Senior Project - Boyland Artist Statement

Gabriella Rubin, Bard College
Boyland

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by

Gabriella Rubin

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My project, Boyland began in 2010 when my artistic collaborator, Felix Bernstein shared a fantasy story/screenplay that he wrote as a teenager called Boyland. The story follows a reclusive and curmudgeonly pedophile named Meyer who gets teleported to a fantasy world/fascistic camp "Boyland" which is ruled by a relentless and perverted dictator named Jeremiah. Jeremiah owns hundreds of handsome boy sex slaves who perform for him in grotesquely beautiful ways ala Pasolini’s Salò. Felix’s original Boyland screenplay draws (with naive and fan-fiction-style writing) from various different films including Lasse Nielsen's You Are Not Alone (1978), a Danish coming of age film about two boys who fall in love in the context of a Christian boarding school. This kind of sentiment permeates Felix’s Boyland which is full of cheesy and unsettling romance (between middle-aged Meyer and Jeremiah's most beautiful boy, Jasmine) and melodramatic heartbreak, all climaxing with Jasmine's sacrifice and resurrection.

The night Felix shared his story with me we were having a sleepover in his dorm room which marked the beginning of a long-term romantic relationship. Hearing this story was so perfect to me in my half-asleep fog, and I felt totally childlike and excited about life and my future with this older seeming man. Boyland immediately spoke to me as I had always been interested in fantasy stories such as Peter Pan and Alice in Wonderland which feature child protagonists who are sexual and androgynous (more so Peter than Alice). What interested me the most was that Felix had described Jasmine in his story as having a vagina but very clearly being identified as a boy, or a boy-princess. At this point in my first year at Bard, I was making the transition into identifying as male with the name Gabe. It was extremely empowering for me to identify with androgynous mystical creatures, and re-live my lost boyhood through this gay or pseudo pederastic relationship with Felix. We both promised each other that night
that we would work to make a film or animation out of his screenplay. Hence, I figured that my film senior project would be the best opportunity to bring *Boyland* to life.

I reworked Felix's original story, transposing the fantasy world of Boyland into a story book that the protagonist, Meyer, had written and illustrated himself, inspired by memories of a previous boy love named Jasmine. I wanted to explore Meyer's character in a less blatantly fantastical context which would have involved a ton of animation, green screen, costumes and special effects. Instead, I wanted to explore Meyer's more mundane lifestyle against the backdrop of the passionate and parasitically introverted world of his psyche. Meyer is instead a photographer who lives in an isolated house in the woods of northern California. He meets James, a runaway teen, who becomes his new muse on the beach, an obvious reference to Thomas Mann's and Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice*. James spends the summer at Meyer's home where he uncovers many secrets from Meyer's past including his pederastic fantasy book *Boyland* about Jasmine and Jeremiah. James, strangely becomes transfixed by the book, and by Jasmine, and enthusiastically participates in Meyer's photo shoots and dress up games to help resurrect his dark memories. James reaches a breaking point when Meyer invites his deranged friends over and they all go on a hallucinogen fueled romp in the woods. James disassociates and believes he has sacrificed himself, and has been reborn as Meyer's original muse, Jasmine.

Throughout the process of making this film I have tried to preserve that initial feeling I had when hearing the story for the first time, like a child would have, even though that has proven to be very difficult. I attempted to do this by keeping an openness in my linguistic/image association. Basically I tried to shoot whatever was around me and as much of it as I could with a wide-eyed naiveté, as well as eventually editing the piece so that it did not follow a stringent narrative structure. At the same time I wanted to maintain a powerfully conscious, intellectual and mythological quality to it with gushing and
sentimental imagery and music. And these qualities were achieved very naturally for me, as I played the dominant role of director/cinematographer, the voyeur, whether gentle or predatory as well as the editor/storyteller.

This film was and still is an empowering experience for me, but also throughout this process has taken on a more painful qualities, in that from Boyland's "conception" I have socially transitioned not only from female to male, but from a child to an adult, and from the one being looked at (in previous performance projects) to the looker (behind the camera). I filmed the attractive boy actors (who were not really "boys" but my age) in my film with an agonizing desire comparable to that of the anguished pedophile, Meyer. For me it was not so much about desiring the boys erotically in the way Meyer does in the film, but wishing to be in their bodies and wishing to be looked at as a boy and as a child. Yet at the same time, this film has relieved that pain for me and helped me regain agency. For one, I have completed a film that I am happy with. Secondly it has helped in certain ways to resurrect that lost boyhood I yearn for and to channel these dark and cynical feelings into something glistening and blooming.