UNAPOLOGETIC

By

Ronald James Geibel

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Edinboro University, Edinboro, Pennsylvania, 2007

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Approved by:
Sandy Ross, Dean of The Graduate School

Chair:
Trey Hill

Committee Members:
Beth Lo
H. Rafael Chacón
Elizabeth Hubble
Prologue
(Letter to Parents June 2012)

Thought you should know…

It may seem odd to receive a letter from me, but after much debate this seemed like the best way to approach the situation. The news that follows may be something you both have assumed for sometime or it may come as a surprise. Considering questions pertaining to relationships or my personal life never tend to come up, I have come to the conclusion it is already known.

Before I go any further I want you both to know that I am the happiest I have been in years. Mainly in part to the fact that I am no longer living a lie. The news that I have to share is that I am gay. I don’t reveal this information with regret or disappointment. This is something I have known for years and finally have the confidence to share. A letter may seem like an unfair manner to receive such news. However, I felt it was the best way to get this off of my chest without hesitation or interruption. The anxiety I have felt in opening up to the two both of you has been overwhelming. To be honest, reactions to the news and the thought of the way the conversation may have played out made me extremely nervous. I felt that writing a letter and giving you both time to gather your thoughts would be the best way to deal with the situation. Being gay is not a choice. It is who I am.
Coming out at this point in my life has a lot to do with gaining the confidence to be who I am. Part of the reason for me choosing to go to school in Montana was to get as far away as possible. Allowing myself a fresh start and no longer hiding that one SMALL part of who I AM. My friends, peers and fellow professionals have created an overwhelmingly accepting environment and that has been so helpful at this point in my life. My friends have shown a tremendous amount of support and without them this process would have been unbearable and I am so thankful.

For a long time I have told myself that the next time we were all together I would sit you both down and have this talk. To be honest, that is the main reason why I did not come home for the holidays. I did not want to be solely responsible for ruining the holidays. Looking back I realize that I made the right choice. After what Joe (my older brother) went through I did not feel it was the right time. Now that I am coming home in a month this has to happen now.

I know the situation that Joe went through was awfully difficult for him as well as the both of you. As parents I know you just want the best for both of us. Unfortunately, sometimes things just don’t work out the way you want. Joe has had a rough few years with his divorce and the new baby and I can’t imagine what he has dealt with emotionally. One thing I do know is that his unfortunate situation has made the two of us much closer. Being there for him when he needed someone to vent to or get advice from was the best thing that could have happened to our relationship. I came out to Joe a year ago. I did not plan on telling him for quite sometime, however the situation presented itself. I told him
while we were having a conversation about life. At one point he said to me that he needs to start living his life for him and making choices that make him happy. At that point in our conversation I could not hold back my emotions and started to cry. Joe asked me what was wrong, I told him like this… There is something I need to tell you, but before I do I need you to promise me one thing. Regardless of how you feel about the information I am about to share, promise me our relationship does not change. Joe promised that I could tell him anything and it wouldn’t matter, so I proceeded to tell him. I will never forget where I was or how I felt at that moment; not knowing how he was going to react was a gut wrenching feeling. The fear of being rejected by family is unlike any other kind of fear. His reaction was better than I could have imagined. His response was basically that my sexual orientation did not matter and much to my surprise he had suspected this for years.

I know this news probably leaves you both with feelings of confusion, frustration and perhaps even anger. Maybe it is easier for a brother to receive the information than it is parents. I know we are not the most emotional family and sharing information is not the easiest for us. You two have always been extremely supportive in allowing me to live and to do what makes me happy. Moving me to the dirty south, then all the way across the country to a state that consists of more wildlife than people. I am truly blessed to have the love and support that you two have consistently shown. Though I understand what I have just revealed is very difficult for parents to hear, I would hope that my sexual orientation does not change the truly exceptional parents you both are. Being gay does not define me as
a human being. I am the same son you dropped off in Edinboro, Pennsylvania nine years ago that I am in Missoula, Montana today. It just took me some time to have the confidence to be me.

I love you both. XOXO,

RON
“Have you always known?”

The answer is yes.

Even though I knew, I had no idea how to deal with the thoughts running through my mind concerning my sexuality. I don’t like to place blame or regret on myself for waiting until I was 27 to tell my parents that I am gay, but inevitably I do. I don’t know if the regret stems from the fact that I waited to tell them, or that I waited to truly tell myself. I think of how my life may have been different if I had the courage to come out years ago and to be honest, at this point, it doesn’t matter. What good does it do to have a cloud of regret floating above your head? I am certain that I would not have had the confidence or courage to deal with the issues that present themselves once you reveal something so personal. Montana may have not been the best place to start dealing with these issues, but it happened and there is only one direction from here and that is forward.

I often asked myself why I would call Montana home for the start of this personal journey. It wasn’t clear at first but after much deliberation it clearly makes sense now. The appeal for Montana was the thought of escape, and escaping was exactly what I needed to do. When I refer to the notion of escape, it’s not necessarily the idea of leaving behind issues that I did not want to deal with, it’s
about starting over in a new place to begin dealing with pressing personal issues. I
wanted to do that where people knew nothing about me or my past. Coming from
the east coast, Montana is a place where family and friends cannot just pop in to
visit. Any encounter with family had to be planned, one I could prepare for. At the
ripe age of 25, I was beginning to tell those close to me that I was gay, but the
thought of telling my parents was dreadful. There was never a doubt in my mind
that I was gay, but if I did not have the confidence to live the life that I was meant
to live, how could I possibly reveal this information to those closest to me,
especially my parents?

February 2013.

When it comes to creating artwork, my personal life has always been the
influence. Before I came to graduate school my work conveyed a sense of personal
nostalgia. I created ceramic pillows (Fig. 1) that were used as a backdrop for
imagery that dealt with the notion of childhood. That work dealt with a time
everyone is familiar with, when decisions were immediate and uncomplicated,
when life was simple, effortless, free from real world concerns. Creating objects
and imagery that prompted a yearning for a past time, particularly moments of
childhood, allowed me to forget about what was circling around in my head. It
allowed me to return to an innocence that had long been lost.

My experiences in graduate school have allowed that work to morph in
ways that I could not have anticipated. Like past work, my first significant pieces in
graduate school came from a personal perspective, coinciding with the first time I
was being honest with those around me. “Touch” (Fig. 2) was created as a response to my coming out to those around me. The twenty-foot billboard was my interpretation of the situation I was putting individuals in. The piece asked for acceptance through interaction. The 2,300 objects that comprised the billboard were an abstraction of sex toys protruding from a format similar to a billboard. Asking the viewer to interact and physically touch the piece was my way of putting them in a spot of contemplation. I wanted the viewer to ask specific questions like, “Am I comfortable touching something that references an intimate object?” or “Do I want others to see me interacting with these objects?” In a way I was asking the viewer to accept who I am, even though they may be uncomfortable. “Touch,” was the first significant piece that addressed issues concerning sexuality and the launching pad for my current body of work.

February 2013

Unapologetic is a show that came to fruition through an unlikely source. The show is based off of a four-page hand written letter entitled “Thought You Should Know,” written in the summer of 2012. The letter was addressed to my parents and concerned my sexuality. Like my thesis exhibition, the letter put everything on the table. At first I had doubts about writing a letter. Is it a cop out? Why, at twenty-seven years old do I not have the courage to tell them over the phone, or better yet, in person? After much deliberation I decided that a letter was the best mode of delivery. A letter is a way for me to say everything I need to say uninterrupted. Also, the thought of how to even start the conversation was quite
Me First. 7” x 11” x 4” Casting Slip. 2010 (Fig. 1)

Touch. 19’ x 4’ x 10” Earthenware. 2011 (Fig. 2)
overwhelming. I will never forget that rainy June morning and the anxiety I felt as I stand contemplating in the post office. I ask myself “Ron, do you really want to do this?” As I contemplate I realize how angry I will be if I bail out of the post office without completing my task. I move forward, hold my breath and slide the letter addressed to that small town in Pennsylvania I used to call home across the table. As I walk back to my car the tears begin, I try to fight it but there is no stopping it. I get in my car and sit in silence and tears for nearly an hour. It is done; there is no turning back now, I simply wait for the phone call.

April 2013.

I approached my thesis exhibition Unapologetic in a similar way to the letter. I have nothing to hide, nothing to apologize for and no longer will I be someone I am not. For so long I have been playing a balancing act between my public and private self. The way I was seen by the outside world and the way I felt on the inside, behind closed doors. Conceptually, I approached the pieces created for the show by asking myself the same questions over and over. How do we choose what to expose and what to conceal about our personal lives? What are the consequences when secrets are revealed publicly? Who are the chosen recipients of this information? After thinking about these questions I wanted to use very specific objects to reference these ideas. Therefore, objects that exist in the private realm inspired the works created for Unapologetic. All of the pieces in the show reference sex toys or intimate objects. There is nothing to hide in Object Choice, (Fig. 4) a fourteen-foot billboard made up of 1,133 abstracted sex toys. It is rather
obvious, but subtle at the same time. The works in the show are meant to be a complementary act between the notions of overt and covert, what is obvious and not so obvious. In the piece titled Inconspicuous (Fig. 6), multiple small objects that reference common shapes of sex toys are arranged to spell out “XOXO,” which signifies the ending of the letter to my family. When hundreds of these small forms are employed to form the larger objects, the reference to sex toys becomes less obvious. This is meant to question how sexuality and gender affect acceptance.

When the objects are disguised are they perceived differently than when presented in a more obvious fashion? This is my interpretation of the way individuals are treated. A person’s sexual orientation can be obvious, but not always. Am I treated differently if it is obvious where my sexual orientation lies? Am I all of the sudden categorized or looked at differently? Unapologetic is, for me, therapeutic, a way for me to no longer have the so-called private part of my life concealed. No longer am I disguising myself, no longer am I hiding.

April 2013.

Conceptually, Unapologetic deals with notions of gender and sexuality. How are they defined and who defines them? Gender is a social construct and is defined differently depending on the cultural context. What may be considered masculine in American society may be considered feminine in another. Though often compared, sexuality is not the same as gender. Sexuality refers to a person’s sexual orientation or preference, not whether they are socially defined as a man or a woman. My work questions these two concepts through imagery and color. By
combining shapes that are associated with intimate objects and colors that are quickly defined as masculine or feminine, I am setting up a space for contemplation. My exhibition begins with Your Choice, (Fig. 3) which both sets the stage for the letter and combats notions of sexuality and gender. Before moving through the exhibit the viewer is asked to make a choice. Two separate boxes contain 150 pink and 150 blue miniature sex toys. The viewer can choose one or both. This piece came about after a conversation with my mother where she said, “well Ron, your sexual orientation is your choice.” After a slight pause and suppressing my frustration I explained that yes, there is a choice. The choice is that I am telling you this information and I am choosing for you to be part of my life and to no longer hide this part of me. That is where the choice lies. Allowing the viewer to take part in the exhibition is my way of asking them where their choice lies. Are they making the choice based off of their sexual preference or the prescribed stereotypical gender connotations that are associated with the colors pink and blue? At the close of the exhibit all of the pink and blue objects were taken. I will never know the reasons why viewers chose a specific color, but that wasn’t the goal. The goal was to simply get the viewer to think, contemplate and ask themselves about their own choice. In the end, we all know that girls wear pink and boys wear blue. Boys play construction, while girls play house.

The viewer is then confronted with the next piece, Object Choice, (Fig. 4) which displays 1,133 sex toys alternating between two colors, pink and blue. This piece is meant to reference society as a whole. Regardless of male or female, gay
Your Choice? 18” x 3” x 7” Earthenware, Luster, Paint, Wood, Spray Glitter! 2013 (Fig. 3)

Object Choice. 14’ x 6.5’ x 5’ Earthenware, Luster, Paint, Wood, Spray Glitter! 2013 (Fig. 4)
or straight, these objects exist in our world. This piece was designed to be overt and over the top, bringing attention to objects that are normally hidden in the dresser drawer or the box under the bed. Each object is hand made and though they look similar and reference one another no two are the same, just like a population of people. We are all similar at the core, but there are discrepancies that make each and every one of us different. Your Choice (Fig. 3) and Object Choice (Fig. 4) are two pieces that are meant to be overt. The two pieces are prominent at the entrance of the exhibit as a way to pose the question of acceptance immediately, hiding nothing from the start.

In the next piece entitled Nascent, (Fig. 5) I wanted to see if the viewer had the same reaction when color and the obvious reference to intimate objects were removed. Nascent, was designed to reference speedbags, used by boxers. While the shapes are similar to the intimate objects used in the previous pieces their absence of color and direct reference to sex toys makes the viewer associate with other aspects of my identity, particularly my masculine side. The scale of the three speedbags gets smaller as the eye travels from right to left. The title refers to the idea of coming into existence. Larger speedbags are designed for beginners whereas the smaller bags are designed for more advanced users. Therefore, the gradual shift in size is a metaphor for becoming comfortable and confident with oneself.

The last piece of the exhibit and the piece that represents the end of my letter is entitled Inconspicuous (Fig. 6). When viewed up close, dozens of subtle
Nascent. 38” x 19” x 11” Porcelain, Chrome Hardware, Wood, Spray Glitter! 2013 (Fig. 5)

Inconspicuous. 51” x 30” x 3” Porcelain. 2012 (Fig. 6)
sharp porcelain objects protrude from the wall. From a distance *Inconspicuous* takes the shape of a common ending to an informal letter, “XOXO.” This is meant to represent the end of the exhibition and the end of the letter. Underneath the piece my name is subtly signed in vinyl on the wall. The sharp texture of the objects represents the tough skin that I needed to write this letter, a protective layer I needed to emotionally deal with everything that has happened in the last three years.

*April 2013.*

My conceptual interests directly correspond with my aesthetic choices. I think of how color, composition, and object can work together to create a revealing sensibility. When people enter my studio they walk into a three dimensional version of my sketchbook. My studio walls are plastered with images of neon signs, sex toys, and photographs from Robert Mapplethorpe and Peter Hujar that mimic the aesthetic dialogue I try to portray in my work. My most prominent interest lies in the landscape of Las Vegas; its flashy over the top atmosphere, its neon signs, billboards and marquees are what inspire *Unapologetic’s aesthetic landscape.* Las Vegas is the quintessential location to investigate the intersection of public and private lives. Aesthetically I reference this landscape when displaying objects that represent the most private parts of people’s lives, the sexuality, gender and identity issues that are typically kept hidden.
April 2013.

Since I am about to finish this MFA I often ask myself “where in the art world do I fit?” I consider myself to be part of the social activist camp. I am inspired by and feel connected to the social activist artists of the 1980’s AIDS epidemic, specifically the work of Félix González-Torres and the collaborative efforts of the group Gran Fury. Social Activist artists create work to inform and generate awareness among a population. Awareness for those affected by AIDS and those ignoring the epidemic. What interests me most about González-Torres is that he doesn’t want the audience to solely view his work; he wants them to feel emotion, take action and become part of the work. As a social activist he often confronts the audience with choices. In one of his most well known pieces entitled Portrait of Ross, (Fig. 7) González-Torres created a pile of colorfully wrapped candy that represents the weight of himself plus the weight of his lover Ross. The audience is left with a choice. Do they take a piece of candy or not? The pile of candy placed in front of the viewers is meant to confront issues concerning homophobia and the fear of contracting HIV, a disease that would later take the life of González-Torres. What draws me to this piece is how emotionally charged it is. It goes beyond the issue of taking from an HIV positive man. It also represents vulnerability, control, loss, and the passion we have for the ones we love. There is a beauty in trying to control something that was basically uncontrollable. In this case, the fight with AIDS is represented through the act of taking. People take in
order to be part of that memory the same way AIDS takes loved ones away. 

Another large part of the Social Activist camp during the 1980’s is the collaborative efforts of Gran Fury. Instead of using the gallery as a means of display, they were interested in using public formats such as billboards and the sides of city buses, the same formats that advertising uses to subliminally sneak its way into our daily lives, to spread their message of awareness during the AIDS epidemic. For Gran Fury, social activism was about reaching a larger audience, an audience outside of the educated gallery scene. Their mission consisted of calling attention to conservative political officials who were doing nothing to help with AIDS awareness. One of their most popular campaigns was a piece entitled Read My Lips, which consisted of two same sex couples and one interracial couple kissing. Above the image read the phrase, “Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do” (Fig. 8). This image was plastered on the sides of New York City buses that made their way through a lot of the affected, yet silent neighborhoods. 

April 2013.

I am also interested in the world of photography, particularly those individuals who use people as their subjects and place them in revealing or questionable scenarios. I am drawn to photography for its immediacy, intimacy and vulnerability. For me as a viewer, a portrait of someone can spark a reaction quicker than certain other mediums. This has a lot to do with photography’s ability to be overt and immediate and our innate ability to relate to an image of another person. One of my favorite photographers whose images can be seen plastered
Félix González-Torres. Portrait of Ross. Individually Wrapped Candy. 1991 (Fig. 7)

Gran Fury. Kissing Doesn’t Kill: Greed and Indifference Do. 1989 (Fig. 8)
over my studio walls is Robert Mapplethorpe, particularly his black and white Polaroids and nudes (Fig. 9). My connection with Mapplethorpe goes beyond my interest in his subject matter. Mapplethorpe’s life fascinates me. The quick portraits of individuals were at a time when he was figuring out his own identity. For the most part the first two years of my graduate experience were similar, even though, taking Polaroid’s is a lot smarter than creating a twenty-foot billboard! My imagery may not be as easily accessible as a self-portrait, but at the core we are both revealing a private part of our lives. Using our own story to expose something about our culture and us.

Collier Schorr is a contemporary photographer who works in a similar fashion as Mapplethorpe. I am lured in by the seductiveness of Schorr’s images and once hooked I discover something more. Her images are constantly questioning gender and how it is perceived. In her Helga series, (Fig. 10) Schorr looks at how femininity can be used to describe a man. Schorr’s interest in how an image can define someone relates to the way I investigate how object and color can define someone. For Schorr this investigation happens by photographing and presenting individuals that appear androgynous. Men and women are presented with combating masculine and feminine qualities. I immediately question what I am looking at and why I am drawn to it. Is it for the masculine or feminine qualities? Schorr has explained that photographing women is about coming to terms with her own fears of femininity and her attraction to it. This concept
Robert Mapplethorpe. Self-Portrait. 1980 (Fig. 9)

Collier Schorr. Helga Series. 2002 (Fig. 10)
pertains to my own concerns about being honest with those around me as well as myself.

April 2013.

Creating artwork that is revealing on a personal level can be overwhelming and frightening. When creating the body of work for Unapologetic, the only way I can describe it is as an “emotional rollercoaster.” The thrill and excitement I felt was constantly met with hesitation and fear. The driving force for me to continue was the overwhelming desire to share this story and potentially help others that may be dealing with the same confusion I had dealt with for years. Thanks to a fellow colleague Burke Jam, I had the opportunity to reveal my story for the Independent, a liberal Missoula weekly. I put a lot of thought into how much I wanted to reveal about my personal story. After much debate, I thought the only way the article would make sense is for me to reveal all of the inspiration behind Unapologetic. I’m constantly questioning the intersection between public and private realms, I should use this opportunity to reveal what’s private in my own world. The article entitled “Dear everyone,” was printed the day of the opening. To be honest, I was more nervous about the article than I was the opening reception. To this day I haven’t actually read the article. I had a friend read it to me as we were driving around Missoula and I have not had the urge to pick it up since. There is something frightened about revealing yourself to everyone. How would I read the article without being overly critical and worrying about what people may think? Well, having the support of my close friends quickly allowed
those fears to diminish. I never looked at the article as being courageous in any way. I looked at the article as a way for me to bare all, another step in my therapeutic journey. The response to the article was overwhelming. People were thanking me for sharing something so personal and that really helped me gain a sense of pride. However, not all response to the article was positive. The reaction from my parents was far from compassionate. They stressed an overwhelming concern for what I had revealed. My mother’s response, “Ron, you know we support you, but your father and I really think you should think twice before making your private life so public. What will people think?” Translation… Why don’t you jump back into the closet? Well, needless to say my response to them was far from sympathetic. My response was as follows, “Don’t get me wrong, I understand that this ‘news’ is fairly new to the both of you and you need time to adjust. I can understand your frustration and the fact that I revealed the context of the letter to the public may be hard for you to grasp. However, if making my story public helps someone who may not have the courage to deal with these issues, then I’m sorry, but that trumps anything you two may be feeling.” As I explained to a group of high school students that viewed my Thesis Exhibition, Unapologetic is about not being afraid to be who you are, having the confidence to be who you are and not APOLOGIZING for who you are.

XOXO,

Ron