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Hartman, Nick, "MAN/BOY." (2017). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 2666.
<https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/2666>

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MAN/BOY

By
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B.F.A., University of Louisville, 2011

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts
In Art (Creative)

Department of Fine Arts
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2017

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MAN/BOY

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A Thesis Approved on

May 18, 2017

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ABSTRACT

MAN/BOY

Nick Hartman

May 18, 2017

Verisimilitude, or the appearance of being true, is a concept I turn upside down; relating it to a guise I wear as a contemporary male in a society dictated by learned social behavior and gender norms. Cultural iconography and expected gender norms are tropes I confront within my artwork. Drawings of seemingly everyday objects act as meditations or a fetishized repetition of supposed unobtainable objects and ideals that deal with masculine societal norms.

Manliness, machismo, masculinity... it is all a culturally learned and expected pose placed on all men. Coming to the realization that I do not necessarily fit into the mold of these cultural norms is an abrupt realization that brought out an intense realization of self. Since I am not *all man*, I am left yearning to fit in and be what is expected of me, but that would only be the appearance of the truth.

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INTRO: AN HONEST APPROACH/ATTEMPT TO MAKE ART

“The truth will set you free. But not until it is finished with you.”¹ David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest: A Novel*

Verisimilitude is my favorite word; *the appearance of being true or real*.

This word is not necessarily defined as being true, it merely has the appearance of truth. The façade about truth is what intrigues me; the concept of an artificial exterior that is believed to be true has an ongoing impact on my art making.

A two-dimensional rendering of a three-dimensional object is a simulacrum; it is a representation of something that is thought to be true. However, when you allow that drawing to be incomplete, the framework showcases the reality of marks on a page. Similar to an artificial reality, I aim to have an immediate visual honesty within my work. From my initial approach to the materials, I aim for a fusion of concept and process within my art making. This appearance of truth demonstrates the physical process of making, whether that be the framework of a drawing or the exposed underbelly of a painting's frame.

By eliminating the facade of a constructed reality, I am exposing myself and my artwork to the audience as a way to pull back the curtain and exhibit the layers of the physical process of my art. I am at once unveiling the lack of hierarchal elements at play (erasing the magical luster of the divine object) and

giving the audience access to my linear process. Shining the light on the man-made nature of the pieces causes me to be unexpectedly vulnerable to the viewer. This vulnerability causes me to be present within the image/object. When viewing my work, the audience envisions an individual creating a piece rather than the glorified object.

My choice of materials relates directly to my concept and process; there is a visual honesty in my material selection. However, by using mostly commonplace and hardware items—house paint and polyurethane, I play the role of the everyman. My history with these masculine materials is circumstantial, yet nonexistent. The outer appearance may feel chaotic, even rushed, but the marks are analytical and planned. Therefore, my application is the non-truth. The exterior appearance reflects the interior motivation, but it is merely a guise.

MEASING UP TO MASCULINITY—HOLLYWOOD MACHO MEN

As a boy, on my first (and only) family vacation, my father stood up from the moving ride at Disney's MGM Hollywood Studios and saluted an animatronic John Wayne on horseback. That tableau has stuck with me for over 20 years, simultaneously reinforcing a mythic aura of the stoic cowboy as a man's man and causing me to question who this mysterious man was that was gesturing towards a robot. I had never seen my father act in such a way. So naturally, I wondered who garnished all the respect from my male hero. My father informed me that robot was the Duke, the *rootinest, tootinest* cowboy my father had ever known to come out of Hollywood.

Pop culture is the most important teacher of gender. For many young males, there is a lack of a distinction between reality and media fantasy. Hollywood, in particular, offers us fantasies to strive for. These fantasies create the idealistic representation to which we model ourselves after, often creating the same ideal of the contemporary *all man* archetype.² The climax to the Wizard of Oz where Toto reveals a nervous, tragic man pretending to be the great powerful wizard is a metaphor for looking at masculinity. Not as a fixed, inevitable state of being, but a projection, guise, or mask men often wear to shield our vulnerability. Boys at a young age learn early on that being a real man, you have to show the world only a certain part of yourself. If you do not measure up or conform to

these expectations, labels and negative connotations are placed on you.³

Hollywood films with strong father-to-son relationships tend to be set in the past, indicating a nostalgic desire to return to older values. In classic old westerns, men bonded through violent action: Indian battles, gunfights, saloon brawls—it was at once a unit of measurement of masculinity and a self-fulfilling affirmation.⁴ Much like how Hollywood implants fanciful notions; my father's reaction to John Wayne led to an increased interest in masculinity as a fantasy to strive for. By showing who he looked up to, he instilled in me a desire to be more of a man's man.

LEARNING TO BE VIOLENT: THE PENIS AND POPEYE

While culturally the penis means irrationality and sex, the penis is the defining physical characteristic of masculinity, and behaviors associated with testosterone—aggression, violence—are offered as the definitive masculine characteristic.⁵ Lack of aggression, or even maintaining a peaceful, timid nature, are frowned upon socially within masculine culture. Acting in this manner, one would be considered not *all man*. Roles and regulatory actions are culturally expected: boys act out violent scenes with action figures, they do not recreate home life with dolls.

Psychiatrist James Gillian wrote, “It is men who are expected to be violent and who are honored for doing so and dishonored for being unwilling to be violent.”⁶ Culturally, the traditional fight or flight mentality is not an option amongst men—the safe route will create reticence and shame. Gillian theorizes that shame, “the absence or deficiency of self-love,” is the root cause of the contemporary American male’s impulse towards violence, and that “the relation between shame and genitals is so close and inextricable that the words for the two are identical in most languages.”⁷ This idealistic expectation of masculinity

within society deals directly with an inferiority complex, causing men to constantly play a culturally expected role of manhood in an often violent capacity.

Youth of today is bombarded with imagery of violent men, which in turn creates a normalization of violent masculinity within popular culture; often, they are viewed as heroic in many ways.⁸ Sociologist Michael Kimmel states, “American men define their masculinity not so much in relation to women, but in relation to each other. Masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment.”⁹ Masculinity is not natural: it’s a series of learned routines one must master in order to be accepted. Not only are these routines learned, they are also cross-compared and examined to our masculine neighbor. “Over our two centuries of history, American manhood became less and less about an inner sense of self and more and more about a possession that needed to be acquired.”¹⁰

Within the world of American sports culture, intimidating and controlling behavior is steadfastly rewarded. Whether it be coaches telling players to *tough it up* on the sidelines or teammates celebrating a vicious tackle, a culturally accepted cycle is being rewarded for aggressive behavior. Simply put, you gain respect from disrespecting your male peers, and you are expected to act in that manner. Another example of this is the rise of professional wrestling in the 1990s, known as the *Attitude Era* of the then World Wrestling Federation. There was an obvious celebration of dominance and projection of power that linked

being a man and being abusive and violent. Boys are being taught over and over that real manhood is connected to size, strength, and muscularity.¹¹

There is more to masculinity than just violence. Culturally, men are expected to be strong not only emotionally, but physically as well. *Real men* do not need other people; they can make it on their own. Interdependence, consecutiveness, and relationships are seen as forms of weakness. This rugged individualist ideal that men are taught to live up to has emotional and psychological costs.¹²

Terrence Real's *I don't want to talk about it* deals with male depression and the ethos of being invulnerable, stoic islands onto themselves. *A real man* deals with his problems on his own and does not burden others. According to Real, a huge portion of the male population suffers from "Covert depression" that he says impairs functioning on a daily basis. Like masculinity, covert depression hides under different masks—addictive behavior like alcoholism, pornography or substance abuse, obsessive behavior, perfectionism, and workaholism. These coping mechanisms of covert depression is designed to keep overt depression at bay.¹³

So, masculinity is a learned behavior, or cultural norm, and violent behavior is expected due to association with testosterone. Entertainment with violent elements geared towards children do not only express these cultural norms, they reinforce the behavior. Angela Moorjani says it best, "...unless the cultural unconsciousness is similarly 'raised,' it will initiate resistance and

backlash... Since everyday behaviors determine the unconscious patterns we adopt, then it is cultural practices that need to change first.”¹⁴

An example of masculinity in popular culture I am personally drawn to, and utilize within my artwork, is Popeye; his straight-forward machismo with permanent scowl and willingness to stand his ground reminds me of my paternal grandfather. Also a sailor, he maintained a hard-nosed, stoic stance on life. Interchange domestic beer for the canned spinach, and they were practically the same person. I have a fondness for the visual character and feel uneasy about him at the same time. He exemplifies the patriarchal uber male I barely knew, yet I still have a fondness for him. My experiences within our learned culture glorified this animated figure, drawing me closer to him, even though I have no personal connection.

MASCULINITY CRISIS OF THE 1990S, OR MY CHILDHOOD

Growing up in the 90s as a heteronormative, middle-class, Caucasian, male, I was admittedly raised on the top of the pecking order of our culture. That being said, I had cultural expectations placed on me. These male norms were not my truths; I never played sports, I am not handy around the house, and I am far from being stoic. For most of my adolescence, other than cultural propaganda, I had no immediate masculine figure to aspire. Culturally, men have been facing a crisis since the mid 1980s because society no longer offers them a clear sense of what manhood means. Rather than participating in society in a useful and meaningful way, men are, “surrounded by a culture that encourages people to play almost no functional public roles, only decorative or consumer ones.” Thus, men are being taught that “masculinity is something to drape over the body, not drawn from inner resources” and manhood is “displayed, not demonstrated.”¹⁵ This lack of a demonstration of manhood has had an immediate reaction to the generations that followed. In *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, Susan Faludi explored the 1990s masculinity crisis. In it, she wrote:

From the start, I intended to talk to the men...about such matters as work, sports, marriage, religion, war, and entertainment. I didn't go to them originally to ask about their fathers. But they insisted that I do so. Over and over, the breakdown of loyalty in the public domain brought my male guides face-to-face with the collapse of some personal patrimony. Behind all the public double crosses, they sensed, lay their fathers' desertion.¹⁶

Faludi is able to examine the lack of trust and relationship between generations and the new vulnerability that was created due to a *desertion* in their masculine leaders. At the same time men were feeling deserted by their fathers, the social structure was changing. In her previous book, *Backlash*, Faludi discusses the various social movements that arose that were a serious challenge to the power structure of the white, heteronormative, male. The power structure started to sway towards the female, gay, lesbian, and transgender communities. Some of the men in power reacted poorly to the social movements that challenged their power system. Because of these social movements, women were becoming more of an economic equal, and our nation responded. Cultural projections of women started visually taking up less physical and symbolic space—the ultra-thin, less physically threatening supermodel female figure—whereas an emphasis had been placed on men to become larger and more violent. Action figures and heroic gun welding Hollywood stars became more physically menacing and threatening into the 1990s. This increase in physical machismo were an example of the pathologies and anxieties being played out on the screen.¹⁷

Contemporary discussions of dysfunctional masculinity cite a number of reasons for the condition of the typically heteronormative, middle-class, Caucasian, male. Social researchers have declared this dysfunctional masculinity as an archetype, labeling them as the “redundant male”, a product of years of economic, social, and biological marginalization. *He* has been viewed as the victim of decades of gay and feminist insurgence and accompanying

changes in gender and labor orders. As traditional masculinity continues to collapse, the once-valued male attributes are no longer honored, much less rewarded.¹⁸

FETISHIZE THIS!

“The constitution of a fetish, a material sign occulting an unconscious subtext, serves to replace the sexual attraction to women with the sexual fixation on a fetish-object.”¹⁹ Rather than fetishizing the envy or loss of the phallus as an object, my work is fetishizing the loss of masculinity as an ideal, and as a loss of my paternal figure. Coming to terms with the loss is my way of healing and accepting myself, and the coping with a lack of a father figure. By “substituting magical objects and practices for lost ones (imaginary or not), fetishists set out to conjure loss by repetition, or waver between denial and the wish to heal their wounds.”²⁰ “The artful, or magical, ways fetishism works to counter the wounds of loss depend on deep anxieties, fears of mutilation, rivalries, and devaluations that stereotypical gender beliefs serve to reinforce.”²¹

For this body of work, the series of fetishized objects—baseball, bottle opener, gun holster, steak, wrench, multi-tool, fishing gear, and a Zippo lighter—are at once repeating and attacking gender stereotypes. I have a lack of personal experience with the objects themselves and the cultural concept/gender stereotypes they represent.

Coming to terms with becoming a man is by fetishizing the loss of adolescence. In Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, the abject directly responds to the intense human reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the

loss of the distinction between self and other. As an example, Kristeva discusses death, more specifically, coming in direct contact with a corpse. Kristeva associates the abject with the sudden injection of “the real” into our lives. She associates the abject response with the human rejection of death’s insistent materiality.²² I relate Kristeva’s response to materiality of death to the physiological death of childhood during the transition from boy to man. This anxiety-inducing self-othering that comes by way of transitioning to manhood is visually represented in my work by the icon of Charlie Brown. To me, he seems aware of his traditional phase; all of his small dilemmas are bringing him face to face with his foreboding manhood. He is the fundamental visualization of childhood anxiety.

CONCLUSION

Manliness, machismo, masculinity... it is all a culturally learned and expected pose placed on all men. Coming to the realization that I do not necessarily fit into the mold of these cultural norms is an abrupt realization that brought out an intense realization of self. Since I am not *all man*, I am left yearning to fit in and be what is expected of me, but that would only be the appearance of the truth.

ENDNOTES

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² Clum, John M. *He's All Man: learning masculinity, gayness, and love from American movies*. (Palgrave, 2002), xv.

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⁵ Ibid, 14.

⁶ Ibid, 24.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Katz, Jackson, director. *Tough Guise*. Media Education Foundation, 2002.

⁹ Clum, John M. *He's All Man: learning masculinity, gayness, and love from American movies*. (Palgrave, 2002), xv.

¹⁰ Ibid.

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²² Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. (Columbia University Press, 1982), 10.

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CURRICULUM VITA

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Allen R. Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville
2006-2011

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Art 116 – Foundation Drawing II
- Graduate Teacher, 2011-2013
Art 115 – Foundation Drawing I

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- Gallery Assistant, 2010-2012
Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, Louisville, KY
- Curatorial Intern and art handler, 2011-2012
- Jewish Community Center, Louisville, KY
Guest Curator, 2012
Allen R. Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

- Student Art League President, 2009-2011

GROUP EXHIBITIONS:

2016

Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN

- 12x12: A National Exhibition of Small-Scale Works of Art, Juried by Dr. Leslie King-Hammond, Graduate Dean Emeritus, MICA

2014

Expressions Gallery, Louisville, KY

- Ripple Effect, Juried by Trish Korte

2013

Jewish Community Center, Louisville, KY

- Mazin Art Show, Juried by Billy Hertz, First Place Award

2012

Jewish Community Center, Louisville, KY

- Mazin Art Show, Juried by Wendi Smith, Honorable Mention

2011

Jewish Community Center, Louisville, KY

- Mazin Art Show, Juried by Ed Hamilton

Allen R. Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

- BFA Exhibition

CURATORIAL EXPERIENCE:

Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, Louisville, KY

- o Taking the “s” Out of Craft (Third Biennial Symposium on Art History and Visual Culture), 2013

Allen R. Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville,
Louisville, KY

- o Culture and Spirituality in the Traditional Arts of North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia: The Gray Henry Collection, 2013

Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, Louisville, KY

- o Re-Animation: Turning Toys into Art, 2012

Allen R. Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville,
Louisville, KY

- o Art of the State: an exploration of government sanctioned artwork, 2012

Jewish Community Center, Louisville, KY

- o Aliens, Bulldogs, & Snow globes (Guest Curator), 2012

Allen R. Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville,
Louisville, KY

- o Bill Fischer Retrospective, 2012

AWARDS: Hite Scholarship, University of Louisville, 2016-2017
First Place, Mazin Art Show,
Jewish Community Center, 2013

Honorable Mention, Mazin Art Show,
Jewish Community Center, 2012

Arts & Sciences Graduate Teaching Scholarship,
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Hite Gallery Assistantship,
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Bill Fischer Oral Thesis Grant (2D),
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