

Colin J. Radcliffe

In conversation with BENJI JOHNSON

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Photographer RAPHAEL CHATELAIN Fashion Editor SERDANE MESSAMET

Necklace LARUICCI
Jacket, shorts and socks KENZO
Earrings TALENT'S OWN
Shoes MARINE SERRE



Seeking to draw attention to the realities of queer love and sex in the age of the modern and digital, Colin J. Radcliffe lets his fingers sink into the malleable offerings of clay, molding and forming the medium to his imperfect imaginings. Never shying away from explicit visual certainty, Radcliffe invites his audience into his life by providing them with outright knowledge of encounters, lovers, friends and selfies that have played integral roles in his growth. Now, after years of existence within a modern age that polarizes queer identity, the sculptor looks not to shock—despite his uncensored displays of nudity—but to explore neutrality through humor and color. Opening up about his own sexual comfortability and coming-of-age, Colin J. Radcliffe traverses his creativity as he approaches the perceived destination of “gay death.”

BENJI JOHNSON. Earlier last year, in 2023, you released your solo exhibition with the Java project entitled “Thirst Trap.” Within its release, it described your work as “confessional.” I was just wondering if you could dive into this a little bit? What is Colin confessing?

COLIN J. RADCLIFFE. I describe it as confessional in that I’m making work that’s very autobiographical and personal. And for me, honesty and vulnerability are really important elements in the work, and it makes it more relatable. It’s easier to connect to other people, and it’s also just more meaningful as an artist to make things that are true. I think the exhibition at the Java project was the most confessional presentation of my work, at least to date, because normally I’m primarily a sculptor. A lot of my work is based on videos or photos I’ve taken of my friends, people I’ve dated, lovers or self-portraits. And most people don’t see that side of the work necessarily. So the exhibition itself paired a lot of sculptures with these photographs that I had taken in intimate spaces like bedrooms with my friends; sometimes dressed, sometimes not. I’m sure if you’ve been to art openings, many artists and people always have questions about, “Oh, what was the inspiration?” So, in that setting, it was very easy and natural to talk people through the process and mostly the story: “Oh, this is what I went through. This is what this person is like.” You can see the line between real life and the production of work. Many of the people in my work came to the opening, so a lot of people were like, “I think that person’s that person.” [Laughs] But it was very cute!

B.J. I’m sure! Talking about that revert to authenticity, were you ever creating or releasing work that wasn’t necessarily authentically you?

C.J.R. It’s a good question. A few years ago, I was making work that, despite a personal element, didn’t present that way; I was primarily making work about dying, spiritualism and numerology. But I realized many of the pieces I was making were of people that I personally had a connection to that had passed away. You can make work about death and dying for only so long before it’s no longer fun. I still kept that through line with the personal connection but realized, “Okay, I’m starting to make work about people in my life and my relationships, people I love or have dated. But the work isn’t very representative of those people.” It was almost abstract, very colorful, and fun. You could look at a sculpture but you wouldn’t know if or who it was. And I kind of just hit a moment personally, just with my own conception of myself, where maybe I wasn’t the most authentic in real life, but my work is very representative of that. And I basically made a conscious decision to move through life more authentically as a queer person and to represent that through my work more honestly.

B.J. That offers a very personal understanding of why and how you create, whether that’s based on an individual, an experience, yourself, a lover or a friend. But do you see yourself in every figurine that you create? Even if it’s somebody else?

C.J.R. Definitely! I’m forgetting who exactly said this, but there’s a quote

floating around somewhere, “All artwork is autobiographical.” An artist is always, in some way, inserting themselves, whether it’s consciously or not. So I do see me in my own work, even portraits of other people or representations of couples or lovers—even just stylistically. There’s a through line because it’s also personal, like the content of the work.

B.J. Inserting yourself into the artwork has surely allowed you to track progress in multiple ways. How have you witnessed your art develop over this time?

C.J.R. I think there’s two that are kind of intertwined but are also separate categories of thinking. One is technical skill. So I work primarily with porcelain. And there’s many reasons for that. But over time, I’ve gotten much better at handling the material and understanding the sensibilities of it. And because of that, I’ve been able to make work that’s more detailed or more complex. But at the same time, as I’ve grown as a person and become more self-aware and comfortable, my work has reflected that and become more authentic in that way. And almost more direct or explicit. In a way, maybe *too* explicit! [Laughs]

B.J. [Laughs] I think we can all see that side of it! On the note of the explicit, your work demonstrates a sexual awareness and I would really love to talk about your own sexual comfortability. Was there a point where you became fully accepting of your sexuality? Did art help with that?

C.J.R. Absolutely! I think what I’ve realized growing up...well firstly, I’m



approaching gay death. I'm almost 30! [Laughs]

B.J. I feel you. [Laughs]

C.J.R. I guess I kind of realized growing up that in the coming-of-age for queer people, we operate on a different timescale and a different timeline than our straight or heterosexual counterparts. So for most straight people, they kind of go through the motions as young teenagers. And by the time they enter university age, more or less, they've already had a lot of life experience. There's not a lot of dating and sexual experience for queer people because we kind of have to hide or repress that.

And I think it's changing now, especially for Gen Z, but many of us go through two coming-of-age experiences. We have a false one, where we sort of play the counterpart and try to fit in or not stand out, and then we enter university age more or less and realize, "Oh, the world's a lot bigger than our small town!" And you then have a second coming-of-age that's authentic and honest, as you already have this previous narrative. You kind of always battle, I think, and that's a big struggle for a lot of queer people. And for me as well, even though I've more or less always been very self-assured, I was aware of that feeling in the production of my own work. So, initially it was not so

much sexual with me. It was more relationships or external people and concepts that were not threatening. Other people started to produce work that was a little more sexual or more honest about people I knew. And even the first sculptures of lovers I had made were not sexual at all. Many didn't even include genitalia! And there came a point where I was like, "You know, that's not right. That's a big part of it!" So I started sculpting dicks.

"The way that I think about artistic mediums, in general, is how people think about language. That you might be more comfortable or more expressive in a certain language as opposed to another. And the more you speak a particular language or use a certain material, the more *fluent* you become." — Colin J. Radcliffe

B.J. Just by themselves?

C.J.R. No, like, sculptures with them. But I've also done just dicks. [Laughs] I've covered the whole spectrum! But the more I was doing that, the more I came into myself, and then, over time, the work was very well received. I met a lot of other queer people. There was a very *positive* community response—much more than a negative response. I think that helped a lot with comfortability.

B.J. It is interesting that you used the phrase "not-threatening" for your previous work. Would you count your latest pieces as being threatening? Do you kind of revel in the ability to make people be like, "Oh, my



Sexy, 2019
Ceramic, glaze
10 x 5.5 inches
Colin J. Radcliffe

God! There's a dick right there!?"

C.J.R. [Laughs] I think, for me, humor is *really* important in life and in artwork, and I think a lot of the art world takes itself a little *too* seriously! The idea of play or that lightness is something that's overlooked or dismissed. And that's why my work looks very cartoonish or childlike but is also very adult at the same time.

B.J. But do you enjoy shocking people a little bit?

C.J.R. You know, I feel neutral about it. I think it's not my intention to shock people, but I'm very aware that my work elicits that response in many people, especially straight people or people who are more conservative. And I think that says a lot more about other people than me or queer people as a monolith. People have a *personal* response and reaction to artwork, no matter who makes it or what it's about—those confrontations are for those people to deal with.

B.J. Take it or leave it! Your work is quite neutral, especially in the balance of good and evil. I'm thinking specifically about your piece "Le Lustre," which contains the devil and angel with a digital infusion. Do you like the neutral playing field in that regard?

C.J.R. Yes, I do. The idea of ambivalence, having two contrasting feelings at the same time, is something I've just lived with for a long time. And I think a lot of queer people—whether they realize it or not—constantly battle against right and wrong. "What's acceptable? Am I good or am I bad? What's ethical or moral?" But I guess pretty recently, I've come to a resolution with ambivalence in my work and that you can have two contrasting feelings—two things that seem very different which are really just two parts of the *same* feeling. And I think my work plays with that a lot and has for a long

time because that's how I move through life. I feel about a lot of things, and those feelings don't always align, but it offers a space for reflection and being introspective.

B.J. Yeah, it does—what is sexual inspiration is coupled with a huge smiling face and a phone. So actually, on that note, you play with technology and the digital. Firstly, why is the digital such a prevalent figure?

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C.J.R. So my coming-of-age as a queer person was in New York. And, I mean, there's like, an *obscene* amount of people and a large amount of queer people in New York, but I tend to be more reserved in person, which might be very shocking given what I produce! [Laughs] It's not so much that I'm shy, but I'm not necessarily going to go up to someone who I think is cute at a bar and flirt with them!

B.J. [Laughs] Okay, understood.

C.J.R. So it's a lot easier, and I think very, very common in New York, to use dating apps or hookup apps to meet other queer people. It's just part of today's culture. So I kind of caught myself right at the beginning and into Covid, realizing, "Wow, I really am super reliant on this little piece of phone in my hand" in finding and forming relationships with other queer people—whether it's sexual or even friendship. So, in line with being more authentic, honest, and transparent with my work, it was necessary to include that element of, "Well, *how* are we actually finding these relationships?" Meeting these people starts in digital space and then moves to physical spaces.

B.J. Absolutely. I read something about your understanding of genuine connection. There was a part discussion about whether we can really have these genuine relationships and connections given today's society and this reliance on our phone. What is a genuine connection for you?

C.J.R. I think these things are really difficult to pin down. Kind of like the definition of what "queer" actually is. It's very personal and it depends on the individual. For me, a genuine connection is a very personal thing and it takes time. It can't be something that's very quick—there are many important elements. There has to be some level of similarity, both emotionally and intellectually. Humor is really important for me,

kindness or caring. Self-awareness is also very important. I think there's this idea of "finding the right person at the wrong time," but I don't really think that's true. I think you find the right people at the right time, and it's not necessarily detrimental. But also, I think you can have a deep personal connection with someone which doesn't have to be a positive connec-

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B.J. In that sense, challenge is so important.

C.J.R. It is! You need to move through difficult things to be *more* human. Being an antagonist or having a negative relationship with someone that was once positive, becomes a *learning* experience to know how to move through relationships. And I guess it also translates to dating. For me, part of why I think people date and why it's important to date often isn't just about getting to

know someone else; it's really about getting to know *yourself*.

B.J. Absolutely. And I think that this is where I feel sad for heterosexual relationships or heterosexual society. Dating multiple people and the idea of any kind of open-relationship is almost taboo within heterosexual society. But also, the idea of dating and then dating someone else and then dating someone else also doesn't necessarily exist. It's like, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry for [heterosexual society]."



Subway Cruiser, 2023
Ceramic, glaze
9 x 9 x 10.5 inches
Colin J. Radcliffe

C.J.R. [Laughs] I agree! I think it's the big difference between queer and straight people.

B.J. Yeah, 100%. But I mean, it comes from a place where we're almost told who we are, and as a result, we need to go out and venture to actually discover for ourselves. Whereas heterosexual people "know" who they are from the start. But really, honey, you don't know who you are. [Laughs]

C.J.R. Exactly! You just think you know based on the environment and the social context that always told you what was right.

B.J. Switching it slightly, in your experience of traveling or even showcasing your art globally, do you think that ideas of love and sex change depending on the locations?

C.J.R. Definitely, yes. Culture plays a huge part in how people navigate relationships and how to be with other people. And I think language is also a large component of that. So, for example, in New York, it's really the most consumerist and capitalist core of America, in a way. There are so many people, and there's *so* much diversity. It's so fast-paced. It's incredibly easy to go on several dates in a day if you want to meet many different people and do that every day! And Americans, especially New Yorkers, are very open

Earrings and necklace *TALENT'S OWN*
Top and pants *COURRÈGES*



On the left
Gotta get the right angle, 2023
Ceramic, glaze
13.5 x 9.5 x 5 inches
Colin J. Radcliffe

Butterfly boy
2023
Ceramic, glaze
11.5 x 9 x 6.5 inches
Colin J. Radcliffe

On the right
Cuddling with Mr. Butler, 2022
Ceramic, glaze
7.5 x 9.5 x 7.5 inches
Colin J. Radcliffe

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– Colin J. Radcliffe

and receptive to meeting, engaging and seeing other people. And even for queer people. In the U.S. we're open to going on many dates with many people in a short period of time, feeling committed or trapped in a relationship. We *explore* and things take time. In France, for example, where I live now, I've noticed it's quite different. Paris, at least in my experience, I've noticed that French people tend to be a little bit slower and less receptive to meeting people that they don't know.

B.J. Yeah, I lived in Paris myself last year and I completely agree with that. I think that people are very selective. What I did notice is that people want to date but I found that relationships were not really something that people were open to. They never really looked at the wider picture, that [a relationship] could potentially happen afterwards.

C.J.R. Right, I think you're right. I

think the idea of looking towards the future or the purpose of a relationship, what the end goal is, is very different culturally. And I think also in New York because we have such a mix of culture here; there are people from *everywhere!* In my dating adventures, so to speak, [laughs] many of the relationships I've been in—even short or long term ones—there's always been a cultural component that shifts the etiquette and the timeline of the relationship and how we connect. I've dated Brazilian people, and they tend to be much more effusive, emotional and more invested early on. More willing, and engaged. Almost the opposite to French people.

B.J. Moving the discussion to the medium and clay. As a material, it's so easy to mold and it's incredibly malleable. Do you think those characteristics allow you to release and let go?

C.J.R. Absolutely. The way that I think about artistic mediums, in general, is how people think about language. That you might be more comfortable or more expressive in a certain language as opposed to another. And the more you speak a particular language or use a certain material, the more *fluent* you become. So I feel that way with clay, definitely. But the clay itself has a lot of personality traits or sensibilities that are very natural for me. And because it's so immediate and so moldable, I'm really able to imprint emotion, feelings, sentiments and experiences *directly* into the clay very quickly. It's important in the kind of work I'm producing. Trying to *capture* a feeling!

B.J. Because your sculptures are not smooth or polished. They're kind of rugged and you can tell that they've had that hands-on approach.

C.J.R. Touch is critical to everything! I don't know what I would be without my hands. The same hands that touched a particular lover or the same hands that are producing the work of them. I think it's like an emotional or spiritual transfer through touch.

B.J. And life, love and sex are not polished. It's not smooth. It's not what we watch on the Internet or the version of love and sex that has been idealized. I feel that's why I like your work so much—because there is so much personality. If it was smooth, I think it would take all emotion out.

C.J.R. Yeah, I agree. It'd make it sterile!

Fashion Assistants
WIKTORIA DUBOIS
and AL MADDI ALI

Conversation edited by
SAM MAYER



Earrings and necklace TALENT'S OWN
Trench coat DENZIL PATRICK
Briefs DE PINO



Earring TÉTIER x LA MANSO
Shirt DENZIL PATRICK