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## THE BLOB AND TRANS ART!

We sit down with Cobi Moules to discuss his work!

# Cobi Moules, Trans Art, and The Blob!

**Lola:** My name is Lola White-Sanborn, she/her, I am the Content Curator for the Gala Pride and Diversity Center. My friend Alison O'Neill, with me, is someone whose perspective on gender and horror is always top-notch.

Today, we'll be talking with **Cobi Moules**, a nationally recognized trans-man artist whose work, "**Showering of Sparkling Bits**," is currently featured at the **Harold J. Miossi Art Gallery in Cuesta College**. This work, which we'll feature throughout the article, uses a unique blend of **hand-painted landscape art covered with an amorphous silicone figure, inspired by the 80s film The Blob, to explore bodies and queerness**. I'm very excited to chat with you about this, Cobi. Thanks for being here.

**Cobi:** Thank you for having me!

**Alison:** My name is Alison, he/him pronouns. It's really nice to meet you.

**Cobi:** Good to meet you, too! I'm Cobi. Also he/him.

**Alison:** Same hat!

**Lola:** Cobi, can you tell me a little bit about your background, please?

**Cobi:** Uh, yeah! I grew up in northern California actually, two hours east of San Francisco, in, like, the Central Valley. Then I moved to the Bay area and went to undergrad at San Jose State, and then lived in San Francisco for a number of years before I headed to Boston for my graduate degree. And then just kinda bounced around New York, and now I'm here in Philly.

**Lola:** Was this an art degree that you got?

**Opposite:** *One of Cobi's landscape paintings, and a zoom-in of the same painting to show the tactile element of the silicone and jockstrap detailing.*

**Cobi:** Yes, yeah. And you know I've been painting for as long as I can remember, and the silicone I just started like a couple years ago.

**Lola:** It's so cool!

**Cobi:** It's a new medium for me, which is so fun and exciting. It's been really wonderful to experiment.

**Lola:** What was the inspiration for the silicone? Cuz I know it does tie into the idea of the queer body and I think it's really brilliant, and I'd love to hear more about that.

**Cobi:** Yeah! Before doing this I was working with a lot of real, like, representational figurative stuff, navigating around my own personal narrative and my own body. But with this work, I really wanted to kinda shift away from the personal narrative and my body and instead think about the body as this much more fluid, amorphous, kinda genderless blob. [laughs] And so I was thinking about the movie "The Blob," and I was also thinking about real-feel silicone sex toys, that kind of texture.

I wanted to create this figure that played with the idea of what is and isn't representation. It has all the specificity of the representation; the moles and the hair and the veins and that stuff, but the Blob itself, or the body itself, is this much more fluid, amorphous, genderless creature. That's where the silicon came in.

**Lola:** I love that! It's interesting you're bringing up the sex toy texture. I've met many trans people for whom those can be part of their gender identity. For example, a lot of trans men might use a specific kind of packer that is of that material so they can feel like they are having a closer connection with their body.

**Cobi:** Yeah, absolutely. I feel like my relationship with it is like... It's always changing and moving, but it's always there. It's difficult to describe, because it's not always physical, and I don't want it to sound like it's TOO grand or important because I see it as just a part of BEING, I guess.



**Lola:** I'm thinking of a friend of mine who is very, very nonbinary. They have a complicated relationship with their body, sometimes referring to it as a flesh prison because they feel so removed from their concept of what a body IS. I was reminded of that a lot looking at your art, like, this skin is PART of me, but it doesn't necessarily define me, and I'm trying to cope with this dichotomy.

**Cobi:** I think that's what I love about using this material and this blob figure; that how we relate to our body varies so much that MY relationship to it may differ from your friend's relationship to it. It's so malleable.

**Lola:** When you're making this art, do you paint the landscape paintings first, or are these landscape paintings you find at thrift stores and cover up, or...

**Cobi:** I paint the landscapes first. I'm actually repainting/making copies of Hudson River School paintings, Frederic Church, Bierstadt, etc.; these big name 19th Century landscape painters. I'm repainting their work, sometimes parts of it, sometimes the full thing, and then I overlay the figure on top of it. And sometimes I'm adding a jockstrap into the landscape, making some of it a little brighter and more welcoming... I'm altering it a number of different ways.

**Lola:** What's the inspiration for working with that style of landscape for this particular project?

**Cobi:** I've been working with their work for a long time. The thing I'm drawn to is their relationship with God, nature, and the individual, and how they're using this imagery as a way to... to show this American landscape as this manifestation of God, the insignificance of the Individual. Ideas around purity and virginity, these very moralistic ideologies that are within their work. And I see a lot of ties between their work and these 1980s horror films, in the sense that they're both depicting the other in a way of fear and degradation, a sense of control, and all of these things.

**Lola:** And horror frequently plays into those puritanical ideas; the teenagers who are having sex by the lake are gonna get punished by the slasher, for example. That's a really interesting combination.

**Alison:** You mentioned the kind of insignificance of the individual and overlaying the individual ONTO the landscape that kind of dwarfs them and makes them insignificant. I'm thinking of all the times and ways it was implied to me that my transition was selfish, individualistic, even an 'American' activity. But I have found that over time I am becoming much less individualistic and much more seeing myself in terms of my social connection. And that's because of the ways that I have to rely on other people because of being trans and gender nonconforming. In what ways have you reflected on that blurring of the individualism/collectivism boundary while making these landscapes?

**Cobi:** It's definitely something I've thought a lot about! In a previous project, I did these landscapes that had hundreds of me running around and engaging. I was seeing myself as this multifaceted thing, and exploring community. I think of this blob figure as being an individual but also like this multitude of bodies that converge together and become one. Maybe they separate sometimes but then can come back together; it's a merging of these different bodies. There CAN be a beginning and an end, but there doesn't have to be, and that could switch up. It's kind of a complicated question because it's so layered, it's hard to pinpoint it at all.

**Alison:** It's hard to succinctly pin down your answer in a couple paragraphs.

**Cobi:** Plus I think so visually that the words aren't always there.

**Alison:** Yeah, it's a translation process. I definitely translate in my head a lot this way. For me, the use of moles and body marking specifically stands out a lot. Not only because it's so deeply human for people, but also my own moles on my body have been kind of landmarks during dissociative periods, things that I would check on and go, ok, I'm still me. The ways that your work uses that as its own constellation territory, but maybe multiple someones from an amorphous sense, is blowing my mind.



*In clockwise order: a silicone "flesh" bench made by Cobi Moules as part of "Showering of Sparkling Bits," a closer look at some of its texture, and Cobi Moules.*

**Cobi:** My moles feel like a constellation on my body too, I have certain ones that I feel like make this body more visceral and personal in this way... I have some varicose veins and such that are seen in more stereotypical ways as flaws and I want to represent them. They're not often seen as beautiful but I want to show that they ARE beautiful. And some people have different reactions to this art. Some people go up to the (flesh) bench and are grossed out a little bit, but I want to just sink myself into it. I love all these little details.

**Alison:** What would you say to those people that, maybe for their own personal reasons, are reacting with that kind of sense of fear or grotesquery, seeing it more as flayed skin rather than its own blob?

**Cobi:** I don't know if I would say anything! I like to sit back and watch things unfold. Even the people who have the negative reaction immediately, there's also this curiosity to it. I still feel like they're intrigued enough to kind of navigate it, even if they don't fully dive in. It's switching between these two things—this push and pull. I'm like, "Hey, you have your feelings, you have your relationship to it, just try to be open. Investigate that!" We all have our things, and some people just have a very visceral reaction to these bodies/silicone.

**Alison:** In that sense, how big of a role do you think disgust plays in giving people the space to push those boundaries in their own lives? In that repulsion/attraction feeling? They may have an 'oh god' reaction, so what kind of personal reckoning do you think is happening there?

**Cobi:** I have no idea. I think because it varies so much, it's very hard for me to imagine. I'm sure some people are immediately closed off. I can see it in their faces that it's 'too much for them to handle.' I don't know why, but I know it happens. I am just creating a space to invite people in, and some people will open and come in the door easily, some will tiptoe in, others will poke in, then nope out.

**Alison:** You're creating the sandbox. That's cool.

**Lola:** Well, that's part of what's so fun about the specific topics and themes you're working with. Because they mean so much to so many people, it's a situation where you have a physical canvas you're working on, but you're also setting up a canvas in people's brains. You're watching from afar what results from that.

**Cobi:** Yeah! I'm trying to connect all these dots that may not seem related at first, and then, "Here you go! Do you see it? Now take it away!" The landscapes, the 80s horror, they're these major foundational images that everyone's gonna have a different relationship to, and how I'm seeing them attach themselves ideologically to each other and to my upbringing. It's so complex that I'm just trying to make sense of things. And maybe people will see that, but it depends on how much they lean into it.

**Alison:** In "The Blob," you've got the Blob consuming this small town. (I'm also trying to connect something that feels connected but I don't have the language for it). I have found during my medical transition that with the kind of de-gendering process that happens, the specific type of dehumanization that I encounter is interesting to me. I'm reminded of that when I look at these landscapes, and I think about that change from people seeing you as a person to seeing you as an encroaching thing, and how much the way that people interact with humans/human flesh changes by making someone even slightly uncanny valley to them. What other connections do you wish people made when they interact with these ideas? I know you create the sandbox, but...

**Cobi:** With what you were saying about being confronted and dehumanized, I think that that's what in my mind that's what's happening in the movie. This blob is this scary monster—this queer scary monster, so in this work, I want that scary monster to be really beautiful and to be actually altering these spaces in a really wonderful way. So, as it's going over and around these paintings, I think it's not only obscuring some of the disgusting historical narratives but also making a new landscape, leaving this trail of queer joy. I do think about that in terms of what that body represented and how I'm trying to alter that now, with the work.

**Alison:** That's beautiful.

**Cobi:** Thank you!

**Lola:** I think it's incredible, you're taking these paintings that existed already and making a NEW landscape with them, because these were two-dimensional works that you're now adding a third physical dimension onto. A topography of skin and flesh. It's like that thought experiment, you thought there were only two dimensions your entire life and suddenly you find out about a third!

I mean, with the 80s "The Blob," I don't think it's unreasonable to think of this "big, encroaching, pink menace" as being, you know, how newspapers talk about us to this day. You can't open a newspaper or Twitter or anything like that without hearing about the latest politician who's trying to eradicate us with Napoleonic fervor. Looking at that through the lens of horror films is so brilliant, especially monster movies because many of them are very critical of the government and military approach. Even in ones that are technically somewhat nationalistic, usually, that is still not the solution to the problem, and trying it just makes things even worse. Actual experts tell them "Hey, don't do it this way, you're gonna get a lot of people hurt." It's such a perfect blend to me of what it feels like as a trans person today. We literally have the science to prove that we survive and thrive and live happier if you just let us be, and yet you're actually causing real lives to be lost because you are on a power trip. It feels so connected to me.

**Cobi:** Every time I'm working on a project—I've been working on these ideas for a long time, it just kind of changed forms—and I think to myself "Well, hopefully, this is relevant in a few years" and then it's like, no, now it's MORE relevant. Great. This constant up and down craziness.

**Lola:** King Kong wouldn't be swatting down planes if the planes hadn't been sent to attack him. This was avoidable! You didn't have to take him off his island! As we wrap up, here's a fun question. Obviously, you've taken a lot of inspiration from monster films, kaiju, what have you... what is your favorite monster movie?

**Cobi:** GOSH... It changes, but I think my latest favorite would be "The Stuff." It's another 80s blob monster and it's a dessert, it's like Miracle Whip, but as people consume it, they just keep consuming and keep consuming and it's this alien creature that ends up killing them. It's brilliant, and so well done. It looks like it had a huge budget even though it couldn't possibly have.

**Lola:** That sounds amazing, I'm gonna have to watch that one now. For a long time for me, it was the 1954 original "Godzilla," because it's a really powerful metaphor, but last year they came out with "Godzilla Minus One" which had one of the most accurate depictions of PTSD I've ever seen in a movie, so for me as someone who's a survivor of a lot of trauma, it really spoke to me to see that represented in a fashion that I had not seen it before. Great political commentary in that one as well. How about you, Alison?

**Alison:** All I was thinking about was Bryan Fuller's "Hannibal." The human monsters.

**Cobi:** There's this book I've been reading, "It Came From the Closet," it's all about queer reflections on different horror movies. There's even a section in there on "The Blob" and society.

**Lola:** Sometimes I feel like there's no better medium for describing our experiences than horror. Not because we are horrible things, but because our existence is so under fire and persecuted, so it's perfect for exploring what we've been put through.

**Alison:** Horror movies are kinda relaxing for me because I go, "Ok, yeah, you've been through it, too, it'll be fine."

**Lola:** Cobi, thank you so, so much for chatting with us all the way from Philadelphia! It was a pleasure chatting with you.



**The  
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