

## All Modes Are Open to Us | A conversation with the artists

**Amy Cousins:** I've been thinking about how our practices have moved toward each other over the years. When we first met, I think, visually there weren't a ton of similarities in our work. I think in some ways I was putting a lot of distance between myself and my work, using the channel of looking through the past and through archives as a way to talk about my present. Whereas in your work you were dealing with your present more directly and intimately and thinking about your current life as an archive, which I found so inspiring and is partly where I'm finding myself now.

**Ruben Castillo:** And now I'm starting to really think about pattern and decoration in new ways, whereas I was always repelled by that kind of stuff before. I think because my parents were always striving to fit in, to subscribe to something they saw as "neutral." Then, of course, you had my dad, who was this Chicano who wanted to assimilate fully into American culture, and so I always felt this disconnect from my identity. But anytime I would go to my grandparents' house, where nobody spoke English and there would be patterns, plants, textures, and colors, and it felt like a declaration of "this is our home," it always felt a lot truer, emotionally. There's something there I think I'm striving to get back to.

**AC:** I think about decoration and beauty as relating to joy, and I think about queer joy as a survival mechanism, that even when we're fighting for our lives there's this element of joy, of camp, of being able to laugh at the cosmic joke that is life. That contrast is something I see really poignantly in the Spirit of Hope scrapbook that you're working with, where there are these newspaper clippings that highlight a pretty dismal time for queer people, but they're all transposed onto these light-hearted decorative patterns.

**RC:** I found myself so drawn to these patterns, and I love the unabashed obsessiveness (or maybe even devotion, since Phyllis was a religious woman). I also thought, thank God somebody recorded all this stuff and that it was in such a fiercely intentional and fabulous way. That kind of love is so aspirational, and I want to find a way to honor that matriarchal sense of care.

**AC:** I've been thinking a lot about obsessive care. When I am working with an object from the archives, spending time on that project, trying to make it look nice, it's not a frivolous thing; it's an act of care to honor that

document. What I'm making now, these quilts, they're literally blankets and then within that there's all this layering and framing; everything is held; it's a gesture of tenderness and reflects the experience I have of tending my garden and feeling held by that practice. I think existing during the pandemic and teaching during the pandemic, it taught me a deeper level of compassion and softness that is coming through in the work.

**RC:** The disruption of the first lockdown was so sudden, and with all of the protests too, a lot of us felt excited about what it could mean for true change to happen on a large, societal or cultural level. There was this exuberance around change and also a lot of anxiety and mixed feelings, but that rabid sense of hope propelled me to dive deeper into my relationships and into being more unabashedly joyous. Both of us are really thinking about the conditions we exist in, both at home and in our studio practices, which I think was a direct result of that time. A lot of us started dreaming again, which really inspired me to think about how objects can trigger feelings and change.

**AC:** There was a resurgence of revolutionary thinking, which is in many ways a utopian project. The archival text that I'm working with, *Country Women*, was a journal for women who were embarking on separatist projects, trying to live off the land, and I think we look back on some of these utopian projects and think that they look quite naïve, but I find it so relatable because as a lesbian in North America in the 1970s, things would have been so suffocating that of course you would want to carve a little slice of utopia and see if you could build something, anything, else. Which I think is why I obsessed over my garden during lockdown, because it was this little area that I could control and connect with and get these glimpses of utopia.

**RC:** That takes me back to the idea of craft, and how your garden is really a craft project, and how the level of commitment inherent in craft comes through in your garden and in your textile work, and how you slowly build it and tend to it and see the fruits of your labor, which is such a sweet phrase. It makes me think of what José Esteban Muñoz says about queerness being the thing you're constantly reaching for, like your plums growing up toward your second-floor window.

**AC:** And a garden is never finished, right? That's why it's so fun to watch and wait for the next thing to bloom, and even in the winter some buds will set, and it gives you something to look forward to. Like us, it's always in the process of becoming.

