

Ezekiel

An interview with London-based photographer Ezekiel Santos on their SMUT photobook series and upcoming short film
Words KC Faulkner Photography Provided by Ezekiel

Jo Ann Calis, Helmut Newton and Robert Mapplethorpe are all hallowed in the photography annals, capturing moments of sexuality and fetish in a candid fly-on-the-wall fashion. Soon to join their ranks as a household name is Ezekiel, the Filipino-born, London-based photographer who is exploring the queer gaze and feminine sexuality, antithetical to the objectified lens that the female form is seen through so often.

Allowing the viewer to gaze into the lives of strippers, dominatrixes, camgirls and, more recently, hook-ups, the 26-year-old has created multiple books, exhibitions and, soon-to-be, films utilising a warm and intimate approach to humanity and identity from a queer perspective.

After the first limited-edition instalment of their photobook series SMUT in February 2022, and an anniversary exhibition earlier this February, 'Volume 1: Transgressions' - which ran a tongue-in-cheek 69 copies - has left big shoes to fill for its upcoming sequel set to release this year in September.

It's been 10 years since Ezekiel began documenting life for their 'bliss' series at the tender age of 16, compiling visual moments >





> of queer joy and liberation in the ongoing photo project featuring their inner circle ageing and maturing, shown through moments of connection. The photography grows too, the camera lens and its mastery maturing with its owner.

The publication of 'bliss' succeeded their first official venture, 'Empathy', Ezekiel laughing at its mention "I published that when I was very young. 20...a baby!". 'Empathy' reflected the human experience, the dichotomy between photography as liberation and as a coping mechanism for a queer person of colour in London, an introspective series despite its position as the observer of these moments, "All of my projects are very personal. It's hard for me to not insert myself fully into every project I do. I can't help it, I'm passionate about my work, and I'm also a triple water sign! Very emotional."

Rounding up their portfolio is the predecessor of the SMUT series, 'tender'. In a collaboration with Singaporean university coursemate Nicole Ngai, the two friends met at the London College of Fashion and created a collaborative zine in 2020 that showcased tenderness, manifested in intimacy that spanned through lockdown.

When reflecting on their work and how it has reframed their views on intimacy, "Growing up I never really got the chance to truly explore my sexuality or gender identity, so my work has allowed me to figure out my desires and what works for me. It's allowed me to be more open when it comes to all corners of my sexuality and not constrain myself to certain - aka heteronormative - ways of experiencing romantic and sexual relationships". >

> In the present, SMUT and its ethos still maintain the hallmarks of Ezekiel's past: the dissemination of sensual concepts and sexuality that are fully explored through the lives of their subjects using their signature golden lighting glow.

'Volume I: Transgressions' having already sold out, Ezekiel is looking to the future of the series, "I hope in the next few years or so SMUT transcends being a photobook and we move on to creating films, publishing a wider range of projects and curating exhibitions and events". The latter of which is already well on its way to being realised, a short film shot back in October 2022, "I don't want to give too much away, but it's an abstract film that explores sexuality and queerness (obviously haha). It was shot in the most beautiful locations in Wales and I will hopefully premier it in early 2024". Marking their filmmaking debut and adding another plume to the ever-growing list of accolades the rising creative has accumulated.

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- Ezekiel

As for others rising alongside them, filmmaker friend Iso Attrill and artist Jesse Glazzard are cited as inspiring creatives. "I've always been fascinated by work related to sexuality, especially by artists who explore the female and queer side of sex and sensuality," they say when prompted for their personal references, lesbian filmmakers the likes of Shine Louise Houston and Emilie Jouvét are cited as huge cultural touchpoints. Ideas that were born from their LCF photography dissertation on sapphic videographers eventually melded to form the concept of SMUT, a concept that will be turned on its head for the impending second instalment in the series.

Look out for SMUT Volume II this Autumn, as well as the upcoming short film aimed for release in 2024, on Ezekiel's Instagram @ezekielarchive. Continue reading for the discussion we had about the person behind the camera on spirituality, queer joy and for some details about Volume II.





KC: Thank you for talking to me about your work, I'd like to get more personal now so... How's your love life?

Ezekiel: LOL good question. My romantic love life is like non-existent.. but the sexual side of me is very much alive. I've been shooting more photographs with sexual partners recently, which has been really hot.

How does having this separate cultural identity to the spaces you live and work in change how you view and approach them?

I wouldn't necessarily say that my cultural background is a barrier, my family is from a part of Filipino culture which has luckily always been accepting of the range of gender and sexual identities. I think growing up in the UK and going to Catholic school actually repressed me more than if I grew up in the Philippines.

I do feel a disconnect to both my Filipino upbringing and British 'identity' which is something a lot of immigrants go through, feeling like you're "in-between". I think this aspect has influenced my work a lot because queer people are often seen as the 'outsiders' and don't really fit into our mainstream society; I have the power to integrate myself with other social groups who experience the same thing. There's a sense of connection in being the outsiders.

Your work over the years is deeply enriched in queerness, part of why I wanted to get you into </3<3 so badly. What does being queer mean to you

physically and sensually?

As for physically I always say that queerness to me has never been categorised by a way of looking or dressing, it's a way of being and how you carry yourself. It's knowing that the world does not cater to you and that people will always see you as 'other', and to own that. I always feel so much power when I think about my queerness because I'm alive and thriving when I have constantly been told from a young age that I shouldn't exist.

I'm not sure I could describe it in a smell... poppers maybe?

What is your form of queer joy?

To me, it's rooted in dancing and music. There is nothing I love more than going out and seeing a queer DJ playing a set for the queers and being surrounded by other people like me in ecstasy and this sense of freedom.

On the flip side, there's a lot of grief in our community right now - the senseless murder of Brianna Ghey, the UK and US governments continuing to infringe on trans rights... Where do you and the people around you find yourselves in this landscape?

It does worry me a lot. Ever since the pandemic my friends and I have experienced more subtle, and not-so-subtle, hate crimes from strangers in public.

There was a statistic online that things like this have sky-rocketed around the world ever since COVID-19. >

> Yeah, the 50% increase in reported hate crimes post-pandemic from that official UK government report, ironically.

I'm not sure if it's because people have forgotten that we exist or if they're projecting their own self-hatred onto us, but it's not fun. It's the same as always though: as a community, we get through these things and we support each other. This cycle has been constantly repeating throughout history, so we must push through and have hope.

How does Ezekiel pass their time?

I've been running ALOT at the moment as I'm training for my first marathon, so a lot of mental and physical strain LOL. I love to run as it helps with my anxiety and I usually come up with fun projects during these long stretches with myself.

I've been reading recently too, mainly books by, and about, queer people. At the moment I'm reading 'A Little Life' by Hanya Yanagihara. Every sentence breaks my heart, but it is so beautifully written.

Is there anything you are obsessed with right now that's bleeding over into your work?

I'm very in my spiritual era of life if you couldn't tell, so I've been tapping into that more over the past few years. I grew up in a religious home which I used to despise, but now I find comfort in it. I do yoga twice a week to keep my physical and mental health in check which is important to keep me sane.

As for music, Madonna's 'Ray Of Light' album has definitely influenced my work a lot - just about anything within that late 90's spiritual electronic genre. >





This is kind of a full circle moment, because on my first date with my partner I remember going to Waste! in Hackney to buy the last copy of SMUT for them, so they are stoked about me talking to you haha. They are a big fan and have a question for you, if you don't mind?

That's so sweet and lovely to hear, please say hi to your partner for me! Of course.

Will do! So: 'You explore the far reaches of feminine sexuality in your recent projects, I was wondering if you will explore the masculine sides to intimacy, especially with your soft style of photography?'

SMUT Volume II will centre around gay sexuality and desires and I've been shooting a lot more men recently, which is weird for me because I used to find that so hard. Women are usually more natural in front of the camera and not so stiff, so it's been a nice challenge to translate my signature style onto masculine subjects.

If there's one message you could put out to the world what would it be?

"Cuntiness is not birthed by thrifted Helmut Lang or a love of industrial techno – instead it comes from the revolutionary and transformative power of love" - a tweet I saw from @fuglibetty which I thought was hilarious but also true. It was a great reminder for me.





Queer Comforts

The joys of young people around the world (names and ages have been altered)

Words KC Faulkner

Ca, 20 “Beep-beep-vroom-vroom-crash-pots-and-pans music”

M, 26 “Grindr”

Ai, 21 “Putting random shit on earrings”

P, 19 “Queer love, it feels so much more special and meaningful”

Their inherent nature of being so personal, it's like the inverse of a guilty pleasure, with some people's comforts just being in the presence of other people. In regard to 'the little things', it's about bringing out your inner child - something so incredibly important for our community due to how tough many of our childhoods often turn out to be, queer or not. We are to believe that we should all 'grow up' one day, yet nobody ever seems happy about doing so (a sentiment many people echoed in adulthood on **pg 15**.) It's vital to have a whimsical, even slightly embarrassing side to you, be it going to Yu-Gi-Oh tournaments after you clock out from work or collecting vintage Sylvanian Families sets. >

Seemingly meaningful or not, queer people tend to latch onto objects and imbue them with a powerful sentimentality. Whether that be the large plush IKEA shark Blåhaj that the internet transformed into a trans icon or video game characters like the anti-villain N from Pokémon Black/White, or Sheik from The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. Queer comforts can manifest in just about anything, and it's not uncommon for a queer person to have a strange fixation on a tv show or movie from 2004 that approximately 6 other people remember.

Anon, 20 “Call it cringy or whatever but Blåhaj”

K, 20 “Flume, Dark Magician Girl and Gengar”

F, 22 “Community, club culture and queer art that incorporates themes of alienation and campness”

Anon, 19 “My Mother”

S, 18 “Watching shows like Pose with honest representation and spending time with my partner”

A, 19 “Seeing people wear pins, badges and flags around town”

C, 21 “Orange is the new black”

E, 18 “The ability to connect with someone in seconds with just a look because of our shared experience”

R, 16 “I LOVE Hannah Diamond”

J, 20 “Referencing queer culture and passing it off as my own to unsuspecting heteros”

T, 19 “Wearing oversized old man clothes”

G, 20 “A sense of superiority over cishet people”

> Not everything is a 'little thing' though. Life can feel like a glass of water on the edge of a table, threatening to spill over at any moment, and sometimes it's strong shows of companionship and honest representation that soothe people during, what is transpiring to be, a dark period in history. Togetherness, love and support are paramount - more so than ever before - and for every victim of bullying, eviction and senseless murder it is of the utmost importance that we stand our ground and closeranks to protect and make one another feel safe.

K, 20 “Being able to live as who I truly am, working towards the body I want with a name that feels right to me”

V, 17 “Being queer and being able to relate to other people like me. It gives me the freedom to express myself”

Club nights like Pxssy Palace and Subculture, and venues like Electrowerkz and Elsewhere, are blazing a trail in creating pockets in the UK and the US where queer people can go out and enjoy themselves without fear, with more and more alternative spaces popping up around the world acting as safe havens to let queer people be themselves without fear - besides the main gay clubs like Heaven, where gender non-conforming people don't always feel safe. More and more fierce queer creatives are rising to the mainstream, from Kim Petras winning a Grammy award to Bowen Yang becoming a prominent writer and cast member on Saturday Night Live - the future is looking queer.

To combat the negativity we must have joy, so here are the queer comforts that young people around the world hold in their hearts. Be they 'little things' or otherwise, they mean a lot to us all.



Trawling on waves of memory,
Wide net cast for information that is incompatible
with daybreak

Sunrise invites pale tides,
filled with naught but unfulfilled potential

Swathed in grey, heart unbreaking on proxied time,
the ship continues.

Without signal or steel to halt its journey,
the charcoal dominion timidly retreats,
a glimpse of land with past shorelines.

pearls tumbling resound with a shuddering
Cognition.

Sunbeams cut through the mist,
a path forward illuminated for the liner
to hone in on,

a port of boundless opportunity,

dock.

SOPHIE VR Experience

An interview with creative computing student Cam Williamson, detailing their upcoming VR project that showcases the music of SOPHIE Xeon

Words KC Faulkner Images Provided by Cam Williamson (@cam_williamson) [note that any VR captures used are pre-alpha footage]

“The people leading the charge of technology, music and art have always been queer people”, says visual artist and student Cameron Williamson over a Zoom call, against a virtual city background, citing the genius of Alan Turing, Sophie Wilson and Lynne Conway as trailblazers to follow.

Working under the name real3 (realrealreal or realcubed to the repetition adverse), the Canterbury-based creative computing student is constructing a collaborative VR project showcasing the work of the late Scottish producer, DJ and popstar SOPHIE Xeon.

“VR could potentially become such an amazing tool of escapism”
- Cam Williamson

While the 40-minute experience is still in its early stages, the Meta-compatible project plans to showcase the width and breadth of SOPHIE’s music - from Madonna production credits to tracks even the most hardcore fans have no knowledge of, “The experience will be for the fans who never got to hear those tracks live...the recordings are so rare because she would ban photography at some shows so this is just as much a tribute as it is for the music lovers”.

The hand-tracking quality that Meta VR headsets is not compatible with all headsets, so accessibility is paramount for a project that is so collaborative. VR headsets are still an early technology and prohibitively expensive, so a 360-degree video will be uploaded to YouTube when the experience goes live. >

> </3<3 and The SOPHIE VR Experience are intrinsically linked, Cam’s visual art being featured in these pages and the music mix for the experience created by yours truly, which Cam says speaks volumes about the community factor that the music has had, “SOPHIE was a pioneer in the music industry and her passing left massive shockwaves in our community. What she was doing with sound design and technology was beyond revolutionary, and the music has brought so many people together, from fans to other artists”.

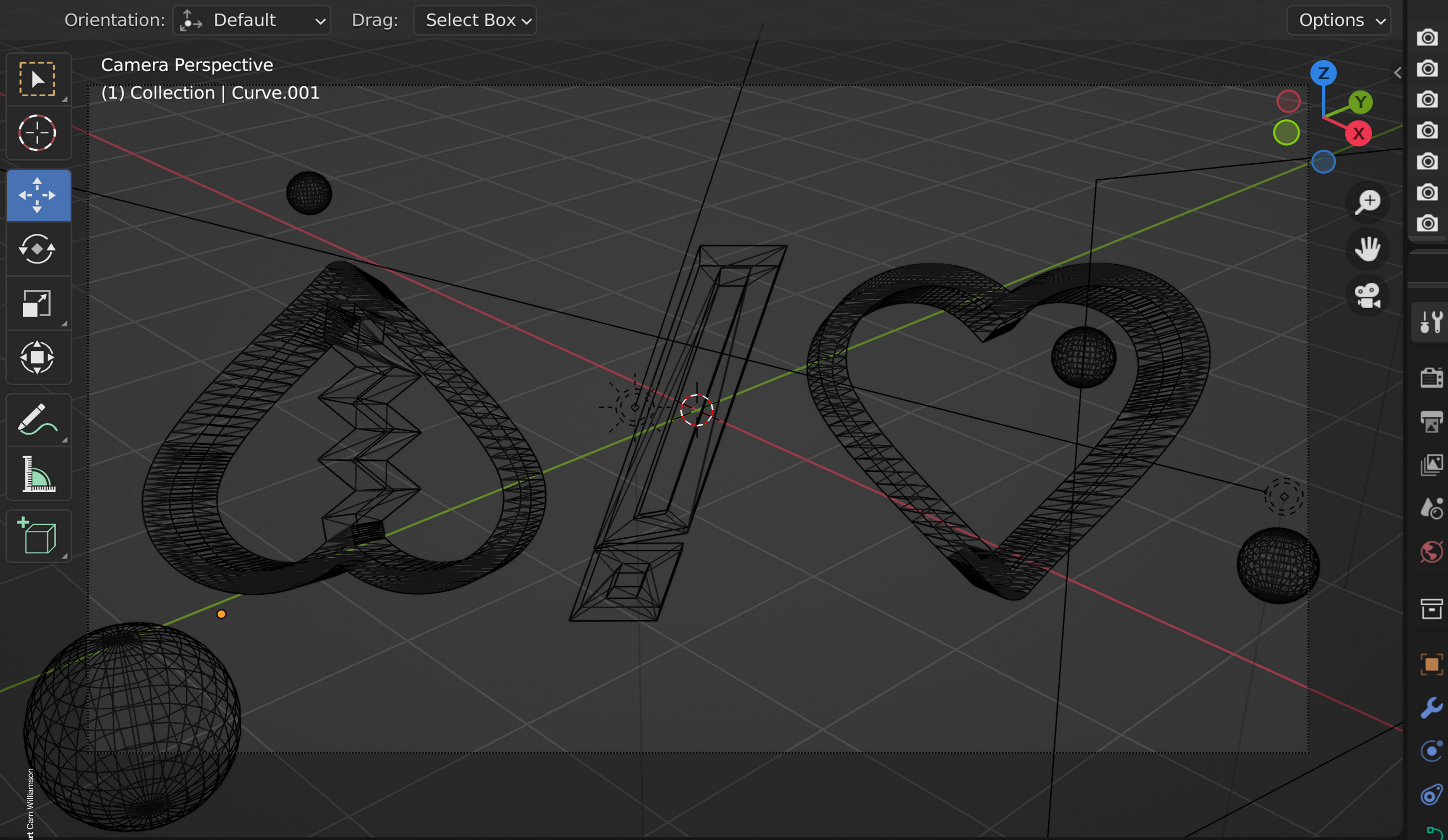
A sentiment that rings true for record label PC Music, headed by A.G. Cook, one of SOPHIE’s biggest collaborators, where completely different artists like Caroline Polachek and Cupcakke have been featured on the same projects - an expanded universe that undeniably revolves around SOPHIE and her dynamic sound.

“SOPHIE’s music has two sides to it almost. Songs like Infatuation, a recurring theme in the experience, have a smokey, liquidy atmosphere whilst Ponyboy, for example, has this rubbery, stretchy and sweaty feel. Her music always had a tactility to it and that quality is super important to me”.

The texture of the music will be amplified by the visuals, testers of which can be found on the project website camwilliamson.net, which has an interesting origin story that’s tied to the Oakland-based visual artist Isaac Cohen: “Isaac has been a massive influence on the project even before it began, before I even discovered this sphere of music actually, which is super weird. Back in the day, Google had this site called Chrome Experiments which had loads of different games, software and visual art from coders pushing the software to its extremes, and Cohen’s website was one of them and I fell in love. It was this self-contained universe on the internet with all these revolving planets with different songs on them. Cut to today and they made all the live visuals for SOPHIE, Hyd, Easyfun...all these musicians that mean so much to me and the people I hang around.”

Another named reference is the simulation Everything by David OReilly, one of many abstract visual experiences that have served as a reference point for metaverse programs in its fluidity of visual storytelling, and the visual accompaniment of Flume’s 2022 album Palaces by Jonathan Zawada (with the track ‘I Can’t Tell’ used as one of the testing tracks.)>





> The community aspect is paramount to Cam for such an important project, especially with all of the challenges we are facing currently, “VR could potentially become such an amazing tool of escapism, something that all queer people seek and that the internet has provided us for such a long time now.” Be it Discord servers for the farming simulation game Stardew Valley or something as quaint as the gay dating app Grindr, the web has long served as the queer communities’ few points of contact and exposure to each other (even more so in the last 2 decades).

Take Youtube and the wave of ‘coming out videos’ every year on October 11th, National Coming Out day, that Cam admits to binging when he was younger, “As a young kid I didn’t really have anything to relate to so I would watch, like, all of them as a way to keep in contact with that side of me, whereas now I find joy in spaces like Corsica Studios and Colour Factory... those small venues surrounded by people like me.”

With the dissolution of coming out videos, a result perhaps of an increase in queer visibility both in media and in society as a whole, in their absence Cam does express concern for the future, “The community can never just feel safe and comfortable at any one time. I’m hoping for a period of peace soon but trans rights are being under attack again, and I think it’s up to the internet once more to provide those spaces and that support for each other when we need it the most.”

As for the future of the project, it looks bright, “I created realrealreal partly as a design identity for my spatial work, but also as a graphic design project. It’s modelled with a satirical big-tech corporation in mind, think Apple and Google, so the branding is hyper-futuristic in that Flume-y, PC Music way where it’s covertly apocalyptic - but ideally, I want it to function as the opposite.

Right now it contains placeholder work but I hope to grow it into a collective and meaningful design space open for collaboration and 3D and XR design projects.” >

> Queer people are always on the precipice of what’s new, SOPHIE being one of the most talented and beloved artists who were paving the way forward. VR is just another potential space for us all to inhabit, an outlet of expression where the possibilities are limitless.

The Sophie VR Exhibition will go live later this summer on camwilliamson.net, and will be on show at the student exhibition at UCA Canterbury in June.

