

## ANXIETY BECOMES MY WORK

SER BRANDON-CASTRO SERPAS  
AND ROSS SIMONINI IN CONVERSATION



This page - *pay to cum (what i thought)* (detail), 2017, Ser Brandon-Castro Serpas and Bri Williams, *Bare Teeth* installation view at Queer Thoughts, New York, 2018. Courtesy: the artists and Queer Thoughts, New York  
Opposite - *pay to cum (but didn't)*, 2017, Ser Brandon-Castro Serpas and Bri Williams, *Bare Teeth* installation view at Queer Thoughts, New York, 2018. Courtesy: the artists and Queer Thoughts, New York



Two years ago, Ser Brandon-Castro Serpas started making sculpture. Since then, she's shown all sorts of evocative, hoarded detritus at spaces such as Queer Thoughts, Performance Space New York, Karma International in Los Angeles, and Current Projects in Miami. That last show was a gentle but nasty solo (her first), which mostly included objects found in Miami—used mattress, old door, vacuum cleaner—slightly adjusted, and arranged like a community of the damned.



Top, foreground - *Load Bearing Allotment*, 2017. From left to right - *pals regret nothing*, 2017; *Translation Failed*, 2017.  
Ser Brandon-Castro Serpas: *Dust Patterns* installation view at Quinn Harrelson/Current Projects, Miami, 2017-2018.  
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Bottom, from left to right - *In The End Times*, 2017; *In The Slightest*, 2017; *Adorn My Knees*, 2016 (with Donna Huanca).  
Ser Brandon-Castro Serpas: *Dust Patterns* installation view at Quinn Harrelson/Current Projects, Miami, 2017-2018.  
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Raised in the Boyle Heights area of Los Angeles, Serpas found the first incarnation of her creative voice in activism. She moved to New York to attend Columbia University and to get involved with the fashion industry, briefly working for studios and modeling for magazines. Quickly, she found her way to art, and after a single sculpture course, began to exhibit. Once she graduated, Serpas left New York and spent six months back in Los Angeles for a period of intensive surgery, which she financed through her gofundme.com “Gender Affirming Surgery Fund.”

I first encountered Serpas through Instagram, which she used to chronicle the progress of her gender transition and post her new art, and to which she largely attributes her quick entrance into the art community. We met in person at Gavin Brown’s enterprise in New York, where she had been working for two weeks.

We listened to the destabilizing video installation by Jacolby Satterwhite and looked at a PDF of Ser’s first, upcoming poetry collection, *manic pixie dream cuck*. She was putting the finishing touches on it. The book is all chronological iPhone notes from her four years in college, many written while riding the subway, scared. One consists of only the line: “the present in drag me to hell.”

The following interview was conducted over a series of emails. The grammar and syntax has been largely preserved.

**ROSS SIMONINI**

How does Instagram function for you as an artistic tool?

**SER BRANDON-CASTRO SERPAS**

mmmm, ok so instagram was like my guiding light in college because i was a gnc [gender nonconforming] freak-o on campus only a year after i was a suspicious hood looking paisa person on campus vis a vis getting arrested twice on grounds and getting hospitalized and handcuffed other times, not too polar experiences mind you, and instagram gave me a space to vent, i guess also similarly to facebook etc. but you know less personal maybe? i love how detached it is while still letting you flash every morbid detail of your day to hella people.

artistically i have found many a friend through instagram, most notably those artists types who don’t post their work at all and post about their lives only and when they do post about their lives it is a super zoom in on a part of their sleeves missing like a button or like some grout on the floor that they really like the texture of then they go off into some monologue about their day or how they miss kylie minogue. i really love that i’m like ahh yes you are an artist you live your virtual life artistically these posts are all swatches. i think i tried to do that too early on along with plenty of narcissism on my part, in a large part an effort to prove i wasn’t some disgusting looking freak (thanks colonization), angled selfies really saved a bench! sometimes the best part of my dreary student days, i would not have gotten through undergrad without instagram.

**RS**

Why were you arrested?

**SB-CS**

one was a profiling incident spring freshman year when i was coming home late at night from le bain [a club] in columbia’s harlem neighborhood because i didn’t look like the typical student and had a little weed on me (it was expunged the following summer 2014, i paid the lawyer with my check from a whitney internship lolllll) and another was because i got blackout drunk and was reported by school security, i was restrained because i was trying to go back to my room while obviously intoxicated.

**RS**

Does social media affect how you see your identity?

**SB-CS**

social media makes me realize that at once identity politics only go so far// can be bought up readily but also reminds me that whatever my identity is it ain’t shit if i’m not backing up work or people i care about irl, i think social media has like destroyed my notion of what it means to have an identity, which i garnered through irl community organizing in highschool with orgs like the coalition of boys and men of color in los angeles, which i mean obviously pigeonholed me lol but yeah like, social media has made

me constantly question why i would want to go on about my identity on social media.

also maybe its made me a little averse to mestizx nationalist politics i’ve seen cropping up everywhere that’s mostly cis led, and definitely wary of anyone trying to pile me in with cultural producers that label themselves latinx chingonx etc [gender-neutral alternative to Latino/a, etc.] because for the most part i see a trend of some of these folks also trying to co-opt a native identity/narrative that maybe they feel can save them from the ravages of being lumped in with the anti black masses when they are actually not doing too much to combat anti blackness in their own communities.

**RS**

For you, do your objects reflect your identity, or do they stand on their own, apart from you ethnicity and gender?

**SB-CS**

not my identity, my skin flakes spit and blood when it gets to that, never me as a person, last year in my senior thesis i was told that my body and what it did was very much a part of every piece i was presenting, that they could see the movements and “violence” of the gestures, in fact they wanted to see it, they wanted me to make video work of me in the studio, like ahhh that dude who dated bjork [matthew barney] and other cis artists, i was appalled, i think most cis audiences only want to see gender non conforming artists making “identity” work, want to see a gender non conforming/trans body on a stage essentially, i detest that, i think my work stands on its own in that i craft a narrative for each piece like a line of poetry, most millennial poets are narcissists, you always get a chunk of whats going on with them, but just a chunk if they’re adept, i hope with every piece i am only giving a chunk that can only be traced back to my imaginary and storytelling capability in regards to what i was going through at the time, like a diary entry, you can’t ascribe the entirety of a person to a diary entry, and you damn sure shouldnt get your kicks thinking you get to see me in my work, youre looking at my labor and a tidbit of a story i was down to disclose. now with all that, you cant separate the art from the artist, but im not making art, im stringing along a narrative that will probably be collected in the future to tell a larger story, but never my body, that’s off the table.

**RS**

When you look at art, do you consider the identity of the person who made it?

**SB-CS**

no, unless they’re presenting a narrative with figures that can be understood as other to the artist in regards to their race gender class etc, in which case i inspect it for a time trying to understand what makes their life so mundane they can’t fill their body of work with their own lived experiences.

**RS**

You said most millennial poets are narcissists. What’s your relationship to narcissism?

**SB-CS**

i think narcissism is a survival tool for a lot of people, am i a lot of people, yes i am! i just wish it was less work to deflect looks you know, people project their stress onto each other a lot in public, in new york more so than any of the other limited number of places i have been, i sop it all up, sometimes a good angled photo and positive feedback from people i don’t know and people i know all too well gives me a little shield of sorts from my empath days, and i need them oh do i need them! otherwise, fuck the work it takes to accomplish that in the midst of trying to deflect the cis gaze the cis gays the male gaze and the male gays!

**RS**

Do you read poetry?

**SB-CS**

i don’t, i actually don’t read that much period, ahh well not book form, i eat articles up, well at least of late. the only poetry books ive read have been hannah black, manuel arturo abreu, rindon johnson and ahh maybe a few other friends but yeah, my adhd is out of control!

**RS**

Is ADHD a struggle for you? Would you rather be more focused than you are?



*pay to cum (what i thought)*, 2017, Ser Brandon-Castro Serpas and Bri Williams, *Bare Teeth* installation view at QueerThoughts, New York, 2018. Courtesy: the artists and QueerThoughts, New York



*pay to cum (i knew)*, 2017, Ser Brandon-Castro Serpas and Bri Williams, *Bare Teeth* installation view at QueerThoughts, New York, 2018. Courtesy: the artists and QueerThoughts, New York

**SB-CS**  
yes absolutely, i wish i could be an academic or researcher like, that would be amazing, but retaining information with study in that way has always required me to biohack via caffeine adderall tunnel vision etc. things i am not willing to do at this moment in time because they heighten several symptoms of my anxiety disorder.

**RS**  
How would you describe your anxiety disorder? Does it influence your art?

**SB-CS**  
my anxiety disorder is like, a guardian angel that really hates me and can smell my shit from a mile away, it is ever present and mad as hell, it just wont leave me alone, and ive gotten better at fighting it off lately, but it like activates a few different sore points across the abundant fields of my paranoia when one thing goes wrong, like a domino effect.

just yesterday i started a new job and the location turned out to be the block where i was assaulted by the nypd years back and by the end of the day i was feeling dysphoric as hell, anxious about work, the viability of my stay in the city, and my friendships, bam just like that, kickstarted bad day emanating from an initial bad feeling linked to a memory linked to a place. when i get anxious i fidget with my fingers toes, my whole body, getting unnaturally anxious with caffeine elicits these same body tendencies for me, so in the studio i activate this body anxiety and let it play out with my hoarded materials and objects, my anxiety becomes my work, like that movie "death becomes her," i love that phrase, anxiety becomes her (my work), probably also related to death though, go figure.



boyfriend, brother, sister, money, amusement, and father, 2018, Kathy Acker: *Who Wants to Be Human All the Time* installation view at Performance Space New York, 2018. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Adam Reich

**RS**  
What's your writing process?

**SB-CS**  
i drink like green tea, and well its different i haven't really had a writing practice in almost a year because my schedule changed after i graduated last may, but it used to be important for me to be on public transit, feel like i was being watched, and for me to be a little caffeinated or inebriated, particularly on my commutes to and from school, which were an hour last year because i was commuting from harlem to bushwick daily. i really haven't found a similar way to replace this method, i wrote a piece for my friend adelita in an uber pool a few months back and that worked, like maybe on my way to work and back now? oh also listening to loud music, right now to write this i am drinking a colt 45 and listening to body mods by lsdxxo, i find it really important to feel a little out of it because otherwise i am expending more energy watching my surroundings like a hawk for any sign of well you know potential transphobic attack, once i'm able to unclench for even a second the words come pouring, and theyre discombobulated, its perfect! i rarely edit, it feels very freeing and nice.

**RS**  
For you, is it important where your materials come from?

**SB-CS**  
yes! i only work with things that have been loved worn and stained! i dont think i can ever be an artist that orders clean materials online with a super clear idea before hand, for me the materials either you or other people hoard have to communicate a little something in hand to surface contact, i wont say the materials speak to me but i will say that when i get to project onto materials my visions for them i want them to project a little something back onto me via dirt and debris is all! a little back and forth.

**RS**  
So, for example, can you tell me about the materials in the *pay to cum* series?

**SB-CS**  
ahh ok! so those fabrics are from my hoarded fabric stash which includes materials from donna huanca, womens history museum, avena gallagher, hari nef, gogo graham, serena jara and more friends who have given me pieces over time when they needed to downsize, its very important to me that those fabrics were loved and worn, so much so that i knotted them initially into a huge triangle tarp that i left in my former backyard to rot for weeks last january, that i then made the audience at my section of the crumbling world runway sunday session [at MoMA PS1] lay on for the duration of my performance, after this i affixed the fabric to two children's bed posts i'd found months before and kept next to my own bed as well as to a lawn chair i also found months before.

**RS**  
Is art making at all connected to your work in activism?

**SB-CS**  
its not at all, community organizing is something i stayed away from for the duration of college because i was worried about falling victim to anti gender non conforming/trans violence from talking to random community members on the street/ public transit etc because thats how i used to work before beginning my medical transition, making work lets me hide and be present at once.

**RS**  
You've mentioned fear a few times now. For you, are your objects an expression of fear?

**SB-CS**  
i want to say that the objects i make are totemic, that i get to trap my fears in the work i make, that i hope i am not coopting totems, that i probably am, that thats fucked, that how could i, that let me look up a synonym, ok vessel, they are vessels for the things i fear most! which is a lot funnier to do with furniture than fabric and clothing for me as of late, maybe because i get to bring my physicality into the work by tossing bookshelves and mattresses and stoves and couches around, that is such good cardio, i get a lot of anger out but am also exuberant, its all the things! the objects are a snapshot of me looking my fears in the eye and knocking them over, but just my eyes! like in the eye zoom kill music scenes in kill bill, thats me in the studio! "revenge is never a straight line." —hattori hanzo.

**Ser Brandon-Castro Serpas** (1995) is a poet and sculptor born in Los Angeles. She lives and works between New York and Los Angeles. Serpas received her B.A. in visual arts at Columbia University and has recently exhibited or performed at MoMA PS1, New York, Bridget Donahue, New York, Karma International, Los Angeles, What Pipeline, Detroit, Bodega, New York, SculptureCenter, New York and the Serpentine Gallery, London.

**Ross Simonini** is an artist and writer. He has exhibited at the Sharjah Biennial, Shoot the Lobster, Luxembourg, Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York, and Anonymous, Mexico City. His debut novel, *The Book of Formation*, was published by Melville House Books in 2017.



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