deliciously succulent highlights and sensual warm shadows. Allowing the viewer to examine their own sexuality and carnal desires while looking at this image, the title also reminds them that the painting is in fact, a painting. As the more educated of us know, all colors are made up of a combination of three primary colors: red, yellow, and blue. How silly it is of us to be sexually attracted to a painting; essentially colored mud smeared onto a mass-produced canvas?



Figure 4. Agostino Vaccaro, *All That Glitters*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 36 in. x 36 in. plane of white, surrounded by a border made up of alternating pink and black triangles. This

My painting, *All That Glitters*, 2021 (Figure 4) features a full-body self-portrait painted in a blue monochrome palette, a stack, of gold bars, and a red graphic symbol of a star. These images are suspended within a

painting represents the phrase, “Not all that glitters is gold.” While this painting does not hold a complex conceptual message, the experimental quality of this painting is representative of this new body of work. In the white background, I experimented with a thick application of encaustic wax, thin passages of dripping paint, and adding temperature variation to create an overall varied surface texture and appearance. After the success of this painting, I have integrated several of these formal elements into my later paintings in this body of work. I find that this kind of experimentation opens possibilities for me that strengthen my paintings as well as makes this new body of work more cohesive.

Throughout my process of creating this new body of work, I am constantly reminded of Michael Warner’s quote. I feel that the freedom to deviate from the normal (in this case, the norms of classical realism) allows me to create paintings that feel more honest to me, in terms of stylistic qualities. Working in this way leaves room for experimentation and intuitive decision making that was not possible for me when I felt confined by contemporary realism.

RESEARCH

Often when I speak about this new body of work, the word “flat” comes up. In using this word, I am referring to the graphic shapes that I have been using in my work. I find the contrast of realistically painted forms and flat shapes to be interesting when used together in the same painting. As a creative, I have always been attracted to visual contrast in terms of color, values, texture. I think that the contrast of flat shapes with realistically painted figures and still life objects is a unique juxtaposition that is not often taken advantage of by painters. One of these flat shapes that often shows up in my work is the symbol of a star. I am not

exactly sure where it originated from, but for years I have used this star shape in sketches and smaller paintings, but never in my larger, more “serious” work. I think part of the reason that I use the star as a symbol is that it helps to add a sense of mysticism or magic to the work. Being inspired by religious imagery, I want my work to feel as mystical and important as Catholic paintings do. I feel that this is a very powerful quality for a work of art to possess, and I attempt to inject the same quality into my own work.

Another symbol that appears often in my work is the symbol of the devil, as seen in my painting, *The Floorshow* (Figure 5). For me, the devil represents enlightenment, liberation, and a sense of playfulness. After leaving behind my Catholic faith, I felt more free to be my true self without the guilt that plagued me as a religious person. I no longer felt that I was disobeying God for being attracted to men, I no longer felt guilty for experimenting sexually, and I no longer felt that I had to behave a certain way to get to heaven. Being raised Catholic was a big contributing factor in my shame about being gay, and I feel incredibly glad that I have left my religious faith. Every year that passes that I’ve left the Catholic church, I feel more enlightened and prouder to be a gay man. I feel that the character of the devil is a good visual representation for leaving the Catholic church because he is the villain in Catholicism and in the bible. The semantic definition of the word “Satan” is “accuser” or “opposition,” which can be used as a metaphor for queer people who go against the church in their attraction to the same sex (LaVey, 55). For me, the devil also represents the same playfulness and mischievousness that I like to inject into my work. I feel that the very act of making this new kind of work is mischievous as a rejection to traditional realism.

Historically, in both Christianity and Catholicism, the Western concept of the devil

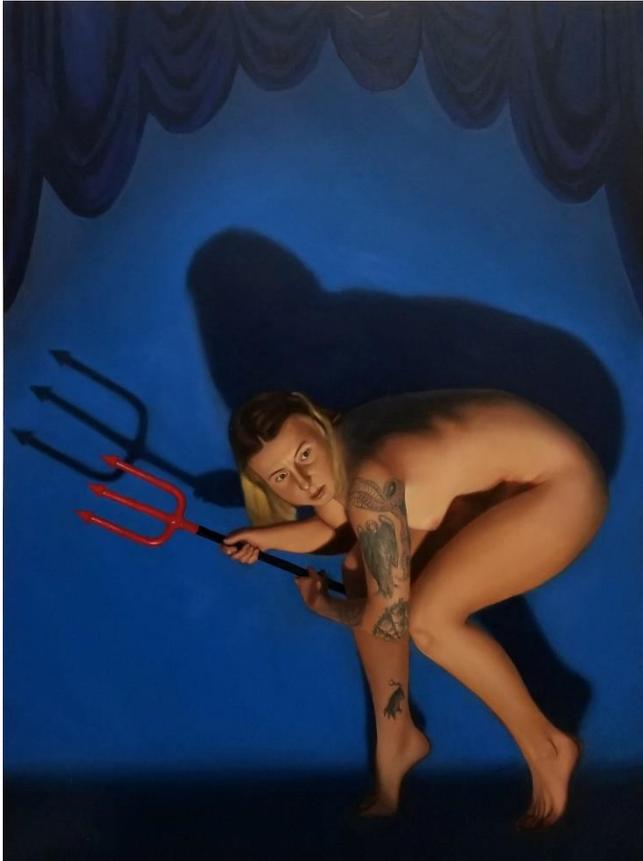


Figure 5. Agostino Vaccaro, *The Floorshow*, 2019, Oil on panel, 40 in x 30 in

has been associated with evil. As Ruben van Luijk states in his book, *Children of Lucifer: The Origins of Modern*

Religious Satanism, during both the American Revolution and the French Revolution, radical leftists often used Satan as a visual symbol of rebelling against the tyranny imposed by God (Luijk, 77-79). In the book, *The*

Invention of Satanism, Dyrendal, Asbjørn, and Lewis state that Satan was “a symbol for the struggle against tyranny, injustice, and oppression... a mythical figure of rebellion for an age

of revolutions, a larger-than-life individual for an age of individualism, a free thinker in an age struggling for free thought” (31). While I’m not using the devil as a symbol for liberation in terms of revolutionary war, I am using the symbol of the devil to rebel against the confines of both Catholicism and classical realism in order to move closer to my identity as an artist and my identity as a queer person.

Humor is almost always an element of my work. I am interested in making serious paintings that are playful and lighthearted. The duality of seriousness and playfulness is another form of contrast that I utilize in my work. In Susan Sontag's 1964 essay, *Notes on Camp*, she states that "The whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious.' One can be serious about the frivolous and frivolous about the serious" (10). I identify with this statement in terms of

my work, not only am I serious about making playful images, but my work is simultaneously serious in concept and campy at the same time. In other cases, I depict still life objects such as Trojan condom wrappers, tiki drinks, dice and stacks gold



Figure 6. Agostino Vaccaro, *Heaven, Earth, Hell*, 2020., Oil on playing cards.

bars to represent human vices, using humor to bring attention to the "sins" we all indulge in, as seen in my painting, *Heaven, Earth Hell* (Figure 6). I am celebrating our carnal desires and the delicious indulgences of humans. Because the images of condoms, fruity alcoholic drinks, and excessive wealth are playful in nature, I feel that I am able to discuss them without my paintings becoming too heavy or serious on a visual level. For me, the goal of

my work is to incite visual arousal and stimulate the viewer, even while discussing the darker, more indulgent side of human nature.

Some artists that I have been looking at for inspiration when creating this new work include Luke Pelletier and Patrick Caulfield. These artists make work that utilizes flat, graphic shapes juxtaposed with areas of more resolved forms. I feel that seeing the painting of these artists validates the new work that I am making and helps to diminish some of the hang ups that I have about making paintings that are far simpler than the previous work that I



Figure 7. Luke Pelletier, *Walking Through a Daze*, 2016, 46 1/10 in x 64 1/5 in, Acrylic on canvas.

trees, alligators, billiard balls, dice, and skulls. In an interview titled *Art School / Q&A with Luke Pelletier* found on House of Vans' blog, Pelletier talks about his use of these symbols. In his own words, Pelletier states,

I think about a lot of my imagery like a vocabulary. I can reorganize it and the painting can mean something else, or look completely different. As far as what I put in my paintings, it's usually something I'm interested in. It's always hard to articulate why you like

was creating.

Pelletier is an artist who makes paintings that feature graphic shapes and a heavy use of personal symbols (Figure 7).

These include stylized depictions of palm

the things you like because you can like some things for different reasons. Sometimes it's purely formal. Sometimes it's because the object has a specific meaning to me.

Like Pelletier, I utilize personal symbolism throughout my work in a very specific way.

I have very specific symbols and patterns that I use repeatedly. At times, a symbol can help contribute to a certain paintings' conceptual narrative, but if used in another painting, the symbol becomes merely decorative. An example of this is the graphic chain pattern found in both of my paintings *Last Legs*, 2020, (Figure 8) and *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?* (2021). In the case of my painting, *Last Legs*, the chain motif present in the top border of the canvas, alludes to our required lockdown during the current COVID-19 pandemic. In *Who's Aroused by Red, Yellow, and Blue?*, the chain motif used in one of the many borders becomes purely decorative.

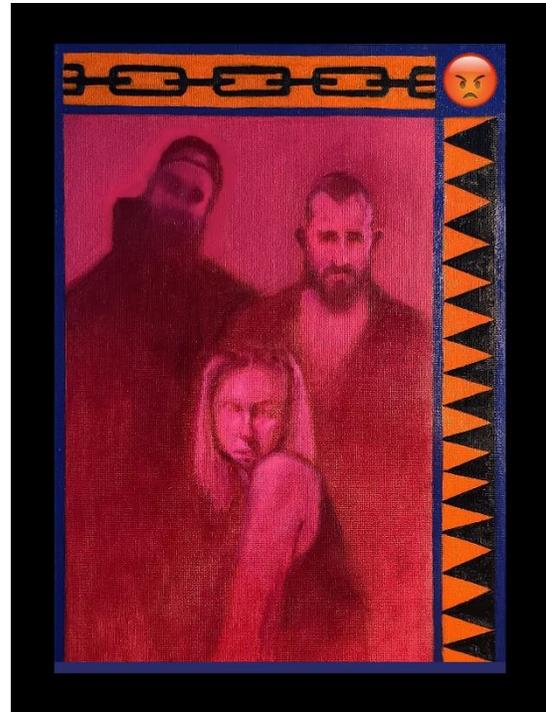


Figure 8. Agostino Vaccaro, *Last Legs*, 2020, Oil on canvas.

For a 2013 exhibition of Caulfield's work, The Tate states that in the 1970's, Caulfield began painting *trompe-l'oeil* still life objects onto his paintings that were depicting interior spaces made up of graphic shapes of color. In his painting, *Selected Grapes*, 1981 (Figure 9) a graphic depiction of a bunch of grapes appears to come to life. Four grapes in this painting are painted with a high degree of realism while the rest of the painting is completed in solid shapes of color. According to The Tate's website, Caulfield played with this contrast to defy definitions of reality and artifice.



Figure 9. Patrick Caulfield, *Selected Grapes*, 1981, 17.95 in x 23.86 in, Oil and acrylic on canvas

Similarly, my new body of work incorporates areas of graphic shapes as well as areas of rendered form. While he did this in his work to challenge conceptual ideas of reality and artifice, I choose to do this as a stylistic choice to develop an art style that is both honest and unique

to me.

While my new work is a lot simpler than the paintings I was making previously, I am still painting some realistic figures and still life objects. In my new work I am utilizing my knowledge of composition, color, values, and rhythm to make interesting images. These new paintings present different challenges than my previous paintings did and are often more

difficult to resolve. An example of this is in the negative space around the figures, still life objects, and graphic shapes. To resolve these types of challenges, I have to apply paint in ways that I never had to before when I was making realistic work. This includes allowing fluid layers of paint to drip on the surface of the painting, incorporating printmaking techniques onto my painting surfaces, and utilizing encaustic wax to create texture in my work. I find that experimenting with these new techniques not only makes the surface of my paintings appear richer, but it also opens up possibilities for me as a painter.

By utilizing flat graphic shapes, pattern, and dramatic visual contrast alongside areas of realistic painted forms in my work, I am selectively rejecting my initial classical realist style in favor of a new style of painting that better captures my interest and allows me to explore conceptual ideas more freely. I attribute this shift in my work to Warner's quote and definition of the word "queer," allowing myself to break free stylistically from the confines of classical realism.

METHODOLOGY

The process of making this new body of work reminds me of the way I would create as a kid. Sitting at the kitchen table in my childhood home, I would use Crayola markers, crayons, construction paper, scissors, and glue to create whatever I wanted. I feel that this same sense of spontaneity is present in my new work, and I have a genuinely good time while creating it. I attribute this to the experimental nature of this body of work. Because what I am doing is so new, the confines of the work have not yet been established, giving me room to play.

Throughout the course of these past two semesters, my painting process has changed now that I have introduced graphic shapes and patterned borders into my paintings. I often will use various techniques and approaches depending on my mood

and how each technique fits the need of each painting. Typically, I will start with a rough sketch of my idea for a painting, as seen in this preliminary sketch for *Who's Aroused by Red, Yellow and Blue* (Figure 10). Once I have a rough drawing of my idea, I will refine it, shifting elements until I am happy with the composition. At this point, I do a small color



Figure 10. Preliminary Sketch for *Who's Aroused by Red, Yellow, and Blue*, 2020. Graphite on paper.



Figure 11. Preliminary Color Study for *Who's Aroused by Red, Yellow, and Blue*, 2020. 12" x 12", Oil an acrylic on canvas

study of my painting, determining the colors and type of paint handling that I want to use in my final version of the painting. During this phase of my process, I like to allow my ideas to flow freely, trying out things that I would not normally do if I were to start painting right on the canvas. This preliminary color study for *Who's Aroused by Red, Yellow,*

and Blue (Figure 11)

illustrates this stage of planning a painting. When I begin painting on the final large canvas, I use blue painter's tape to mask off the borders to achieve clean edges. When painting my patterned borders, I begin by filling them in with a solid layer of oil or acrylic paint. Once this layer is dry, I go in with black paint to add the contrasting patterns.



Figure 12. *Linocut border for Illusion of Truth*, 2021. 9" x 12", Carved linoleum mounted on board.

When deciding the thickness and number of borders to use on each painting or print, I usually make decisions in an intuitive way. I find that the more borders that I put around an image, the more important an image becomes. This is really the only formulaic rule that I give myself in terms of designing borders. In some cases, I will freehand the rectangular shape of the border, while other times I use painter's tape as previously mentioned.

Recently, I have been experimenting with linoleum block printing to create identical, easily reproducible

borders for a smaller series of paintings that I am making. To achieve this, I draw my border

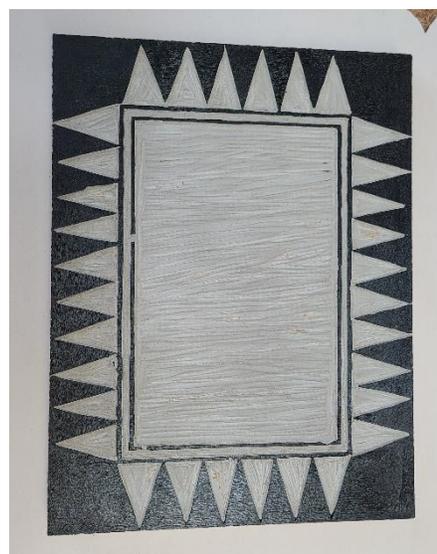


Figure 13. *Inked linocut border for Illusion of Truth, 2021. 9" x 12"* Carved linoleum mounted on board.

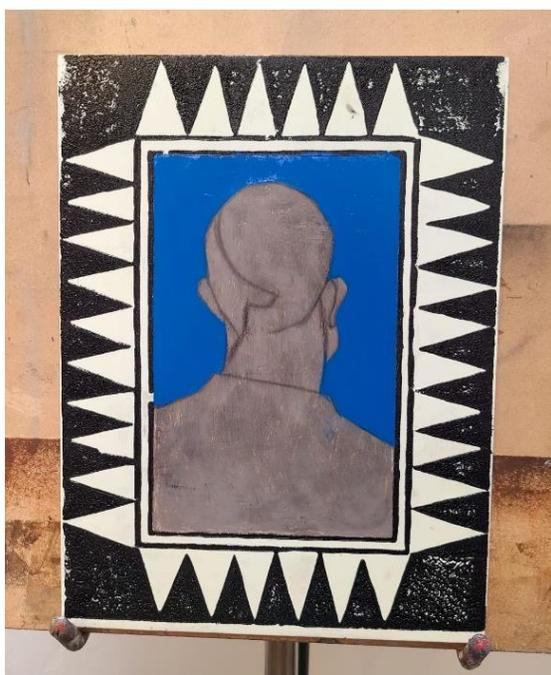


Figure 14. *Progress image of Illusion of Truth, 2021. 9" x 12"*, Oil and ink on panel.

on a linoleum block with graphite before carving out the negative space. Because block printing is a subtractive form of printmaking, the areas that I carve away appear as negative white space once the block is printed with black ink. (Figure 12). Once I finish carving, I use a roller to roll ink or oil paint onto the surface of the block (Figure 13). I then treat the inked linoleum block like a stamp, pressing it face down onto my panel. I find that this creates an interesting textured look that contrasts with the smooth,

shiny surface of my oil paintings. Another benefit to using this technique is that because of the sometimes-unpredictable nature of handmade printmaking, each printed border is unique. There are often areas where the border does not print as well, leaving interesting texture as well as artifacts of the white panel showing through (Figure 14).

Experimentation drives this body of work on a technical level. I've learned that this helps me stay interested in what I am doing, and that experimentation is crucial for my growth as an artist.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the process of earning my master's degree at LCAD, I have been able to mature not only as an artist, but also as a queer person. While creating my thesis project, I have developed a cohesive style that is unique to me while giving myself the agency to take risks and be spontaneous. Before I created this body of work, I was hesitant to take risks and experiment in fear of failure. I now see failure as an opportunity to problem solve, challenging myself to go on the adventure of fixing something that did not work as well as I had hoped.

I feel a greater sense of confidence calling myself a queer person having made this body of work. In creating this body of work, I was able to break free from the confines of traditional realism, allowing me to have a greater sense of pride and authorship than I had previously as both an artist and a queer person.

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APPENDIX



Plate 1. Agostino Vaccaro, *Hollywood Forever*, 2020, Oil on panel, 24 in. x 30 in.



Plate 2. Agostino Vaccaro, *Satisfying Vices*, 2021, Oil on panel, 20 in. x 16 in.



Plate 3. Agostino Vaccaro, *Who's Aroused by Red, Yellow, and Blue*, 2021, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 36 in. x 36 in.



Plate 4. Agostino Vaccaro, *All That Glitters*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 36 in. x 36 in.



Plate 5. Agostino Vaccaro, *Heaven, Earth, Hell*, 2020., Oil on playing cards.



Plate 6. Agostino Vaccaro, *Shoot from the Hip*, 2021, Oil on Canvas, 36" x 36"



Plate 7. Agostino Vaccaro, *The Mystic*, 2021, Oil and ink on panel, 9" x 12"

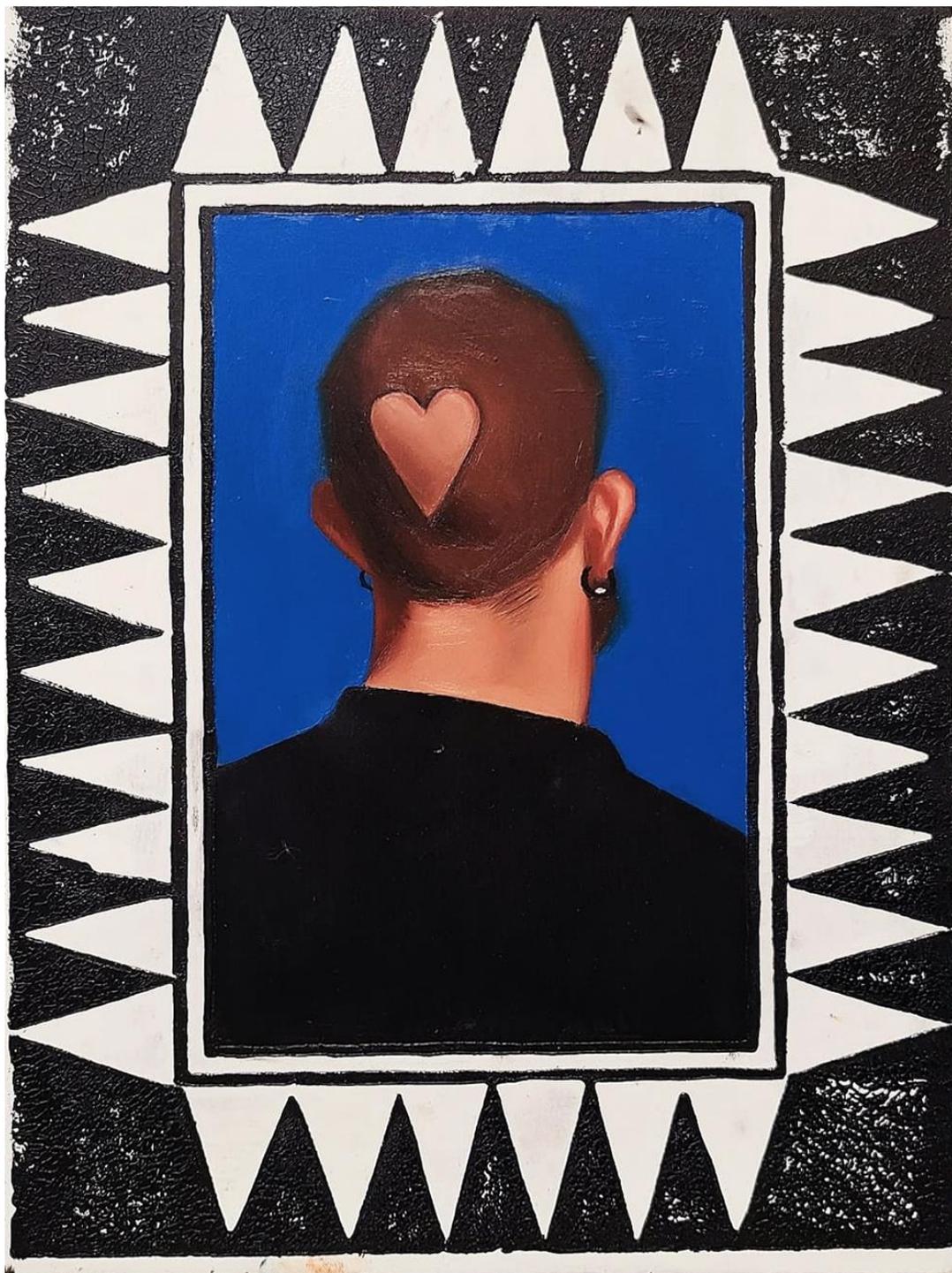


Plate 8. Agostino Vaccaro, *The Lover*, 2021, Oil and ink on panel, 9" x 12"

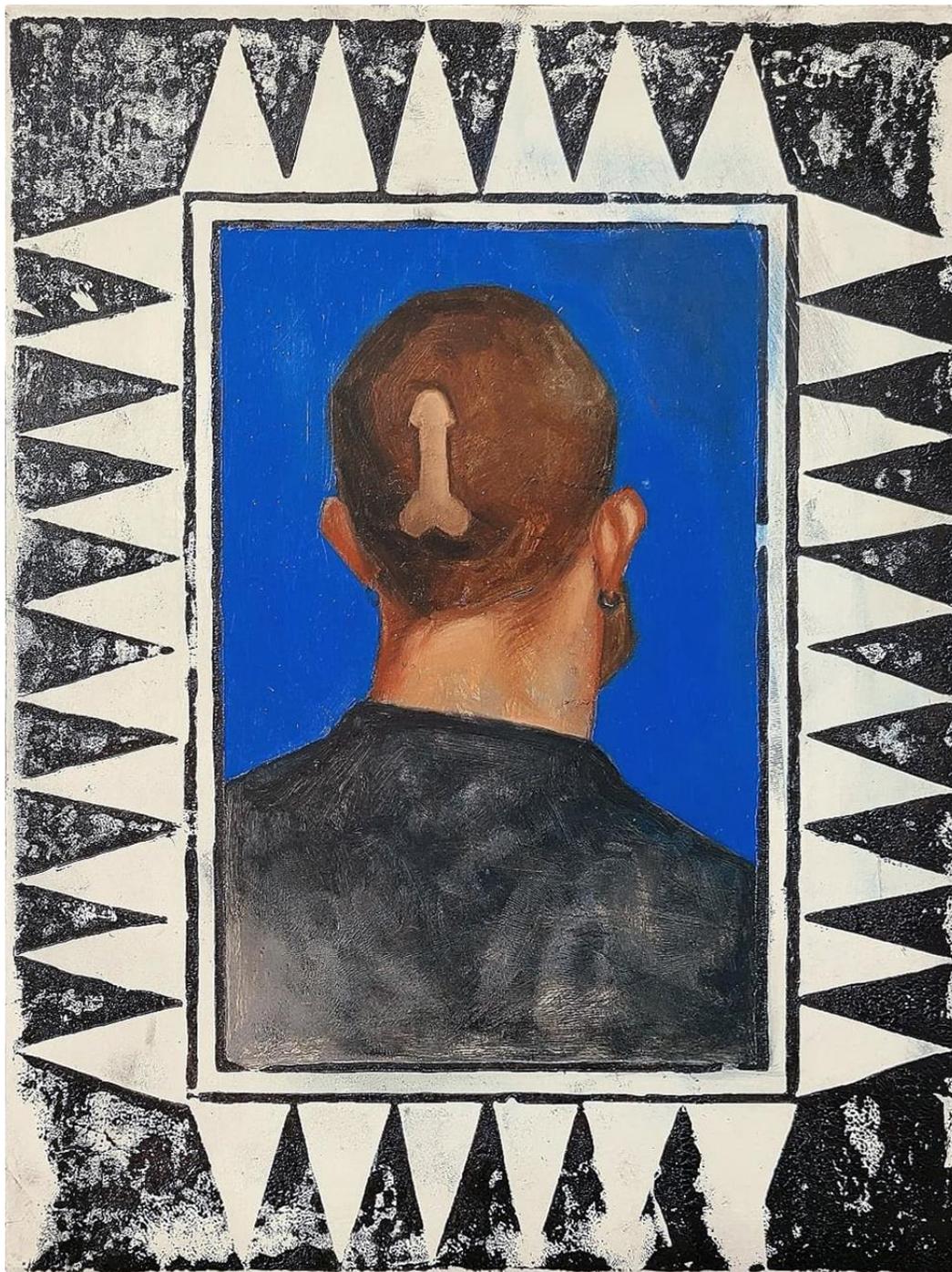


Plate 9. Agostino Vaccaro, *The Dick Head*, 2021, Oil and ink on panel, 9" x 12"

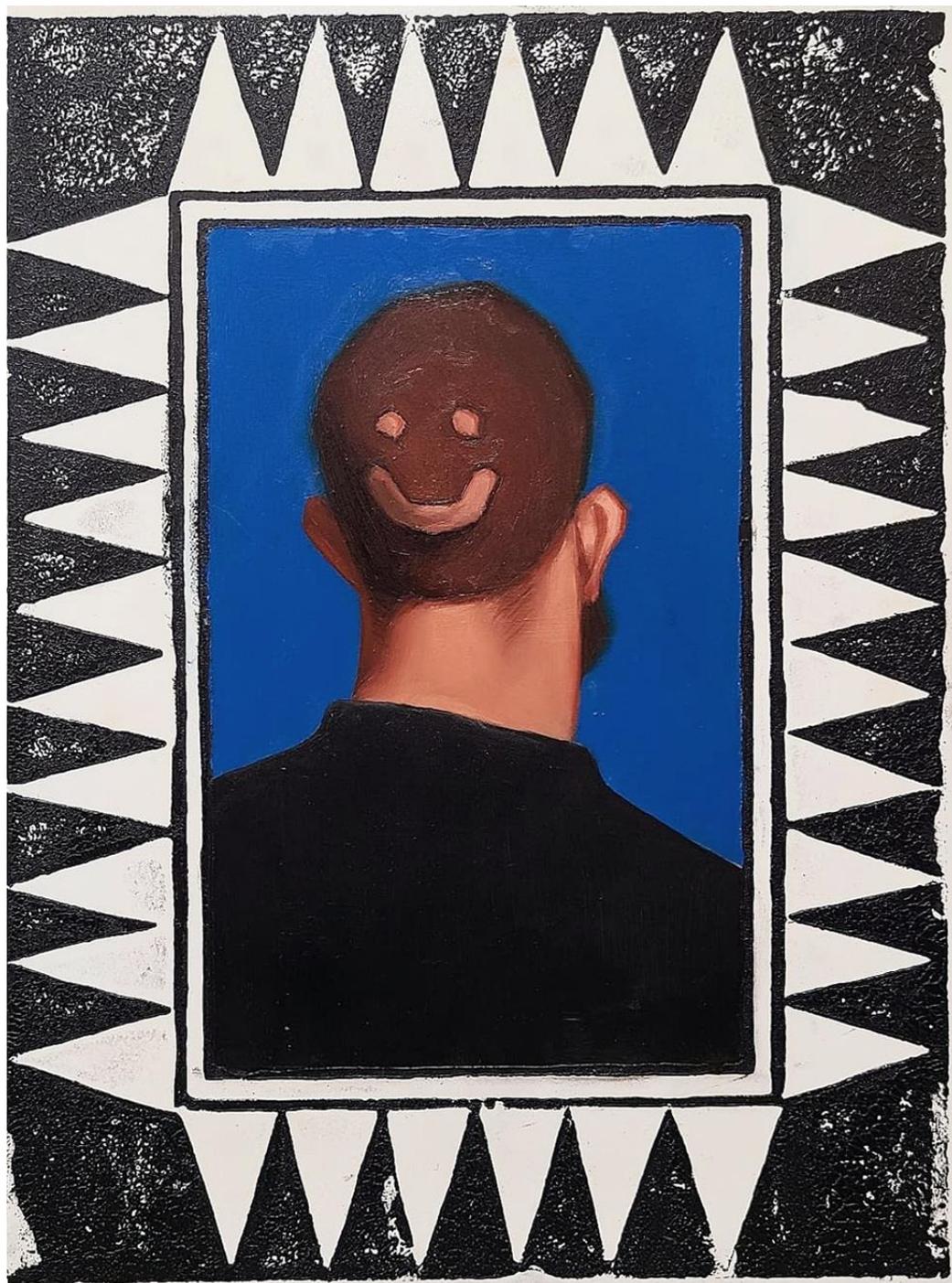


Plate 10. Agostino Vaccaro, *The Fool*, 2021, Oil on Panel, 9" x 12", Oil and ink on panel.



Plate 11. Agostino Vaccaro, *Stairway to Heaven*, 2020, Ink on paper, 8" x 10"



Plate 12. Agostino Vaccaro, *Smoke and Mirrors*, 2020, Ink on paper, 8" x 10"

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