



ALEX MURPHY  
ANTHOLOGY OF WEEDS WILDFLOWERS

# the difference between a weed and a wildflower

A close friend recently asked if I could recall any subtle signals I used to communicate my queerness before I came out. The answer is most likely yes: I was signalling my queerness, but unintentionally. Kids on the schoolyard saw these signals before I knew what they were. Many queer folk can feel that question coming—a kind of intuition—before it leaves their lips. “Are you...?” This is a life-lesson we learn quite young: our bodies communicate non-verbally, even before we fully understand the social, political and emotional implications of these coded messages. Years later, when I stepped into art school, I fell in love with a broader lexicon of symbolic codes in queer social circles and art history. Hal Fischer’s Signifier for a Male Response introduced me to the hanky code, an index of colourful bandanas that men who sleep with men use to signal their sexual preferences to one another<sup>1</sup>. For centuries, queer people have adapted both subtle and overt coded ways of communicating identity and desires. I couldn’t help but reach for this lexicon when viewing Alex Murphy’s solo exhibition *Anthology of Weeds Wild Flowers*.

The show at ODD Gallery, Klondike Institute of Art and Culture, presents embroideries, largely of plants and text, hand-stitched into marbled cotton. Scanning the pieces, the outlines of broadleaf plantains and marijuana plants crop up among other species more common to a Southern Ontario suburb, like clovers and dandelions. Paired with each delicate and simple stitched image are short, embroidered statements like *Hidden Potential* and *Self-Determined*. Each declaration offers a frame of reference for the plants and begs me to rationalize the coded or symbolic relationship. *Can a plant be self-determined? And what is the difference between a weed and a wildflower?* A handful of pieces in the gallery contain no text at all. One embroidery shows two near-identical root systems side by side, spooning on a bed with their legs tangled up together, inside the blueprint layout of a bedroom. An intimate scene, this work generously reveals the codes that were merely hinted at in other works. The small, shared bed and its inhabitants offer obvious signs of queerness. The matching and usually hidden roots are on display, emphasizing the seen/unseen, the us vs. them. Seeing this more obvious message halfway through the tour of *Wildflowers* is like suddenly understanding the local dialect, like the understanding of colour coded handkerchiefs. It is a gift of language, an invitation that offers the chance to re-examine the other embroideries with fresh eyes. Something clicks into place. *When is a dandelion not a dandelion?*

Each of the twelve embellished textiles are the size of an oversized handkerchief, and though one of the pieces includes a traditional embroidery hoop, the remaining eleven are unframed, their raw edges working against the orderly tradition of craft. In some, the images and text are obscured as the blue or white stitches disappear into marbled cyan ink and raw cotton. In others, the gold floss stitchwork is unmistakable and glittery. The combination of delicate linework with blue ink and gold thread sparks vague memories of gilded Italian Renaissance paintings, where precious and imitable lapis lazuli was reserved for wealthy patrons who could afford the rare blue stone. Knowing only limited details about Murphy’s time spent in Florence—a study trip he took while at OCAD University, after obtaining degrees in environmental design and architecture—something inside me is tickled when I think of him deliberately using the blue colour to elevate a common clover to divine heights, mimicking Renaissance artists who heightened the symbolic meaning of Virgin Mary with lapis lazuli<sup>2</sup>. This tickle becomes a giggle as the embroideries move canonical art history to the hanky code: a blue handkerchief signals an oral fixation. Murphy is subtle with the way he reveals codes through his work. He plays with traditional expectations; a weed is glorified, a delicate handkerchief is a sexual code, roots have secret love lives.

1 Unknown. “The Handkerchief Code, According to ‘Bob Damron’s Address Book’ in 1980.” *The Saint*, The Saint Foundation, 25 Apr. 2019, [www.thesaintfoundation.org/community/hanky-code-bob-damrons-address-book](http://www.thesaintfoundation.org/community/hanky-code-bob-damrons-address-book).

2 St. Clair, K., 2018. *The Secret Lives of Colour*. London: John Murray Publishers, pp.182-205.

The collection of embroideries lay flat on sideways plinths like long, low tables in the centre of the gallery. The configuration forms the broken outline of a rectangle, echoing running stitches in textiles, but also dashed lines found in architectural blueprints. Murphy is aware of how people move through space; his works are placed deliberately close to the ground instead of on walls where visitors might expect to find them and easily engage with them<sup>3</sup>. This placement hints at the natural environs of wildflowers and requests that visitors move in a way that is uncharacteristic of gallery-goers. Viewers need to do a bit of extra work to operate within the rules of the space that Murphy has created. We all have to bow our heads respectfully, or bend over—a queer request if there ever was one—to see the work clearly.

The title of Murphy’s exhibition makes creative, perhaps even queer, use of words. The etymology of “anthology” can be found in Greek, coming from anthos (flower) and –logia (collection), insinuating a collection of different stories from different authors brought together in one volume, like various blossoms forming one bouquet<sup>4</sup>. Historically, we know gay men have been called “pansies,” or any number of flowery names as labels for flamboyancy. Lesbians have had their share of flowery associations too: the “Lavendar Menace” movement or the “Sapphic Violets”<sup>5</sup>. But what stands out the most in Murphy’s exhibition title is the word weeds, with a deliberate strikethrough. When writing by hand, we cross out words we don’t want; when reading aloud, these are words we don’t say.

And what we don’t say, what we can’t say, matters. One could scarcely be further away from Florida than the Yukon without leaving North America, but despite the false pretence of safety that distance affords, the “Don’t Say Gay” Bill has real implications for Canadians across the border. The Bill prevents Florida public school teachers from discussing gender identity and sexual orientation in kindergarten to grade three classrooms, and stops teaching in ways that are supposedly “not age appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students”. The repercussion of these “crossed out” topics will hinder conversations around sexuality and gender identity in grades four and higher, too<sup>6</sup>. This legislation was born out of a resurging mentality that being queer and trans are harmful threats to cisgendered, heteronormative society. Bills like these have a way of emboldening some on both sides of the border to voice bigoted opinions.

I make this leap, connecting Murphy’s work with present-day politics, because it doesn’t seem that far-fetched to think that we (queers), might soon return to a time when we have to choose our words wisely and use secret messages to communicate with community members. Murphy’s work is quietly political, speaking in codes because he wants to, but I can’t help but think that his work is speaking to a future that a generation of queer and trans elders are very familiar with already, and one that younger generations have only heard stories of. We may have to use “friends of Dorothy” instead of “gay”, “wild flowers” instead of “weeds”.

When I think again to myself, *what is the difference between a weed and a wildflower?*, it’s a question that every queer person of a certain age has contemplated at some point in their lives. It’s the difference between a look and that look from across a crowded bar. It’s desire, perspective and judgement.

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3 A nod to Sara Ahmed’s foundational book *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others* (2006), which outlines how bodies are situated within space and time, in relation to one another.

4 “Anthology.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anthology>.

5 Prager, Sarah. “Four Flowering Plants That Have Been Decidedly Queered.” JSTOR, January 29, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/gbs/flowering-plants-decidedly-queered/>.

6 Unknown. “Trans, Gay Teens on How ‘Don’t Say Gay’ Law and Texas Order Harm LGBTQ Kids.” CBC news.CBC/Radio Canada, March 9, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/kidsnews/post/trans-gay-teens-on-how-dont-say-gay-law-and-texas-order-harm-lgbtq-kids>.

## ALEX MURPHY – ANTHOLOGY OF WEEDS WILDFLOWERS

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As a society, we are encouraged to explore external constructs and geographies, but rarely as individuals, are we encouraged to understand the internal landscape of the self. Only when both internal and external are understood and valued is true integration possible.

Themes of space, time, and difference have rooted in me and consistently express themselves through my work. Natural environments have directed the content of my art through subjects of cartography, landscape, and botany.

My work reconsiders traditional perspectives through the investigation of, and novel approaches to, historical technologies. In this body of work, I have reimagined Florentine marbling and juxtaposed it with embroidery. This layered confluence results in a kind of ethereal blueprint, where unusual spaces, small as seeds, form where they were once previously lacking. These blueprints allude to transcendence from dichotomy and begin to acknowledge and reintegrate that which has been made, or viewed as, ‘other’.

Fluid, wild and unruly lines of marbling create a foil for careful, regulated and intentional stitches of embroidery, combining dichotomous concepts that exist within me. Although this body of work was created through my lens of queerness, my hope is that a plurality of identities finds space here.

Alex Murphy 2022

**ALEX MURPHY** is a queer visual artist and educator. They hold a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in drawing and painting from OCAD University. Additionally, they hold a Bachelor of Environmental Design and Master of Architecture degrees from Dalhousie University. Alex’s environmental and architectural studies significantly influence the direction and content of their art education and practice. Their work reconsiders themes of space, time, difference, and value. Alex is compelled to critique antiquated perspectives, to innovate approaches to traditional technologies, and to construct new spaces in and with their practices. Their work has been exhibited in Italy, Ireland and Canada.

Alex is of settler descent and was born in Kespu’kwitk in Mi’kma’ki (southwestern Nova Scotia). They currently live and practice in Tkaronto (Toronto).

[alexmurphy.ca](http://alexmurphy.ca)

**TYLER DURBANO** (he/they) is a queer visual artist and cultural worker based in Treaty 16 territory/Barrie, Ontario. They received an MFA from the University of Western Ontario, a BA from Acadia University and a BFA from NSCAD University. As an artist, Tyler has exhibited throughout Ontario, Nova Scotia and abroad, including Eyelevel Gallery (Halifax, NS), Anna Leonowens Gallery (Halifax, NS), Forest City Gallery (London, ON), Quest Art Gallery, (Midland, ON), and the Cable Factory, (Helsinki, Finland). As a cultural worker, they have held positions in education, communications and curatorial capacities at universities, art museums and galleries throughout Ontario and Nova Scotia. Most recently, he was Assistant Curator at the MacLaren Art Centre. Tyler is currently Guest Curator at the Latcham Art Centre.

