

QUEERING TITIAN'S "AMOR SACRO & AMOR PROFANO"

A TALE ABOUT OVERCOMING CIS-HETERONORMATIVE OPPRESSION



Amor Sacro e Amor Profano, Titian, ca. 1514

Around 1514 the Italian artist Titian was commissioned a painting by Niccolò Aurelio. Its original title is unknown and the painting is referred to as “Amor Sacro e Amor Profano” (“Sacred and Profane Love”). I came across this painting in my third year of high school, when I was around 17 years old. By then, I had just come out to my parents as gay and I was slowly getting more comfortable with my sexual identity. The high school I attended was in a neighbourhood called E.U.R.. It was built by Benito Mussolini to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the March on Rome and of the beginning of the Fascist era.

Even though Mussolini had long been dead, the majority of the people living in E.U.R. were still highly influenced by fascists ideals. I was the only gay person in my classroom and since day one I was verbally bullied for it. I consider myself lucky because I have never faced physical violence, but all the slurs that were shouted at me have scarred me. I struggled a lot to be and to express myself and to feel good about being gay. Slowly all of the hatred that I was showered with got the best of me and I began to hate myself for who I was. I struggled for many years to find the self-love necessary to heal from all their hatred.

And it wasn't until I left E.U.R. first and Rome slightly after that I learned how to forget about their slurs and become happy within myself and who I was.

In January 2017, during my second year of university, I found the courage to leave my hometown and move to Manchester, UK for five months. I had never heard of the city before I came here and I was scared to death about the idea of moving somewhere that I had never even visited before. But there was also a halo of excitement lingering in the air. I was looking forward to having the chance of starting from scratch and to evolve into someone who was removed, both physically and emotionally, from all the pain that growing up in Rome had brought me. When the 5 months of my study abroad period came to an end, it was terribly painful to go back to Rome. I had embarked on a journey to find myself in Manchester and I wasn't ready to go back to living in a neighbourhood where I knew people would still call me names while I walked on the streets.

When I graduated from my BA in Rome, I came back to Manchester and moved here for good. It was November 2018 and I remember feeling ready for a new chapter of my life to start. Hopefully, a happier one. Once I got back here it didn't take long to get used to be showered with acceptance. I found authenticity in this city. Having access to multiple literary resources and getting a better hold of English, allowed me to describe my own identity in a much more inclusive language than Italian. Finally breaking the language barrier and feeling fully settled in Manchester, I began to discover more about queer culture, art, literature and films. When I understood what the word queer meant, I began identifying as queer and using that label gave me the power to fully embrace many aspects of my personality. Alongside this process of self-labelling, I started dating people from all walks of life and each person that I met brought me closer to finding my core.

In July 2019 I came out as non-binary. I had never come across that word whilst I was growing up in Rome and it took me some time and a lot of research to understand what it actually meant. It was so freeing to finally find a word to describe how I felt deep inside from a very young age. I chose a different name for myself, a name that summed up how I felt in regards to my past. Alma Renée. Alma means "soul" in Latin and Renée means "born again" in French. That's how I felt when I had completely stripped off of all the internalised homophobia and transphobia that was instilled in me by my Italian straight peers. I felt like my soul was born again and I was about to begin a chapter in my life in which I could finally let my true colours shine through and be myself unapologetically. The level of acceptance I

experienced when I told my Mancunian friends about my newly reclaimed gender identity was so refreshing and empowering. For the first time in my life I didn't feel ashamed of being myself.

Art, in many of its forms, has always played a major role in my life. I used to find shelter and comfort in looking at paintings, in drawing and in literature. I was eager to find representations of people who looked or felt like me, and whenever I did I felt slightly less lonely. As per any other painting in history of art, there are multiple interpretations of the figures portrayed in the Titian's "Amor Sacro and Amor Profano". The one I was mostly drawn to was the one which identifies the three figures, respectively, as a bride, Cupid and the goddess Venus. I thought long and hard about how to adapt these concept of sacred and profane love to my own life. I was fascinated by the fact that some believe that the two depicted women are actually the same person. I was inspired to imagine myself in that painting and I wanted to convey my story throughout the image. I wanted to focus on the idea according to which platonic love and carnal love coexist in people's hearts.

As I stared at the painting, I started thinking about my personal journey, in terms of sexual and gender identity. I thought about my childhood and my experience growing up in a catholic country, in the city of the pope, and in schools where I was forced to attend a mass every Wednesday. I realised that a big part of me was holding back to be my true self because of the place in which I was raised. I didn't feel safe enough to let my colours shine through in Rome. So I flew away as soon as I could. I bid goodbye to all the hatred & the shame that growing up in Rome had brought me. In Manchester a new chapter of my life began; one in which I'd learn how to get rid of the years of self-hatred that had turned me into the person I was. I came to this city and for the first time ever in my life I felt finally free of all my sorrow and pain. I learned how to love myself and how to accept every little part of me by understanding myself more and learning that there was beauty inside of me, as well as outside.

The realisation of this shot wouldn't have been possible without three amazing people: Madeleine, Brandina and George. I met Madeleine and Brandina at the BLM protest that was held in Manchester on June 7th. Our souls sparkled with the same energy and we vibed together from the very first instant that we met. I proposed my concept to Madz and she

offered to shoot me. She invited over George who took care of my makeup. Brandina came along and took care of the close-up shots. We shot these pictures in Madeleine's house on a Wednesday morning. I had always wanted to be photographed by professionals and to have my make-up done by someone who actually knew what they were doing. I felt like a proper model whilst George was doing my make-up. It was amazing to observe Madeleine setting up the photoshoot backdrop and coming up with more ideas to render the concept I had come up with even more beautiful. She was the one who proposed to revert the order of the photos: having the bridal figure on the right, Cupid in the middle and Venus on the left. Brandina's words of praise fuelled me with confidence as she shot me in front of a warm golden light.

By the end of the shot I felt so empowered, beautiful and sexy. For the first time ever I looked at myself in those pictures and I felt good about my body and my face. This shot was a reminder for me that my being non-binary doesn't exclude the possibility of being and feeling sexy. It doesn't matter how many people will be questioning my gender identity, or who won't respect my preferred pronouns, or who will bully me because they don't understand if I'm a "man" or a "woman". All that matters is how I feel on the inside. I am so grateful that these three angels decided to give me this opportunity and it was beautiful to be in a setting where I felt so welcomed and loved. Thank you so much from the bottom of my heart to all of you for making my queer fantasy come to live. I feel blessed!



Queering Titian's Amor Sacro e Amor Profano

photo credit: (Instagram) @madeleine.penfold

photo edit: @roylancestudio

make up: (Instagram) @georgegordini

I wanted the first outfit to represent my early life in Rome. The idea of a bride being someone who was considered only as a property. Someone whose agency wasn't affirmed and who was constrained to live in chastity and pureness. The representation of the sacred love, a love that doesn't involve anything sexual or carnal. I wanted to give it a darker twist and tried to come up with a queer goth bridal look. My earrings have crosses on them and the long black velvet skirt suggests the idea of purity. I never realised how much my upbringing had shaped the way in which I thought about myself until I was able to look back at things and put them in perspective. In the first shot I wanted to represent myself as the person who was too afraid of their true self because the environment in which they were brought. I grew up feeling monstrous and disgusting because of what people said to me. In this shot I also wanted to portray the beauty that I found in the depictions of Virgin Mary and other Saints in many of the Italian Renaissance paintings I studied while in high school.

In the second shot, I wanted to embody the figure of Cupid, the Greek god of desire, erotic love, attraction and affection. For this shot I came up with an outfit that showed more skin than the first one. Because Cupid is a minor character in the depiction, I also wanted the

second shot not to take too much space in the triad composition. The idea behind showing my body was a way for me as a queer person to channel the idea of body-positivity, self-confidence and sexiness. Because Cupid represents the linking figure between the bride and Venus, I wanted both my outfit and the photo to be very ethereal.

For the last shot, I wore an outfit that was more provocative than the first two looks. I wanted to embody the figure of Venus and the idea of her as the goddess of carnal love, lust and sexual desire. Coming to Manchester I have explored my sexual identity and learned how to stop feeling ashamed of my sexual desires. One needs to unlearn all the bullshit that we've been fed with. It often takes a long time to get to the point in your life where you're able to feel unashamed of what your body, your heart and your soul desire. With this final shot I wanted to channel the idea of how every queer body is beautiful and sexy. It doesn't matter what your body looks like, how you identify, or who you have sexual desires for. All it matters is how much self-love you carry inside of you.

I want to share these pictures because I want my non-binary siblings all over the globe to remember that we are beautiful, we are valid, we are sexy, we are strong, we are empowered and we're done holding back only to please the cis-heteronormative patriarchal society we live in. Our time to shine has come and there's no way anyone will dim our inner lights.

A.E. L.



AMOR SACRO

photo credit: (Instagram) @bijuaru

make up: (Instagram) @georgegordini



CUPIDO

photo credit: (Instagram) @bijuaru

make up: (Instagram) @georgegordini



AMOR PROFANO

photo credit: (Instagram) @bijuaru

make up: (Instagram) @georgegordini

Non-Binary Feels In My Teen Years

24.02.2014

Rome

17 years old

“It’s time for the group photos,” one of my classmates’ parents screams. “Girls first, boys after.” It’s Mattia’s 18th birthday. He’s the first one in my class to find himself on that thin line that separates a teenage from an adult. His parents have rented an entire bar to celebrate his entrance into manhood. It’s a rite that every person born with a penis cannot escape in Italy. Girls and boys start parting as if Moses has just parted the waters. They stand in straight lines opposite to one another. I can hear their whispers as they stare at me and wait for me to decide where to go.

There I am again: immobile under the same spotlight that I know painfully too well. I feel like an actor on the main stage about to deliver a moving soliloquy. Only I am not an actor and my mouth is too dry to utter any word. My straight classmates, surrounding me and towering over me, are waiting for me to make a move, to say something. I am just a queer freak to the eyes of this heteronormative clique.

In those moments I forget how to speak. At times, I forget how to breathe. I recently started recording these moments in a journal. On its cover, written in black ink capital letters, it reads “parting moments”. I called them like this because it always feels like I am asked to make a choice and share it with the world. In the divide between boys and girls, my classmates expect me to pick a side and stick to it. No gender-fuckery allowed in this fascist neighbourhood where I grew up.

The problem is that when the parting moments come, I can never decide on what side to stand. I feel like an abandoned kitten, lost to my own devices and confused as to where to find others like me. Am I to go with the girls? Am I to go with the boys? I wasn’t born with a vagina. I was born with a penis between my legs. How is it possible that I always felt like both and neither at the same time then? Journaling is a way to deal with the anxiety that these moments stir in me. Even though I can’t speak up in the parting moments, at least I am able to digest them later in the silence of my bedroom.

I feel Her whenever She’s about to arrive. She never knocks on the door but somehow She always finds a way in. Anxiety climbs Her way up from the bottom of my feet to the tip of my forehead. I turn red as my classmates stare at me. They are waiting, eager to discover

on which side I will line up. I can feel sweat drops slowly dripping on my temples. I can't seem to stop my fingernails from scratching both my palms.

It feels like I've been thrown in a pit from where I can't seem to get out. I can never find the courage to take action. Instead, I just always stand still, scared and anxiety-ridden. I feel like the only place for me to be in is in the middle. But for some reason, I never feel uncomfortable here. On the contrary, I feel like a balloon floating beyond their gender binary rules. In the middle, no one asks me to pick a side. No one expects me to make up my mind. No one considers me a freak because I'm too girly to be a boy and too boyish to be a girl. I don't feel like I'm different when I'm the middle. I don't feel judged. I don't feel unease. It's actually the only place where I feel free to be myself.

In the middle there's no one else with me. I'm all on my own. In the middle I exist and I'm not a boy nor a girl. I'm neither and both at the same time. I am just me. There's no one around me that can tell me I made a mistake by inhabiting this space in between. That's my reality. I am not picking a side because I don't need to. I can exist in the middle because I don't belong with any of you. Too many chromosomes X or not enough chromosomes Y? I don't even care. I just know that I am not Adam nor Eve. I am just a sorrowful misfit that tries too hard to fit in an cis-heteronormative mould.

I wonder if I will ever find the courage to speak up when I'll be asked to make a choice again.

E.

a kindly reminder to all my queer peers

12.06.2020

Manchester

23 years old

i grew up queer
and wherever I looked
not matter how far or near
i was always surrounded
only by straight peers

in the streets of rome
whenever i walked on my own
i used to get cursed
people would scream “frocio”
at the top of their lungs
and every of their slur
like the sharpest of blades
inflicted abhorrent wounds
all over my skin
all over my soul

i slowly began forgetting how to swim
& so i sank
deep down
in the bottomless hatred
they poured
like boiling hot water
all over me

but then one day i started remembering &
i began swimming again
far away from their hate
looking for a further shore
where i would eventually find

a cure for all of my pain

it took a long time to learn how to forgive them
it took a long time for me to forget their hurtful slurs
it took a long time for my scarred body to heal
but
i did it
& so can you

today
i want to celebrate
my queer peers
all over the globe

i want you to remember that
we are powerful
we are beautiful
we are strong

WE ARE HERE
WE ARE QUEER
WE ARE LOUD
&
WE ARE FUCKING PROUD

so
get ready straights
cos we're done staying silent
we're done remaining still
we are standing right in front of all of you
chin up
WITH NO FUCKING FEAR!

A.E.L.