

CASSILS: SOLUTIONS





Encapsulated Breaths, 2017
Hand-blown glass
Various sizes, approximately 4 in. to 16 in. diameter

Extinguishable Fire, 2015
Large-scale video projection with sound, looping
Installation, run time 26:08

Solutions, installation view at the Station Museum
of Contemporary Art, Houston, TX, 2018.

THE ALCHEMY OF QUEER GRIT

by Kelly Johnson

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In a time of severe backlash against trans bodies nationally, it is imperative to publicly exhibit this chronicle of queer tenacity as a testament to trans survival. Cassils approaches art making as alchemy, transforming performance works into rituals of persistence and witness. Within these rituals, the artist takes a critical stance against the recent wave of hateful, violent policies enacted toward trans communities and othered bodies.

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Cassils, *Indistinguishable Fire* (2015), 26 minute video projection. *Encapsulated Breaths* (2017), hand-blown glass.

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Cassils' catalytic work, *PISSED*, was created in response to the Trump Administration's rescinding of protections for transgender students in 2017, disallowing trans students from using restrooms corresponding with their gender identity. The Trump administration has rolled back many other protections, including banning transgender people from service in the military; allowing discrimination against transgender people in the workplace, housing, and healthcare; and threatening to narrow federal definitions of gender to biological sex.

Locally, Houstonians still mourn the overwhelming rejection of the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO) in 2015, which highlighted community fears of granting protections to trans and gender nonconforming bodies, especially in public restrooms. This fear is often translated into physical violence, Equality Texas reported that the state led in hate-related homicides against LGBTQ people in 2017. More recently in spring of 2019, Houston Public Library was forced to end their joyful Drag Queen Storytime program, as performers and organizers were threatened with violence by vicious, armed protesters.

Cassils' response to these endless acts of violence against trans and queer bodies is to use art as "a prayer for political

climate change: invok[ing] Athena, Goddess of War, in elemental rituals of the sacred and the profane.” As art provides a critical outlet to imagine new modes of being, it also creates a safe space to practice compassion by centering the artist’s perspective. Cassils calls upon each object and performance to serve as an alchemical prayer, inspiring a path to change with each element.



Cassils, *PISSED* (2017-), 200 gallons of urine, 8,338 grams of boric acid, plexiglass. *200 Days, 200 Gallons* (2017), 260 24-hour medical urine capture containers.

This invocation for change commences with Cassils’ *PISSED* (2017-), a mesmerizing cube of shimmery urine, swirling atop a pristine pedestal with a pump hidden inside to maintain the liquid’s movement. The sculpture is backdropped by *200 Days, 200 Gallons* (2017), stacked columns of medical urine containers from a local “urine drive,” in which Houstonians participated to complete *PISSED*.

Together the works establish the rough form of a temple, a sacred monument standing in solidarity with all whose bodies are policed and rejected by hateful bathroom bills, which have also been famously considered by the Texas State legislature in past sessions.

Like a golden lava lamp, *PISSED* is effective in its simplicity. The work is at once serious and heartening in its production and symbolism, plus it’s totally gross, hilarious, and weirdly beautiful—it’s a giant cube of glittering pee! The collaborative format extends the life of the sculpture, allowing this important conversation to be held in other communities.

In the original durational work displayed at Ronald Feldman Gallery in NYC, Cassils collected more than 200 gallons of their own urine from February to September 2017 to fill the sculpture, carrying medical containers with them wherever they went. Cassils originally wanted to mail the piece to the White House in protest, but it would have been considered an act of biowarfare. It’s telling that restricting bathroom access is not also considered biological warfare.



Cassils, *The Resilience of the 20%* (2016), cast bronze.

The litany continues with visceral works that focus on Cassils' individual endurance, confronting the physical, psychological, and generational harm against trans and queer communities with their own body. Cassils hijacks gestures of violence perpetrated on trans bodies and combines them with their own rage in the face of enduring injustice to channel *The Resilience of the 20%*, *Ghosts*, and *The Powers That Be* (2016).

Fist- and stomp-prints rendered in clay, grunts and yells from the corners of a pitch-black room, and the exhausting dance of grappling with an invisible sparring partner each indicate violence as a spectre that follows and haunts trans bodies. These ritualistic performances of stamina combat the constant existential threat faced by trans folk.

Analyzing this legacy of violence on collective queer bodies, *Aline's Orchard (Between Scandal and Oblivion)* (2018) and *103 Shots* (2016) each address the "disorienting effect of violence in the space of intimacy." Recreating a popular Los Angeles cruising site with sensory elements like a grass floor, and the projected scents and sounds of sex, *Aline's Orchard* contends with the removal and policing of queer meeting spaces, as lawmakers and communities continue to find insidious ways to eliminate, straight-wash, or buy out these spaces. This is happening here too in Montrose as gentrification pushes queer individuals and businesses out from the former Houston gayborhood.

103 Shots contextualizes the horror of the 2016 Pulse shooting. A survivor recounted his initial confusion at hearing gunshot noises in the club, thinking they were celebratory fireworks or balloons popping. Cassils directed a video at a recent San Francisco Pride celebration, asking couples and friends to burst a balloon between their bodies with the force of their embrace—103 gestures of affection for the number of bullets fired that night. The video echoes with sharp bursts and looks of surprise and discomfort on the pairs' faces, providing a metaphor for the potential danger that lingers among these sacred moments in demonstrations of care.

Inextinguishable Fire (2015) and *Encapsulated Breaths* (2017) feature a larger-than-life video of Cassils burning in both protest and determination, foregrounded by 14 fragile hand-blown glass bubbles matching the number of seconds Cassils' body is engulfed by flames. The artist on fire conjures monumental images of crucifixion and self-immolation—a body suffering in defiance of an unjust political situation. Though as the stunt crew extinguishes the inferno, Cassils could be seen as a phoenix rising from the ashes, representing those trans folx able to escape or survive danger, living to speak their truth.



Cassils with Keijaun Thomas, Fanna, and Rafa Esparza, *Solutions* (2018), 15 minute 4-channel video projection on plexiglass.

Solutions (2018) features Cassils with Keijaun Thomas, Fanna, and Rafa Esparza, melting ice sculptures with their naked bodies in a collaborative performance of physical and mental endurance. Each artist, whose “subject positions differ, but whose civil rights are all being eroded by the current US administration,” selected a mythical image to be made into a large ice sculpture, then identified a gesture with which to confront and transform it. Together, the artists’ efforts to melt or deconstruct these prescriptive social structures that restrict bodies become a chorus of persistence, united in respect and care for one another’s struggles.

As a benediction, Cassils’ *Alchemic* series with photographer Robin Black (2017) solidifies the theme of collective transformation in exaltation of trans bodies. Quietly stunning cropped photos of Cassils’ flexing body covered in gold paint “appl[y] [an] alchemic process to the subject of trans embodiment, gilding and exalting the self-determined trans body to monumental proportions,” as described by Cassils and Julia Steinmetz.

Throughout *Solutions*, Cassils harnesses the alchemic power of the four elements to transform individual and collective queer trauma into vulnerable moments for justice and compassion. Battered clay and trampled grass (earth) become monuments to survival, testifying voices and encapsulated breath (air) stand witness to struggle, a body engulfed in fire (literally) demonstrates defiance and resilience, and golden piss and melting ice (water) illustrate community solidarity and challenge imposed limitations of the physical body and identity.

Each of these works of “elemental rituals of the sacred and the profane” are used to process and defy the barrage of violence, while upholding the sacredness of this wild, miraculously complex experience that it is to be human. *Solutions*

references not only the liquids of blood, sweat, tears, and urine that manifested this artwork, but also suggests that art can be an answer to the cultural and political issue of disembodiment—a desire to distance oneself from the interrelatedness of all physical lived experience, often resulting in doing harm intentionally or unintentionally to others.

Cassils has the powerful ability to transfer a feeling or perspective from their own embodied experience directly to the viewer through the experience of their work. Cassils puts their body in constant states of danger and struggle in authentic ways such that the viewer cannot look away. Their grit is striking, and cannot be ignored. This is the process of alchemy, as the viewer is drawn to serve as witness and participant in the artist's vulnerability, thus Cassils transforms art into a tool for empathy building, education, visibility, and inquiry.

This work calls upon viewers to take on the responsibility of posing questions about our own bodies, identities, and privileges. *Solutions* calls for cis folks to question how we uphold transphobic behavior and policies, just like white folks need to critically examine our role in upholding white supremacy, and hetero folks need to critically examine their role in upholding homophobia, etc.

Solutions calls for lawmakers, family, friends, employers and business owners, teachers, and all humans to engage in self-education on gender identity; listen to and believe stories of trans and nonbinary folx to better understand their experiences; ask for, respect, and use people's pronouns; and challenge transphobic and sexist remarks, actions, and policies. With compassion, accountability and a lot of grit, we can each be a small part of the solution, working together to build a less violent, more caring world.