

## Interview

### Ian Miles Gerson

#### *Mark Tschaepe*

In February, the artist, Ian Miles Gerson, was kind enough to grant me an interview at their studio in Houston. Their colorful, woven wearable art hang from the ceiling and the walls. Their worktables are covered with materials that Ian has rescued from bayous in Texas and Louisiana to use in their work. We chatted as their playful dog, Ozu, vied for attention. In our conversation that is transcribed below, Ian shared their insights about their work, queerness, and other concepts important to somaesthetics.

*Editor's note: This interview has been edited for clarity and continuity.*

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*Journal of Somaesthetics* Can you just tell me a little bit about yourself, a little bit about who you are, what you do, and whatever else comes to mind?

*Ian Gerson* Sure, sure. Yeah, great to be with you today too. I am a visual artist. I work mostly with sculpture and installation, and I use found materials primarily. I'm from Houston and living in Houston now, though I spent many years outside of Houston in New York and other places. In my recent work I've been using ropes that I've found around Galveston Bay and the Houston Ship Channel. I've been weaving them with other materials such as emergency blankets and neon construction, netting, other found plastic and mesh, and personal clothing scraps, and kind of just other random things that I find, or not random, but other things that I find in the city, on the streets. I've been making a series of weavings and wearables.

*JoS* Somaesthetics is a way of looking at aesthetics that recognizes the body as having intention, as having intentional agency. And I remember when I first saw your work, I immediately thought of it as somaesthetic, as involving the body and its engagement with the world, rather than the body as passive or somehow as a bystander to the work, but rather very much engaged with it. And it seemed as though even when I was seeing your work in the gallery space that I read your work as being very mindful of the body and embodiment, especially but not limited to some of your work as wearables. And I was wondering what you could say about your work as somatic, as it relates to the body as an agent, not just as a thing, but to subjectivity.

*IG* Before making the wearables, the work had been a series of five by three-foot weavings that hang. I've been working now with them hanging not on the wall like a painting, but hanging off

the wall to call attention to their materiality and play with shadows. They're a physical entity. I mean, I think about them as bodies themselves, and they change over time, and that's kind of part of it. They begin to sag and shift and sometimes they look different from different angles, and I'm interested in that too. What's read differently from a different angle. There's text sometimes in them. I think about the surface. I think there's relationships to tattooing or piercing or hair. Yeah, I think about them as being a physical, bodily surface in a way. It's not representational. I mean, that's very abstract, but yeah, there's text in them that is sometimes more legible than other times and I'm interested in that idea of legibility or illegibility and also how that relates to subjectivities and who's legible to whom and in what context. I think about them as kind of a metaphor for transness., That is how I see them.

*JoS* Regarding legibility and transness, can you explain that a little bit further in terms of what you're thinking in terms of the work?

*IG* Yeah, I will use text that is intentionally fragmented or backwards or obstructed. I think the longer you spend with it, you might unfold, it might unfold. Sometimes it will never unfold to anyone and that's the intention and that's kind of to suggest that there's something written there, and I know what it says, but other people don't. Sometimes the longer you spend with it, you do make out a word. Depending on your familiarity with trans experiences... your familiarity with what I'm thinking about or writing about, you might be able to read it more easily. So, thinking about illegibility, I mean, I'm interested in illegibility kind of like as a tactic, as a protective strategy when thinking about identity. Protecting rather than exposing yourself, rather than being a marginalized subjectivity having to be performed or perform themselves for the dominant gaze. Playing with illegibility as a cover to conceal or as a protective strategy... if that makes sense.

*JoS* Yeah, it does, absolutely. So when you're talking about illegibility, especially talking about the sort of knowledge that it takes to translate whatever it is in the text or in the image or what have you, the idea of queerness comes to mind, the idea of queering language or language that has been queered. And just throwing out those terms to you, queer, queering, queered. I'd like to know what your thoughts are on those terms regarding the work that you're doing, the sculptures that you're making.

*IG* Yeah, yeah, I mean, I feel like they are. I identify with them and myself as being queer, of having actions that are queer. I think of the objects themselves. They're assembled from miscellaneous types of materials. Materials that are identifiable, but they come together, they're interwoven with each other, they create something else. So, there is a relationship to identity formation or to queer identity of what gets a symbol or thrown into the mix. What sticks, what moves away, what interacts or resonates with something else. I think their materiality has a queerness to it because of what it's made of. They're made of trash. They're made of things that don't have a lot of inherent value. They're made of things that are found, that are dirty, that are discarded, and then elevated. I want to think that they're elevated. I'm giving attention and care to them and putting them... yeah, bringing attention to them, to these materials that have been cast off. I think there's again another kind of thing to think about related to identities or subjectivities that have been cast off. Queer identities. I think that they like have a motion to them that is like queering. I think about the sculptures. They could be thought of as paintings. I think that's kind of queer. I think their form is queer... that means skirting away from fixed categories. Doing its own thing. I mean, that's how I think about queer, queering.

JoS So your idea of sort of the reconstruction of materials and the repurposing of them or taking what you know you're saying is often discarded as trash and creating this new identity reminds me of Muñoz's idea of disidentification that he talks about in his work. And I'm curious if there are specific works from what has become loosely known as queer theory that inform your work, that inform what you're doing with the work and your ideas in terms of the work.

IG I guess like starting with Muñoz, the idea of disidentification, also the book, *Cruising Utopia*, a lot of my work takes inspiration from queer nightlife and the energy of queer nightlife, and that book is a lot about queer nightlife. And Paul B. Preciado's work, *Testo Junkie* and their *An Apartment on Uranus* too. I've had a few two different shows that reference the titles. *Chronicles of the Crossing*. This show that I had was called *Crossing*, and that was thinking about their text. They're also making parallels between gender and migration and travel and fluidity. Yeah, so those two writers for sure. Halberstam too.

JoS One of the things that came out of your show last year was this notion of *tremble*. What is that? What is the idea of tremble?

IG I was introduced to the quote from Eduard Glissant's work. I was familiar with his work before about opacity and ideas of relation. In *Chronicles of Crossing*, Preciado mentions another idea that he wrote about called *un tremblement*—like the trembling with, tremble thinking or tremble. Tremble thinking is thinking that's opposed to the system or thinking that's opposed to the status quo. That is like queering, or that is queerness, or that is *transing*, or that is thinking that's opposed to hierarchical structures or gender categories or capitalism. That's how I think about it. Rather than a sign of weakness, it's strength, because it's shaking the system. I imagine cracks in a column or something like the tall pillars—white supremacy and capitalism—that there's small cracks in them and it compromises the strength and then eventually it crumbles. But it just starts from a small crack, which is the tremble. Preciado said the tremble of the voice on testosterone. The changing voice or that moment, that in between of transitioning.

JoS So, one aspect of somaesthetics is practical. It's the idea that our somatic engagement with the world has a practical element that we can apply to our lives to facilitate change to flourish. And I'm curious regarding your own work, what are the elements that you believe communicate anything about flourishing, with regard to a message or with regard to a feeling that the participant in your work can utilize for improving their own lives? I mean, what are some aspects of your work or what are some ideas within your work that have to do with the improvement of life?

IG I feel like the work itself has a kind of a celebratory feeling because of some of the reflective and neon materials. There's a looseness to the way that they're put together and this kind of playfulness. So, I think there is kind of like this upliftingness... I'm thinking about things like a lot of the materials are pulled out of urban waterways. So, I'm thinking about those waterways and what we've done to the land and what our relationship is to land. It's depressing to think about climate change, but that's where we are. We can't deny that. We can't erase that and totally transform it. We need to figure out how to navigate our future with where we're at. It's so complex. Coming to terms with how we got here and how do we think through that in a just way. How do we move forward and what does that look like and what changes do we need to make? All of that is heavy and serious, and then, but there is this celebratory element that I've been thinking about. *Trans* as a verb. I think it is something to look to, to think about how to move forward in this kind of climate apocalypse that we're in. I'm thinking about certain elements that could be found within a trans experience that could be taken as inspiration or looked to as far as

survival. Ideas about adaptability or non-binary thinking or non-linear thinking. Learning from the past or learning from Indigenous knowledge. Thinking outside of the binary. Resiliency, interconnection, and interconnected networks The weavings. They're interconnected materials that rely on each other. I feel like there is a hopefulness, and I think there is flourishing, to go back to the question. The work that is very make-do, making-do with what's there. So, I think that opens up a lot... is empowering. That's something that I've always liked about using found materials and trash materials is that it's potentially empowering for somebody to see it and be like, "oh, well, this is just this thing." This breaks down the mystique of making or of art. What could be possible with what's already around us. That idea within art, but also beyond that.

*JoS* Is there anything else that comes to mind regarding something that you want to make sure to communicate about your work?

*IG* Some of the material choices ... like the emergency blanket material, for example That's used in a crisis scenario, or it provides warmth where warmth is needed, and often in situations where the cause of this need is completely man-made and avoidable. That object is like a survival object and then I manipulate it in ways ... I cut it, cut them up and they dangle and they kind of become like a party decoration in a way, like party tinsel, which is not really what I'm using, but I think they begin to look so much like that. It becomes party tinsel in a way. I've been interested in that. Going back to queer nightlife stuff, queer nightlife as a refuge space ... Like this blanket that provides warmth and safety and comfort and survival. A nightlife space is also a space that provides warmth and safety and survival. I think that similarly the construction netting, this neon construction netting and mesh has a relationship to queer club wear and nightlife and then it's also a safety tool in the world designating a space or a construction site.

*JoS* That's interesting. I know that there's been some work done on glitter for instance, and sort of the significance of glitter regarding the idea of fabulousness.

*IG* Yeah, as a sort of form of protection. Yeah, this feeling of home through certain spaces that are often seen, maybe from the outside as being merely for entertainment, but actually are much more than that with regard to the notion of community and home and security. What you're saying definitely resonates. I mean, I think also that that can become and I feel like I do this too, that it can become easy in a way maybe to glorify or only focus on like the positive there. I feel like utopia is this thing that we're reaching for and grabbing for. I think about where nightlife spaces are utopian or I can talk about them like that. But of course there are so many other issues that make them not utopian. They're not ideal perfect safe spaces that exist. What is safe space? They don't exist, or they exist outside of our world. There's a potentiality or like a magicness that can exist within those spaces. I think there are spaces that people can like dress how they want to dress and be how they want to be. I'm kind of let down that they can't in the daytime,.. in the straight world or whatever. They are real sites of refuge, but they're not without their issues.

When you said glitter, thinking about reflection or thinking about camouflage and anti-camouflage, I guess, like something that's eye catching versus something that blends in. On the way to the club, there's an element like you need to camouflage within the subway or whatever within the train. And then when you get there, I mean, anybody's look could be different, but potentially there's like this kind of like anti-camouflage thing of attention grabbing. Presenting. I'm interested in that idea about calling bright attention to something versus blending in or dissolving into the background.



*JoS* It brings us back to this idea of legibility that one might desire within a specific context, especially that transitory context going from one place to another—going from home to the club—of being illegible, of desiring this illegibility. But wanting or desiring that legibility upon entrance to the club. “Read me as I want to read,” so to speak.

*IG* I think there's totally a relationship. Yeah, that's the protective strategy. I guess I'm kind of interested and I don't really have, this is not a fully formed thought... being camouflaged on the subway, that's a way of being illegible, a claim of illegibility, or being, being legible as something else. But I'm kind of curious if it's possible to use that... using the anti-camouflage to still play with illegibility.

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The real me, the core me ... my thought is, well, what even is that? Is there such a thing? I think not. We're always a different version of ourselves in so many different spaces. I've done workshops with young people before, with teens, one of the things, a prompt that I have with them thinking about mask making has been: who are you on social media, who are you in your bedroom alone, who are you around your parents, who are you around your friends? Those are different versions of the self. You accentuate different versions of yourself based on what you resonate against.

*JoS* The multiplicity of identities that we have rather than this notion of some core fixed, essential identity. Queering disrupts that notion of a fixed identity, right? The idea of disrupting that notion of some kind of essential identity that is somehow absolute.

*IG* Yeah, totally. It's like there isn't just one way to read a work in front of you. You read it based on how it impacts you or what mask you're wearing or something. It could be a mirror for a different mask or something.



**Ian Gerson** is a trans and queer interdisciplinary artist from Houston, TX. Working at the intersections of sculpture, installation, and community engagement, their recent work investigates climate injustices, trans consciousness, and queer longing. Ian has shared work throughout the US and Mexico including Art League Houston, BOX 13 ArtSpace, Galveston Artist Residency, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, The Bronx Museum, AIR Gallery, and Socrates Sculpture Park. Their work has been supported by grants and residencies including the 2022

Houston Artadia Award, A Studio in the Woods, Galveston Artist Residency, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, MacDowell, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Swing Space, and a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship. Ian holds an MFA in Sculpture + Extended Media from Virginia Commonwealth University and a BFA in Studio Art from UT Austin.

