

On Capacity

There is something quite desperate about holding water in your hands. It doesn't work. It leaks and spills, drips through the cracks no matter how tightly you try to grip it. It does not stick around long. Try, if you like, to hold water for even 10 minutes consistently. It's difficult. It's not what your body is for.

While observing this in the bath one day, I told a friend on the phone that I needed their help taking the photos that would eventually become *Capacity*. Making these photos was necessarily collaborative. Although holding water is never quite successful, it certainly can't happen while one is pressing a shutter, and an assistant had to arrange everything while cold water seeped across my skin and I waited for the blinding flash.

While the amount of water I can successfully hold varies between images, it's important to note that none of them demonstrate more than a few tablespoons of capacity, not enough to fill a dinner glass halfway. The title, *Capacity*, refers both to the volume that something can hold as well as the ability that someone may or may not have. What is immediately proven here is a failure of my body to achieve the task at hand. Hopefully the complete ridiculousness of such a task is evident. Why would one measure the success of their body by how much water it holds?

Of course, there are more ridiculous metrics that we all hold ourselves to. To state it as plainly as possible, my focus here is on both gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia in the body, as well as both grief and guilt in the soul. In all of these, there is the feeling of cold water seeping and dripping, slowly and irrevocably across my failing body, from the place where I want it toward the ground below. It is corporeally obvious that this is not something I am good at holding. And yet, it is necessary.

The environment is intended to be subtly present in many images. The intrusive grey backdrops, strobe cables, and sneaky tripod leg are meant to unhide the studio. My body here is clearly a subject of photography, with its technologies, rather than vision. In this case, a 4x5 view camera and considerable lighting equipment are implied in the photos, while darkroom equipment and chemistry are not. I was the one to press the shutter release on about half of these, but others required a collaborator to make the finishing touches because both my hands were indisposed. Regardless, these images were made by myself, of myself, in

a studio, and surrounded by the technology that enabled them to be created. The body pictured here does not exist in a vacuum or as an object, but instead in a hyper-present engagement with its own performance, the creation of the photographs seen here, and the emotion being described through them. The technology is present to show that as a photographer, I am acting as a technician and operator of a seeing machine and a network of associated parts, especially tangible in analog methods. Despite that, I am also just the shades of grey flattened before you. Everything from softboxes to negatives to enlargers are under the purview of the body depicted here.

I am continuing to explore what has become a trend in my recent work, the nature of photographing oneself and of being simultaneous model and photographer. Self-imaging is perhaps an ultimate performance, in the queer sense of the term. I am performing as female, as queer, as a body, as a cup of limited capacity, as a photographer of hopefully less limited capacity, as a disembodied hand, as an object of your gaze, and as an object of my own. Here, the content of the photos again returns to demonstrate the limits of my capacity. Sometimes I can hold tablespoons, sometimes only droplets. Never as much as I'd like.

Often, gender as a trans person is most painful when one fails at it, when the performance is outside the capacity of one's body. When the water seeps through. While self portraits can be the ultimate performance, being both subject and object at once, they are also the ultimate alienation from oneself. After all, becoming both of these things requires a split self, one to do the looking and one to be looked at. This also captures my experience as a trans person. Passing a mirror, I sometimes imagine that what I see is a sort of avatar for my true self to pilot. Making photos of myself is not so different. Burning in my shoulder 10% darker in the darkroom is a delicate surgery, one that necessarily splices the worlds of technician and subject. In both the mirror and the photo, my image stops being the same thing as my self, for better and for worse.

Capacity shows me what I cannot do. I cannot hold guilt. I cannot perform womanhood. I cannot be both artist and subject. I cannot control every aspect of a photo. I cannot keep more than a sip of water resting in my crossed arms. It all falls to the floor. And yet, I try anyway. I find it quite hopeful.

— Cassidy Clark