A man breaks into the demolition site of 12th Street Gym. He searches through the rubble with the help of the ghosts. Amongst the debris he finds some aluminium railings, which once lined the stairwell, floating in sun rays.

On a white wall, mounted on a steel hook, hang two D-handles. Along the grip, wrapped tightly around the form, is the aluminium excavated from the site. It bears the imprints of a hand. The valleys of the finger's creases invert to peaks, and the rest of the bulbous metal mirrors the welding along the top of the D-handle. The metal is cold but the history warm. It's a work from the series, *Hold On Me,* by artist Nicolo Gentile, who over a period of months conducted interviews with local queers for his publication, *Queer and Now*, based on the Eve Sedgwick essay of the same name. During these conversations, Gentile was told countless personal histories about 12th Street. Some cruisy, others impassioned. Everyone had a story. 'I felt like I needed to do something with this,' he told me when we spoke over Zoom, 'I missed 12th Street, I wasn't a member, so all this history is happening before my time.'

There're two more works in this series. One is a 20kg barbell, used for compound movements, where the spectral hands are placed as if the spirit is about to perform a chest press or back row; the other is a lat pulldown bar, which hangs on the wall like a trophy stag.

The mouldings on these works were taken while conducting the interviews. The works have the actual grip of somebody who once attended the gym, but the material itself is left to speak on their behalf. How many hands touched that piece of aluminium as they descended, ascended, through the stairwell? How many men propped themselves up against its cold frame after sucking somebody off in the shower? What conversations, or whispers, did it eavesdrop on? Did it take part? But even so, even with the initial muse of these works being so intrinsically tied to a physical space in Midtown Philadelphia, a space in which neither Gentile, nor myself, ever stepped foot inside, a space which is no more, the lingering presence of a touch is so paramount to them as objects. The hand that reaches out across time; one's grip as it holds the hand of a dying partner, refusing to let go; the grip on the sense of self. Although it's a commemorative work for 12th Street, the works themselves don't feel singular in their response. They are not only about this one gym. If I'm being honest, they don't feel like they are about the gym at all. Instead, they are about the desire for Gentile to create space for queer elders in his practice, to project onto the archive, to find kinship with the voices of the past.

This is the difficulty with Gentile's work. It holds many temporalities in its material, and aesthetic, construction that the lines between them blur. Like the men in the showers. When making the work he was asking himself if this 'pursuit was a recapitulation on the aesthetics of the oppressor,' that is: he was questioning his use of gym apparatus as creative material. What did it mean for him, a gay man, to appropriate these elements of heteronormativity, of straightness, into a queer practice?

Born in '91 he's been training, like me, since his early 20s. Struggling with a kind of

depression that leads to apathy, he found, after many pursuits of remedies, a physical outlet worked best. Be that on the school volleyball team or playing tennis. His Sagittarius Mars placement helped a lot, he told me. On Zoom he takes up most of the screen. He's wearing a tight-fitting quarter button shirt, not unlike the ones J. used to wear when I first met him, and his shoulders fight against the cotton for dominance. His long curly hair is tied tightly into a bun and he's adorning a pair of black framed glasses; he has a thick moustache. When he speaks, he speaks with his hands. 'I was fat and faggy' he said. 'And there was a dysphoria there, in terms of how I felt in my body, but I thrive on dissonance, and friction, I enjoy being a bit of a thorn in the side of things.' Queer people are always a thorn, covered in glitter.

The gym is a site of self-awareness, surrounded by mirrors, we are there on a particular pursuit. As a sculptor, Gentile is aware that the manipulation of material, in space, has effects. His body is just an extension of that practice. One thing queer people know more than anything is their own bodies, the way it moves through space, and how they are orientated to those around them; what is projected out and what recedes. Even before he started training, as he sashayed down the street in a crop top, his physical form was always a game to him, something to play with. A bit like art.

In the search for a sustained studio practice, he turned to what he knew, adopting the scaffolding of the gym to be something upon which he could hang is practice, like a sweat towel or painter's rag. The discipline of the gym — turning up every day, counting reps, increasing weight etc. — reflects the language used to speak about mediums, (painting as a discipline, sculpture as one too), and an art practice in general. Turing up to the studio in a quest of challenging oneself and output. In his earlier works, the body is less present, only suggested through the objects on show: a vest made of chains; various sport balls forged from animal hides; a basketball net which cascades from the hoop and flows along the gallery floor. Or a running jacket, suspended on the wall, next to a piece of paper where he would draw for the same length of time as the run he just completed, the sheet getting darker and darker, as the jacket gets lighter and lighter, sun bleached and stained with sweat.

As his practice at the gym swirled around the one in his studio, this mirroring became more apparent. Being a gay man there was an interpolation of the sense of self with all the ideologies we are called to participate in. This echoed the construction of himself in a display of a masculine gender, as well as the construction of himself as an artist. The collisions of the two disciplines were fertile. The content of the work became informed by the merger. 'I found, and find, that after this pursuit, and this considerable transformation of my physical form, the ability to then navigate spaces that are "deemed unavailable to me," or the new discomfort I express in others …' he tails off, sighs. 'It's fascinating, and I don't see the work slowing down, it's an ever-changing environment, and question.'

His work is rooted in the gym as a queer site, as a space where kink, power, and masculinities brush up against one another (there's that friction). He references Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and José Esteban Muñoz throughout our conversation, wrapping Queer theory over metal and iron like a lifting strap. In his work the body is absently present, and despite the fact that

'queer abstraction and [him] are on the rocks' there's still a relevance, at least in the work made since 2021. Take, for example, *Drop My Body*, where a crumpled leather jacket, cast from paraffin wax and stained with leather dye, lays on the floor as if fallen from the changing room hook. Its sleeves crossed as if in a coffin and embedded within it are twelve burning candles. The work is a commemoration of loss, where the candles burn in remembrance, and across its surface black tears creep over failed zips and useless pockets. They search for meaning in the devastation.

And then there's *Hold On Me (BodyPro 961),* a red leather bench press mounted on the wall. It holds a steel barbell with the indentations of a hand along its knurled surface, and on either end, a 50lbs weight plate, also showing the handling from a body. The imprints are electroformed aluminium from the original pillaging of the demolition site. At the base of the bench a leg extension has been fitted: a crucifix with no victim. Leaning against the wall is a 25lbs plate with the relics of a pair of hands — thumbs and meat of the palms — fusing with the metal as if the body was about to load it onto the barbell, then thought better of it, tossing it to the side. In all the *Hold On Me* works, within the metal, and leather, and phantom flesh, there's a fear of mortality. There're so many absences.

One year after 12th Street Gym opened the first cases of Gay-Related Immune Deficiency are recorded in the United States. It would be renamed Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in 1982. From 1981 through 1990, 100,777 deaths were reported to the CDC by local, state, and territorial health departments, referencing AIDS as the cause. Gay men, and queer people, saw their friends and loved ones perish at the hands of the virus, becoming frail and weak as it ravished their bodies. At a time when Jane Fonda was realising her home workout videos, dressed in neon leg warmers and striped leotards, being gay was unfortunately linked with being ill, with articles by the likes of *The New York Times* referring to it, in a quote, as a 'gay plague'. These sorts of diseases, 'the most feared,' as Sontag notes, 'those that are not simply fatal but transform the body into something alienating … are the ones that seem particularly susceptible to promotion to "plague."' She later goes on to say how, at the time of her writing, AIDS was 'understood in a premodern way,' which is to say, that in homophobic 1980s/90s America and Britain, that AIDS was seen as a disease incurred by members of a "risk group" which 'revives the archaic idea of a tainted community that illness has judged.'

What were gay men to do in this time of such heightened anxiety? While some were driven to celibacy, others were determined to be seen as separate from "them". Instead of ingesting class A's, sniffing poppers, and boogying to Whitney Houston on the dance floor, they hit the gym. Exchanged baggies of Coke and MDMA for protein powders, Disco tracks for barbells, and neon shorts for … another pair of neon shorts. They pushed weight and pumped iron in the wake of their community's destruction. They broke themselves down to build themselves back up. They became obsessed with health. If they could mould a body which projected this idea, they would not only be seen as "not gay" but also indicate that they were free from the virus. For as long as they were spending hours in the gym, altering themselves to meet some predetermined level of idealised healthy perfection, they could starve off the Angel of Death.

At least for a while.

These ideas of health haunt the gay community. It presses up against our bodies and attempts a possession. According to Dr Avery Gordon, ghosts are 'attached to the events, things, and places that produced them in the first place; by nature they are haunting reminders,' and these are some of the very ghosts seen in Gentile's work. Growing up in the wake of the epidemic, inheriting the trauma of a time before his own, he's able to ground his work, and take a reflective, critical, position in the structures that reflect on himself, and the community at large. It also holds, within its aluminium cast grip, a sensitivity to the fragility of life. 'I was a very sensitive kid. I still am. When I was four years old, I was dealing with experiences of mortality; I would wake myself up at night crying.' And, I guess, it was this perception of a greater threat, which later became terrorism, which now is Fascism, that flexed in the face of that anxious child in Upstate New York.

'The culturalisation of the AIDS epidemic made its way into my psyche, and has now materialised in how I self-present,' he says, rather matter-of-factly, before going on to list, in a bout of tentative candour, the number of times people have projected lost friends, or family, onto him. 'It's beyond!' This projection of a lost love onto his own body is where the language of his practice comes from. This *Hold On Me.* A desire to hold, and be held, to be held right. To remember a touch. To feel that hand reach out across time, to brush up against it. To remember the grip of one's kin, trying, desperately, to stay alive.

Mid-workout, I'm scrolling through Instagram, as one does, past cat videos, and Donald Trump signing some other executive order, past a new show at an up-and-coming East London gallery, and flicking away a post by some gym-bro I don't remember following, telling me to use his discount code for some Blue-Razz flavoured BCAA's. As my thumb pushes post after post away, a black-and-white image comes into view. Taken by Robert Mapplethorpe in 1983, it shows Kathy Acker standing in front of a light-grey background, her body angled at three-quarters, and her legs falling below the bottom edge, cut off at her hips. Her brown hair is shaved into a buzzcut, which is in the process of growing out. She wears a pair of large sunglasses that cover most of her face, and they reflect the studio lights, which illuminate her from the left of the photo. She is sporting a thick leather belt, like one worn for weightlifting, wrapped around a black jumpsuit that stops mid-torso, and would expose her stomach and breasts if it were not for her arms criss-crossed across her chest: her left hand on her right shoulder, and her right hand, fingers curled, is placed delicately below her neck. She looks resolute, with her head facing directly towards the camera, lips pursed, as if to say: *The fuck you looking at?*

According to her biographer, Chris Kraus, Acker was likely first introduced to Mapplethorpe by her trainer, the celebrity bodybuilder Lisa Lyon. Acker had been 'bodybuilding for ten years, seriously for almost five' when she wrote her essay, *Against Ordinary Language,* where she explores the connections between bodybuilding and language, attempting to ascribe meaning to something 'which is speechless.'

The gym is speechless, but by no means quiet.

It is speechless, but by no means silent.

It is speechless, but by no means wordless.

I entered the gym in Brighton, still new, still skinny, still learning. Still weak. In a photo from that time, taken by J., I'm performing a set of lateral raises with a pair of 3kg dumbbells. My arms are raised to shoulder height, Christ-like, and my face is tense with the agony of the movement. Out of shot, a man sits on an adjacent bench: 'Sissy weight,' I remember him saying.

Acker, in her essay, was primarily concerned with language and its projection onto the body. Her language. Her own body. She neglected to speak to the language directed onto one's flesh by another. Getting called a "sissy," by proxy of the dumbbells, was jarring. I had been lucky in the sense that homophobic slurs directed towards me, since leaving school, were few and far between, but hearing them being used in a place like Brighton was surprising. And upsetting. J. told me to ignore him and get on with the next set, but I couldn't. I was using sissy weights.

I was a sissy.

Language is violent, or at least it can be. Words leave marks on our tissue far longer than a fist or a shove. A sissy, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is 'an effeminate man or boy' and 'a timid, weak, or cowardly person.' I guess that man was right. I was indeed all those things. That word took me right back to the school changing rooms; made me think of my father and his disdain towards me when I couldn't catch a rugby ball in the park, fumbling and falling over my feet; back to sitting in front of the mirror as a kid drawing self-portraits as muscled superheroes; back to carving the word *fag* in my thigh. That word, in a sense, was a reason I was in the gym in the first place. I wanted to counteract those perceptions of myself, to rewrite a history of my body.