

# **SOME BINARISMS/ THE TWO WAYS OF LIFE**

MICHAEL REECE





## PUBLIC GARDEN

BY MATT MORRIS

Michael Reece's recent images bloom with compounded iconography harvested from the technological wastelands of advanced capitalism. Strategies of appropriation, quotation, and most of all simulation crisscross cultural spheres of politics, sex, commerce, and notions of embodiment in search of the latent potentials afforded a society by its shared publics. Social theorist Michael Warner offers this working definition that, "A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself." Simple though that may seem, such a means of circulating ideas is in no way guaranteed; insofar as a society is managed and regulated—particularly through its practices of property ownership and the applications of those concepts to the increasingly immaterial, such as subjectivity, identity, ideas, and data—the fostering of public discourse is a fugitive and uncertain labor, often encumbered rather than enabled by the sheer proliferation of pictures and their attendant positionalities. "Public discourse, in the nature of its address...promises to address anybody. It commits itself in principle to the possible participation of any stranger... This is its fruitful perversity." If anyone could appear then in Reece's fantastical forensics, everyone does, replicated from the image trails left in the wake of the possible modes of address by which contemporary discourse is enabled: communication technologies, social media platforms, and the wayward digital-draconian roleplay of trolls and culture jammers and call out queens, oh my! Rather than one or another particular ideological position, it is the organization of belief systems per se that Reece's treachery of images aim to agitate.

In earlier projects, the artist has emulated commercial product photography and advertisements in order to distinguish the difference between an object and the affectations with which it is instilled to maximize desirability. Following upon those investigations, these recent digital collages amplify the breakdowns between form and content that is endemic to photography as a medium, amplifying the morality fable made with misleading collaged techniques found in Oscar Gustav Rejlander's *Two Ways of Life*, 1857, printed 1920s, which serves as inspiration for Reece's latest project. Not only do these works emphasize medium over message, but in fact the tensions inherent in our accepted modes of delivery are treated with the utmost scrutiny. Emoji, clip art, the trappings of Internet image searches, and manipulated 3D scans of "fake plastic flowers" underscore artifice.

As Jean-Paul Sartre notes of the queering and heaping of pretense upon pretense to be found in the plays of Jean Genet, "Everything must be so false that it sets our teeth on edge...Anything can be a woman: a flower, an animal, an inkwell...relative to everything and everyone; their being is defined by its absolute relativity. They are others." If with Genet, a flower can be a woman, in Reece's work, artificial flower bouquets, dick pics, memes, clip art, and symbol systems of divergent modes of patriotism in the United States tumble over themselves into reveries of playful dissidence: dandies, Decadent poets, and discontents are all in attendance, as are a rogue's gallery of misunderstood supervillains, Althusser's policeman, the freefloating signifier of a conservative Christian everywoman character portrayed by Margot Robbie in Jay Roach's 2019 film *Bombshell*, and Marchesa Luisa Casati dressed in her notorious headdress of white peacock feathers drenched in chicken blood, surrounded by her menagerie of cheetahs, albino blackbirds, and boa constrictors. One hopes that when the artists Jeff Gibson, Martine Aballéa, Jacolby Satterwhite, Martial Rayssé, and Belgian surrealist Marcel Mariën are thought of, it is with fondness. In the catacombs that run underneath these public parks, edge lord veteran Camille Paglia is skulking. The 'torture gardens' are planted with roses named after dead presidents, penis flytraps, and orchids, honeysuckle, tuberose, waterlily, apricot blossom, bird of paradise flower, and whatever other blossoms comprise a super-synthetic Britney Spears perfume. In sum total, these scenes are elaborate shell games with which to attend to the ways visual culture is harnessed to signal any number of political positions.

The matrix across which Michael Reece transgresses in his work is a class war acted out through aesthetic signifiers that articulate difference oppositionally rather than in coalition. Inflammatory tone, flamboyant satire, and encroaching cynicism pervade these ornate simulations of rote discursive cliché, and only latently does the cluttered surrealist



kitsch betray its basis in a fragile hope for an as of yet unrealized commons. In economic theory, a commons potentially corresponds to the publics aforementioned, predicated on the concept of resources held in common, not privately owned, and accessible to all members of a given society. At a time when even "liberal" politics are enacted seemingly at the expense of society's most vulnerable communities, the effusive, often barbed impersonations that Reece performs can be read as a form of protest that marks out hypocrisy and internal contradictions in form.

In step with accelerated industrialization in the nineteenth century, the institution of public parks and gardens provided a means of gathering for poor and working class people, their apparent economic struggle often showing stark contrast to the beautified landscapes that for so long in mythology and history were predicated on logics of expulsion. Alongside the provocations of Reece's social critiques, the digital flowers he manipulates into resplendent follies are anticipatory of another cultural turn that would cultivate not only shared resources but also hybrid visual languages by which positions of difference might achieve correspondence—unmanaged, out from under hegemonic control, overgrown in flowering wildness.

<sup>1</sup> Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. Print, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Introduction." *The Maids and Deathwatch* by Jean Genet. London: Faber and Faber, 1954. Print, p. 10, 17.

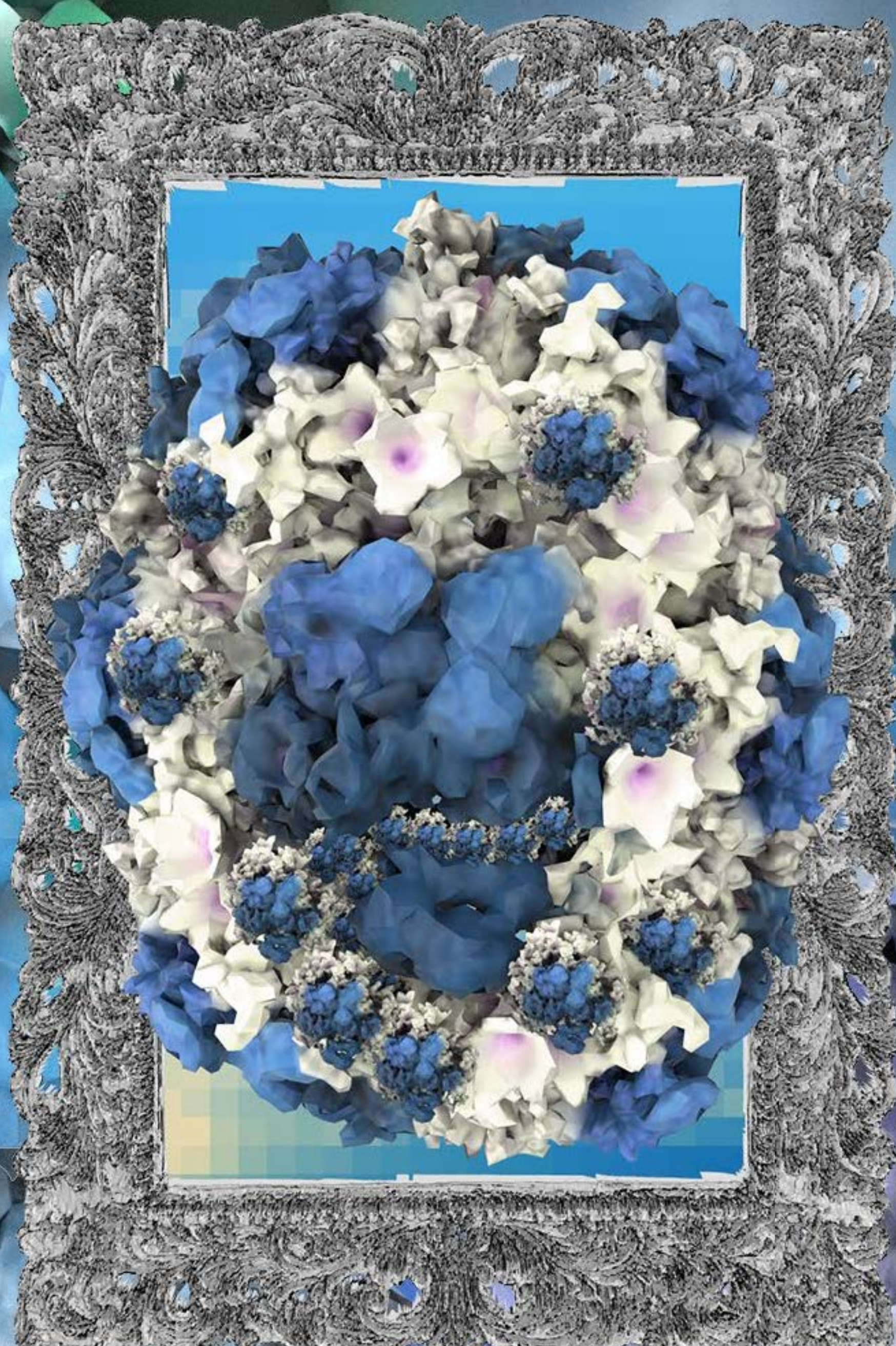
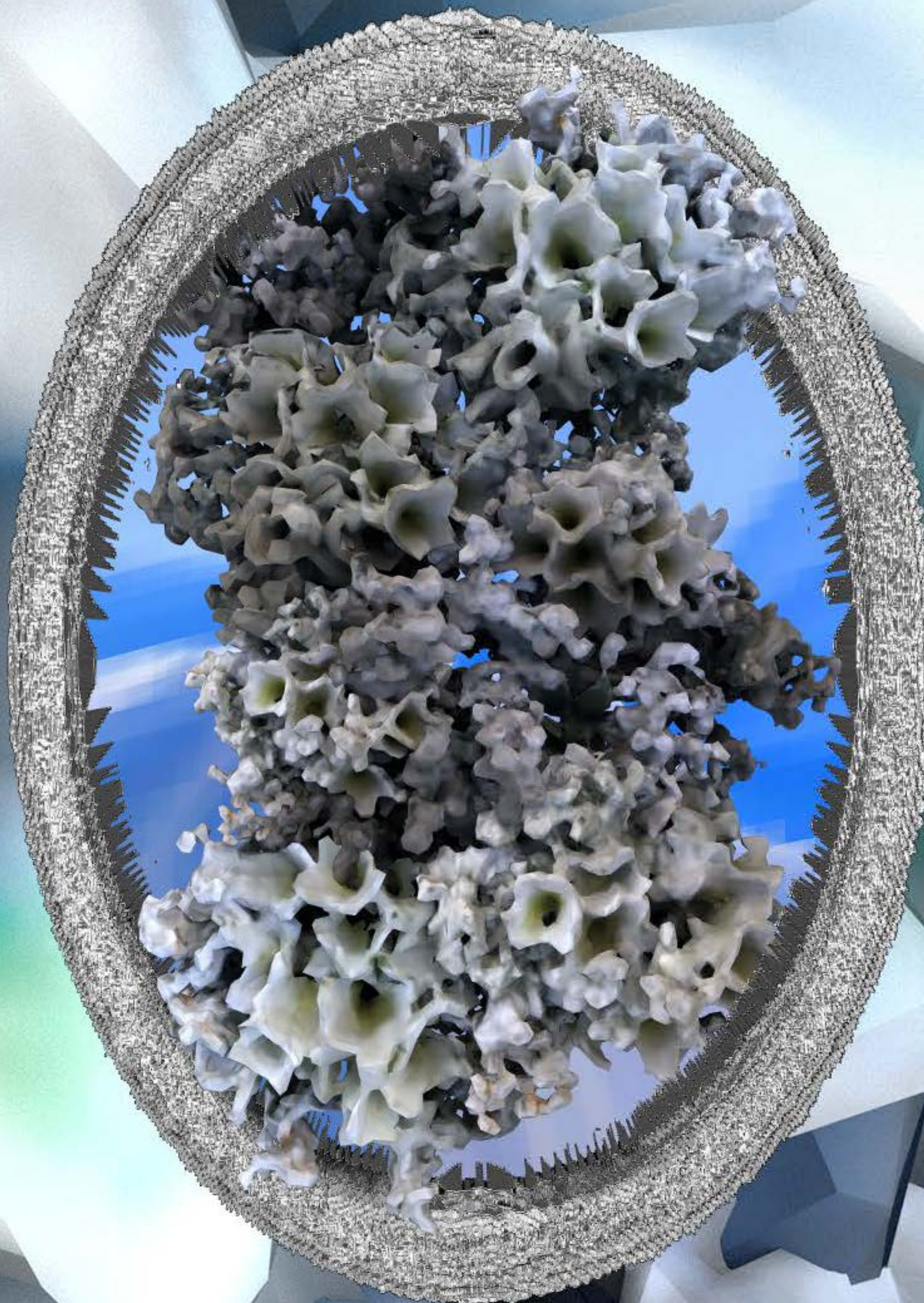
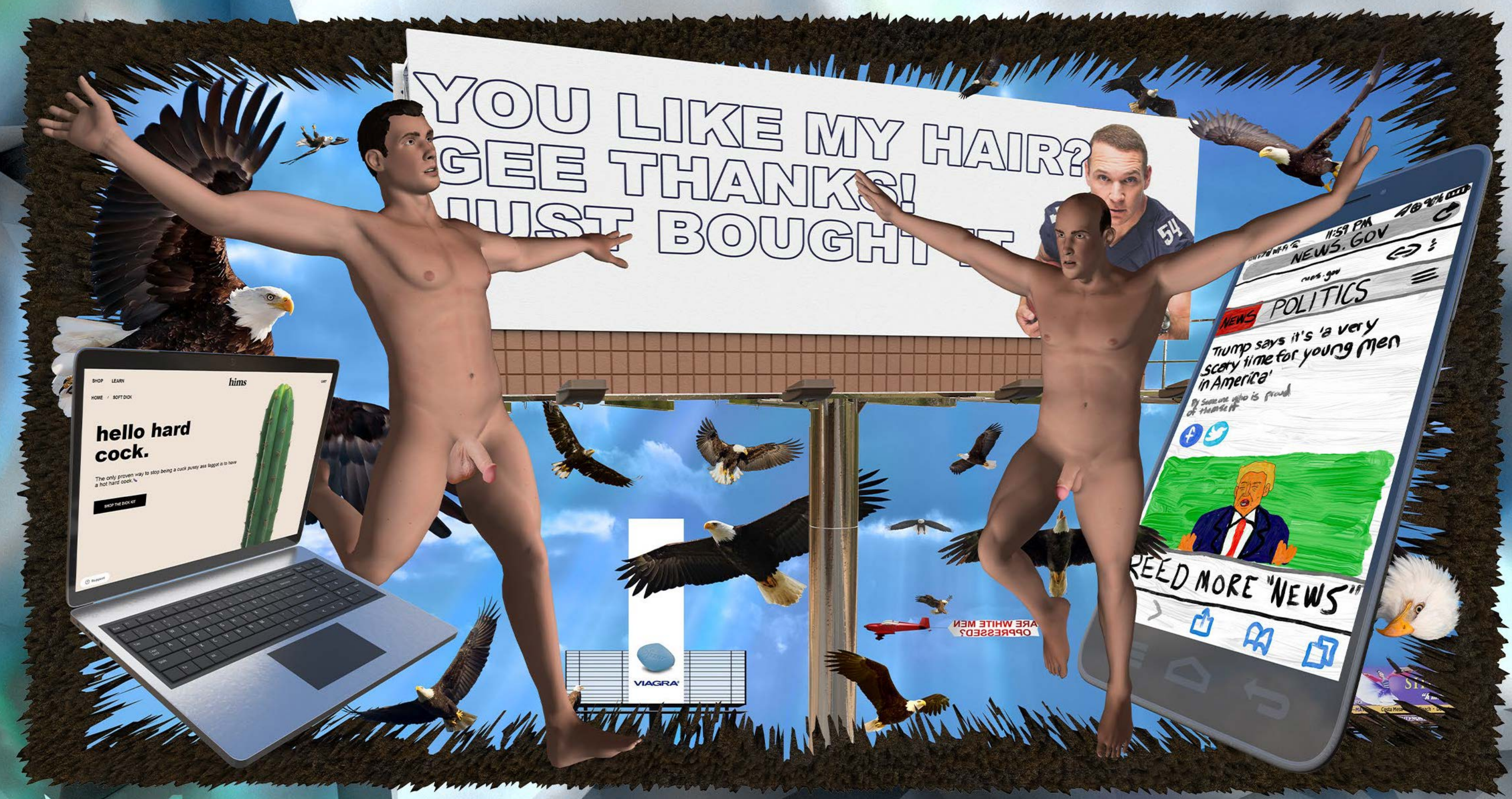














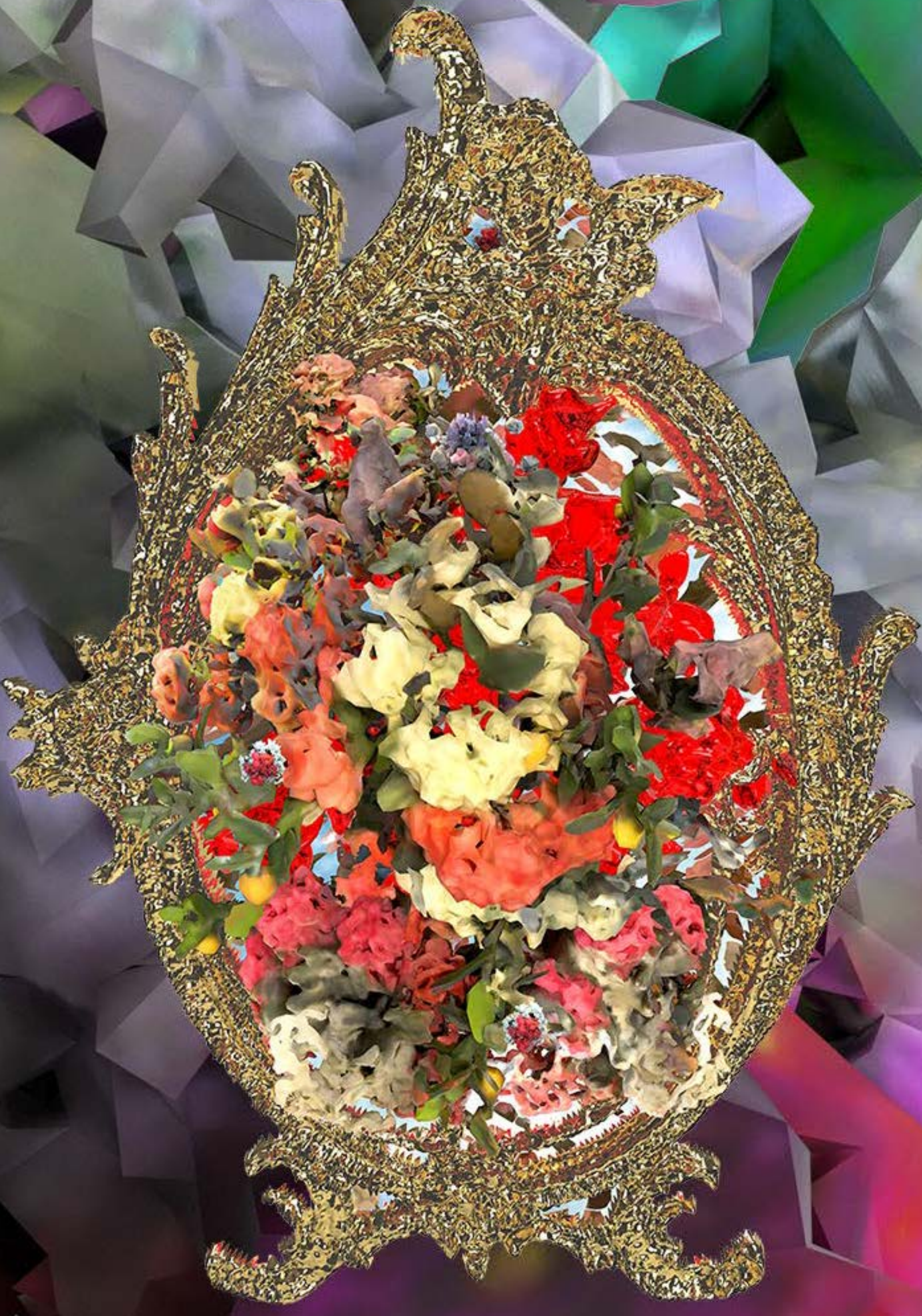
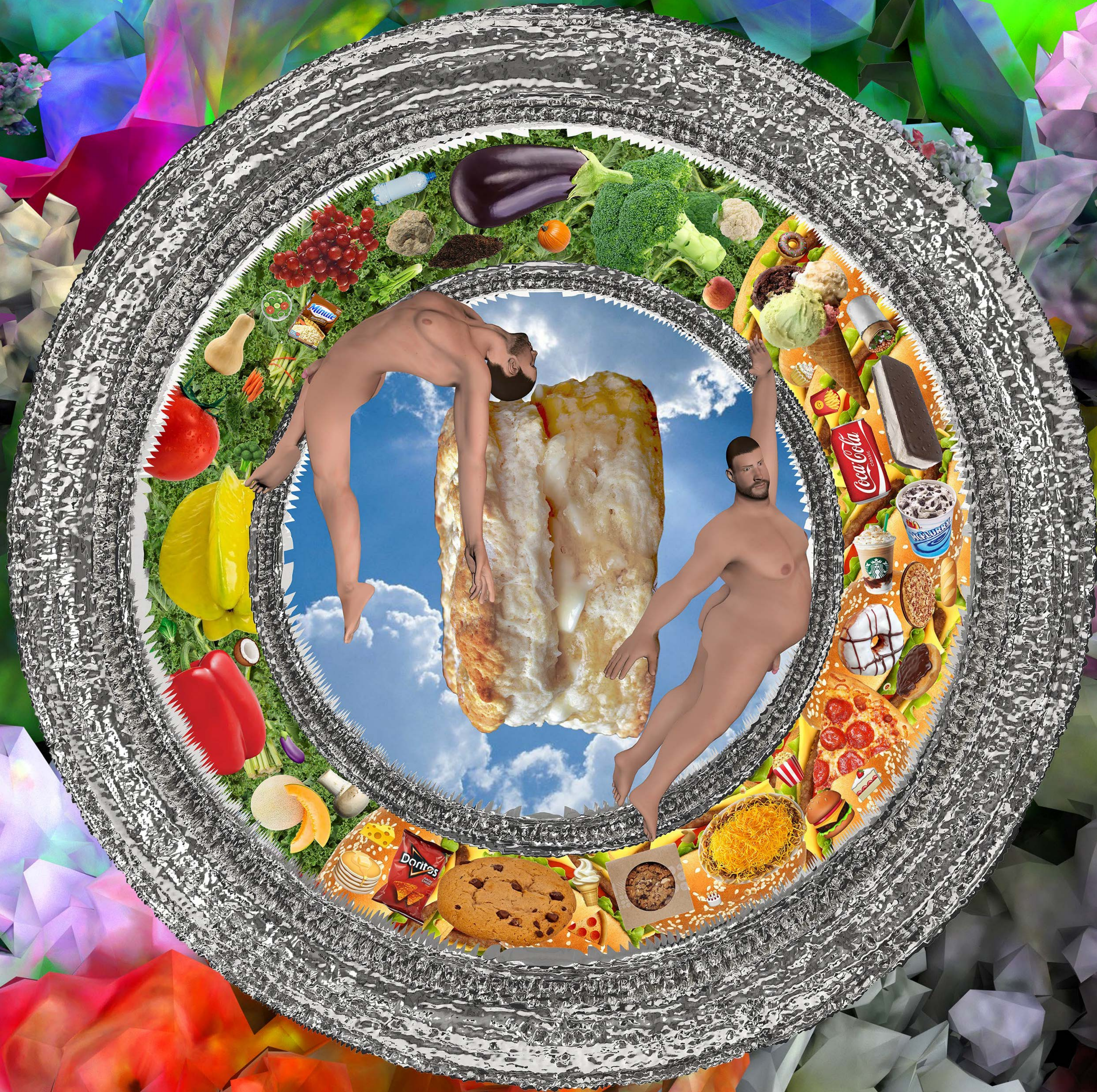




IMAGE TITLES

- 1. Let Us Eradicate Empathy
- 2. Tomi or Rachel?
- 3. Outrage Now Think Later
- 4. The First To Ring The Bell Furthers A New Standard Which Disables Free Discourse
- 5. Aiden or Kash? (The Two Ways of Life)
- 6. Brian and Ryne (The Two Ways of Life)
- 7. Fight Hate With More Hate
- 8. A Man Named Warturtle Bothers Me in the Men's Room
- 9. What Happens If I Make a Mistake?
- 10. A Mean Gay





IMAGE TITLES

- 11. It Is Okay To Be Wrong
- 12. How to Hide Your Rich Parents From Your Poor Friends
- 13. Get Over It!
- 14. If They Look Like Someone Who Hurt You, Treat Them As If They Did!
- 15. Jesus is a Biscuit, Let Him Sop You Up!
- 16. "Us" Versus "Them" Never Failed Us Before
- 17. If U Disagree W/Me U R Dead 2 Me
- 18. Alienate Those Who Support You
- 19. Is This a Genuine Reaction or a Performance?

