

THE EXAMINATION OF GENDER ASSOCIATIONS IN BEING

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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BY

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Most objects possess gender-specific characteristics. These characteristics encourage identity structures that support oppositional distinctions. This installation layers femininity, masculinity, function, and decoration through the creative manipulation of gender associations, functionality, and artistic practice. Particular focus remains on examination of the identity and function of a male artist. These explorations relate to and reference many artists of varying periods and/or movements within art history. This focus on a reflexive approach to creative practice stems from a curiosity about the context of the artist. By setting parameters in which to operate functionally and creatively, the context of the male artist is transplanted into the very functionally feminine role of the primary caregiver. This role opposes the stereotypical essence of the male, artist genius and confronts societal hierarchies that place male autonomy above female functionality. But the widely accepted concept of masculinity does not recognize the male artist in their classification of masculine. These layers of contradiction expose the absurdities embedded within socially designed gender roles.

REVIEW OF INFLUENCES

The role of an artist is simply described as a problem solver... or unemployed. As an artist/problem solver/unemployed, the most logical problem needed to be resolved is the one of unemployment. My cultural background places me in the context of a white, middle-class, suburban, heterosexual, male. Within these particular circumstances, a reasonable solution or answer to the problem could be outlined in the role of the stay-at-home-dad. This framework outlines the influences of personal experience, culture, gender roles, and the traditional concept of functionality on my creative project.

The stay-at-home-dad (“SAHD”) has become a phenomenon mostly associated with the late twentieth century when the traditional gender roles of American society eroded and uncovered that the role of family breadwinner was not sex specific. This breakdown in the historically sound power structure associated with gender assignments placed an ever-increasing pressure on the tightly knit idea of the masculine and feminine. In an existential crisis involving masculine identity, the male was forced to grapple with this traditional idea of masculinity. The time-tested definition was brought into speculation, and He ceremonially passed the metaphorical loaf of bread to Her.

But the role of the male artist had been placed in a questionable arena between masculine and feminine long before the “battle for the bread”. A stereotypical manly man scoffed at the idea of the male artist possessing even an ounce of testosterone, but

within the art world the macho artist had already become a stereotype embodied by icons such as Picasso or Jackson Pollock. These ideas and concepts became a visible social and/or cultural segregation between the realm of intellectuals and the working class, so even amid these two proximal social/cultural bodies the idea of manhood is in question. What is not in question is the pride attached to these two battling bodies. The male ego that drives the traditional idea of masculinity draws the line between these two social extremities.

For this body of work, exploiting the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity help to highlight the predominant paths taken by the sexes. These paths are predetermined by a transparent power structure connected to all social norms. Even objects possess gender associations. The taboos of everyday run-ins with gender compel my interest in the subject as a way to communicate absurdities that are intimately linked with my audience.

The work of David Hammons exploits the associations of objects in a way that supplies a social critique linked strongly to the African American community. His interest in creative process finds energy from the destruction of racially stereotyped objects. This process involves the elevation of materials, which draws a strong connection to Marcel Duchamp's *Readymades*. Hammons heavily utilizes art's ability to elevate an object beyond the everyday circumstance in which it exists. He lifts racially stereotyped objects out of their context in a way that emphasizes the absurdity that these associations exist in the first place.

Joseph Beuys also worked with the associations of objects/materials. He embedded his chosen materials with personal history, mysticism, primitivism, and certain

ideologies associated with Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy¹. He manipulated the meaning attached to his materials or objects to promote social reform on a global scale. Beuys also questioned the authority of the artist (as well as exploiting such authority) by declaring all humans are artists. This particular statement influences my process by suggesting that there is no difference between creative and functional practice, or that there is creative practice involved in function. The duality associated with these two phenomena has long been socially accepted, or perhaps it has been obscured by social definitions like the ones associated with gender roles.

My use of appropriation is a means to reference and converse with art history. A variety of appropriated imagery and ideologies, including the prior mentioned, have supplied a reference point from which to anchor my process, but doing so in layers reflects the complexities evident throughout the discourse of art. This also reinforces my interest in the identity and subject matter of the artist.

The work of Jasper Johns incorporated everyday, mundane objects into the highly crafted practice of painting. His interest in ordinary subject matter outlined a contradiction in the history of painting he felt necessary to subtly reference. He was also linked to an artist named Robert Rauschenberg, who worked in a more blatant way that incorporated life and art by utilizing actual everyday items in his compositions. *Bed* is a piece of his that shows a bed mounted onto the wall and had marks reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism. The overall similarities between these two artists have

¹ Developed in Switzerland by Rudolf Steiner in 1923, it seeks to support individuals who are working on their own inner development and who wish to bring the fruit of that inner work to benefit the wider world (anthroposophy.org).

influenced my choice of subject matter, but more importantly to this body of work is their rather different personas or degree of masculinity associated with their creative practice.

The exploitation of masculine artistic practice has also been explored in this body of work. Much like the work of Cy Twombly, my exaggerated use of expressionistic mark-making is used to question the ideals of manly art. The drip paintings of Jackson Pollock utilize this testosterone-driven expression, but his interest in purity of mark offers a blunt and rather shallow expression of art and manhood linked only to ego. Twombly's parody of the masculine artist supplies a much deeper conversation about mark making, masculinity, and art as a whole.

The variety of personas acquired by male artists from the past has allowed my creative project to explore a layered interpretation of gender. The lack of reference to female artists only encourages my interest in the ideologies of male autonomy and female functionality. Satirized appropriations of everyday processes and iconic, masculine artists spotlights the absurdity that is the male and female ego. Attached to transparent power structures, these social norms create a humorous and intriguing dialogue intimately connected to my audience.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTWORK

This body of work will explore a mixed-media approach. I will build a living room environment where the individual works of art will be displayed as a cohesive collection of related investigations. The objects and paintings will create an atmosphere that entangles my concepts outlining the ambiguity of function and/or purpose. By using multiple processes, techniques, and materials, I allow the viewer to be drawn in by several interpretations. I force; painting, printmaking, drawing, assemblage, sewing, collage, sculpture, scrapbooking, video, performance, pickling, jamming, and collecting to interact by overlapping their purpose, concept, and aesthetic qualities.

The installation will be displayed within a twelve foot by twelve foot room. Using two existing walls within the gallery, I will construct two stud walls to complete the structuring of the space. The stud walls have hanging within them inward facing paintings backed with a non-toxic, recycled denim insulation, alluding to structural integrity. More two-dimensional work will cover the existing walls of the gallery as well, and a large blue tarp will act as a roof. Using clamp lights and lamps for lighting, the rest of the gallery will be dark allowing the room to appear glowing. These combined elements define the structure of my space and provide an inviting environment to draw the viewer into this realm of the Stay-At-Home-Dad.

The interior space houses various arrangements of furniture, found objects, and other sculptural investigations. The placement of objects within the room examines the relationships created when objects share space. These explorations observe an oscillation between function/purpose and decoration/ornamentation with particular focus on the gender associations attached to these segregated phenomena, femininity and masculinity.

My central concept explores equality amidst opposition. The ultimate goal is not to reach a resolution but to make visible and explore the absurd, paradoxical characteristics of these phenomena (function, ornamentation, masculinity, and femininity). This encourages a relational examination of the subject by altering the familiarity of being. I tangle, exploit, or otherwise manipulate the projected will of the majority into an unfamiliar hybrid. Some investigations reveal fundamentally, prejudiced regularities in our social structures. By altering the state of an object under the will of a prejudice system, an object is able to explore a harmony through diversity.

I search for this harmony by exploring a reflexive, oscillating entanglement of these phenomena. This describes a cyclical layering of everyday gender associations. Utilizing widely recognized social distinctions; the viewer is able to navigate my investigations in familiar territory. A humorous approach continues to provide an inviting, non-abrasive environment in which the audience can examine or confront the subject matter. Joseph Beuys said:

Humour cuts into the consciousness like a knife. It's an elegant solution, as elegant as gaiety, and this can be overlooked if one's understanding of life is not expansive enough to project beyond personal problems and feel a kind of Homeric laughter running through the whole structure of life and natural powers. It's not something that can be taught or cultivated, and is especially avoided in contemporary education with its emphasis only on so-called rational things. After

all, it needs a lot of discipline to live beyond the simply personal level. (Tisdall 25)

The universality of these phenomena allows the complexity to remain visually and conceptually readable.

(Below is a description of selected pieces from the installation)

Vitruvian SAHD

Acrylic, Graphite, Charcoal, Fabric, Wood, Twine, Found Objects

7' X 4.5'

This painting layers feminine colors and household themes with a male figure labeled SAHD (Stay-At-Home-Dad) located in the middle of the composition. Purposefully exploring opposing elements, this piece offers an anatomical investigation of the male submersed in the feminine role of the primary caregiver or the Stay-At-Home-Dad. Strong references to Jasper Johns approach an interest in everyday objects associated with living, but more importantly, the persona characteristic of Johns. He does not fit the egotistical mold of Jackson Pollock or Picasso. The attention paid to the variety in mark very purposefully juxtaposes masculine and feminine themes.

Seven feet tall by four and a half feet wide, a life size depiction of an anatomically exaggerated male phallus lies bulging under a floral patterned apron. Most of the masculine references in this piece exploit the stereotyped ignorant male helplessly fumbling around in a feminine environment. This weakens the dominance of the autonomous male.

Binky (Baby's Blanket)

Burlap, Acrylic, Graphite, Twine

3' X 3'

A three-foot by three-foot arrangement of clumsily sewn together burlap provides a feminine function practiced by a male. I exploit the stereotype of the clueless male that is immersed in feminine gender roles by identifying these pieces as a baby blanket. The abrasive material, sewn together in a ham-fisted fashion opposes the gentle touch needed to care for an infant. The distinction between function and ornament is drawn when the artist side of my being repurposes the blanket into a work of art. Reference to Alberto Burri suggests a comparison to Art Povera, a very masculine artistic movement that glorified the autonomous male.

Mustang Sally (Flaccid Quilt)

Burlap, Fabric, Acrylic, Graphite, Twine

9' X 4.5'

A large quilt made of sewn together burlap sacks with a Mustang painted on it. Nine feet long and four and a half feet tall, it is nailed to the wall bunched up to create the illusion of a crinkled car. The feminine act of quilting juxtaposed with the abrasive material, depiction of a muscle car, and masculine aesthetic explores interesting themes associated with gender. The stay-at-home-dad, in an attempt to maintain a tight grip on his masculinity, uses the quilt as an extension of his phallus. Muscle cars, a well-established masculine activity in many cultures, are often represented as symbolic of a man's sexual ego, as is referenced by the female names often given to cars (i.e. Mustang

Sally). I emphasize this female personification further by using remnants of a prom dress in the color of the car, which is red (a color often associated with passion). The masculine egotism is balanced out by scrunching the quilt in a symbolic gesture that suggests a flaccid phallus, which negates the dominance associated with male genitalia.

Oversized Scrapbook (An Artist Family)

Woodcut on Mingeishi Awagami, Acrylic, Graphite

4.5' X 6'

The feminine practice of scrapbooking is adopted by the stay-at-home-dad, but his egotistical persona overwhelms this nostalgic activity with portraits of artists rather than family photos. Often accompanying photos are heartfelt messages or notes that relate to a family experience or occasion, but the SAHD writes illegibly the names of artists as a reference to the work of Cy Twombly. Twombly explored the idea of purity in mark. His large scale drawings adopted a masculine aesthetic to parody the expressionistic mark-making characteristic of Abstract Expressionism. I also parody or exploit the persona of the masculine, male artist as a way to create a dialogue with gender associations within art history.

Spring Break 2012 (Vacation Scrapbook)

Collage, Acrylic, Graphite

56" X 40"

This piece also skews the concept of the scrapbook into a product of overcompensated masculinity. Cherished moments are saved in scrapbooks, but in this

documentation of a trip to Boston, what are saved are the misfortunes of travelling. The physical and psychological toll travelling has on the body becomes the main focus of this nostalgic time capsule. This reflects a typical behavior associated with males. They discuss what goes wrong instead of the “kodak moments”. When analyzed, this behavior suggests that a vacation without mishap is not masculine. The family voyage must have some unforeseen catastrophe, so the male can discuss his ability to (man) handle a situation into submission with other males. Again, a common theme in this body of work transforms this “scrapbook” into a piece of art, but this time, it barely erases the original function from the piece.

Shelf Abstraction

Collage, Acrylic, Fabric, Canvas, Paper, Burlap, Twine, Graphite, Beeswax Cast Objects
46” X 37”

Clement Greenberg was a recognized art critic who wrote many papers describing what he considered to be the epitome of art. This was formalism, or more specifically Abstract Expressionism with particular interest in the work of Jackson Pollock. One dominant characteristic of this movement was purity in mark. When deconstructed, purity in mark making cannot exist when in the hand of an artist attempting to make a pure mark. When you are trying to be spontaneous, you are no longer spontaneous. Therefore, this work is turned backwards exposing the marks that were made unconsciously, or purely. Then dedicated to Greenberg, the purity of this piece is then repurposed as a shelf for beeswax objects to negate the high minded concepts of Abstract Expressionism with an ordinary function.

Hermaphrodite

Acrylic, Glitter, Sequins on Sewn Together Fabric (with Twine)

39.5" X 27.5"

This piece physically layers opposing gender associations. Floral patterned fabric sewn together in a brute fashion are stretched to support the addition of Jackson Pollock-esque splatters of paint adorned with sequins and glitter. The mixture of these elements creates a confused expression stuck between the feminine and the masculine.

Nourishing the Canvas

Beeswax on Mulberry, Okawara, Mingeishi Awagami on Canvas

56" X 40"

Joseph Beuys associated honey and beeswax with nourishment. Nourishing the young falls under the responsibility of a primary caregiver, but the artistic ego has again proven to lead the SAHD into folly again. This basic principle associated with life has been repurposed in a highly conceptualized practice aimed at healing a traditional artistic surface instead of a child.

First painting the wax onto various types of Japanese paper, I then began to slowly heat the wax bandages and work them into the canvas with a wooden spoon. The fragility of the wax lends to the skin like effect it produces when adhered to the canvas. The time frame for the healing is left uncalculated, but this piece is not archivally stable. The bandages will eventually come off when the healing is complete.

Burlap Suit / Burlap Suit Print

Burlap, Twine, Ink / Relief Print on Okawara

6' X 3'

The responsibilities of a primary caregiver include clothing offspring. I have adopted the practice of tailoring as a means to carry out such responsibilities, but the first garment was a men's suit. Continuing the juxtaposition of masculine to femininity, the combination of abrasive material and clumsy execution for a highly complex and precise skill associated with the feminine. Further emphasizing the transformative powers of art, the function of this suit goes through two transformations. First the knees are sewn shut destroying the practical function of the garment and exploiting stereotypical, male ignorance. Then the suit was printed, transforming the garment back into a functional object as a stamp.

This piece also strongly references the work of Joseph Beuys, in particular his *Felt Suit*. Beuys used felt for, what he perceived to be, regenerative powers. Tailored from one of his actual suits, the piece also acts as a self-portrait. I also consider the burlap suit to serve as a self-portrait within my simulated context.

The print of the suit acts as an exploration of print media and the transformative potential inherent in the medium. It also invites a comparison to a uniform. Most important though is the instantaneous shift that is simultaneously destructing and creating function.

Pageant Dress

Fabric, Twine, Sequins, Glitter

Child Size

This dress further explored the creation of garments with a focused interest on the culture involved with beauty pageants. I exploit the ignorant and egotistical male ability to objectify women as a means to enter a beauty pageant with my hypothetical daughter. The dress is created in a ham-fisted fashion that continues to emphasize the hopeless nature of this SAHD.

Ceremonial Implements

Found Objects on Sticks

Around 80" tall

These implements consisted of practical tools and decorative elements attached to long sticks. The absurdity associated with the use of these tools is stuck in a functionless function. Rather than sustaining the original function of the objects, they became drawing implements or functional in the functionless. I manipulate the function of the objects multiple times before the final products are that of functionally functionless bastardized mongrels.

Pickled Prints

Pickling Jars, Fabric, Intaglio, Relief, Lithography

16 oz. Jars

In an attempt to deal with the archival preservation of my prints, the feminine practice of canning served as an interesting exploration of function versus concept. Pickling is a process used to preserve food. I replace the food with prints in hopes of

preserving them. This humorous examination of layered processes lands between failure and success or function and concept.

Nourishment

Beeswax Cast Bowls and Spoons

These objects combine the symbolic associations of Joseph Beuys with practical function. These bowls hint at the possibility of functioning as a vessel should, but the material's fluid nature opposes the forms function. They seem to be both raw and roughly designed but soft, delicate, and inviting. These battling elements form an object worth investigation.

Birth Control, Condom, Vasectomy (Birth Control Series)

Found Watering Cans and Cocktail Shaker, Wax, Condom, Rubber Band, Cork, Engraving

This series manipulates ornamented objects of functional distinction. The contexts in which these objects function, gardening and dinner parties, is fundamentally feminine. Emphasizing the form of these objects into a symbolic representation of male genitalia, the association this object makes becomes incredibly masculine. But then the reference to birth control points to the destruction of masculinity by way of forced impotence. These objects now possess an association to that of a confused hybrid.

Instructional Video

16mm Projector, 16mm Film Spliced Together, Timer

Using a found film about home safety, spliced together clips create a looping video of children in common household accidents. This points to the masculine's lack of maternal instinct, but more apparent is the destruction of function. The informative nature of this film has been destroyed through the splicing/looping leaving only a confusing collection of clips showing children hurting themselves. The use of the projector references nostalgia from an era that embraced the segregation of feminine and masculine. It also lends to the space by providing an entertainment unit characteristic of a commons area within a home.

CONCLUSION & EXHIBITION STATEMENT

I am a white, male artist with a masculine aesthetic, but I do not project or adhere to the essence of the widely accepted concept of masculinity. From the “real” masculine perspective, I have no practical function as an artist, and the widely accepted concept of masculine men consider the role of an artist to be a feminine, functionless pursuit. In a search for function and in turn masculinity, I came across the Stay-At-Home-Dad. I have found practical function and in turn masculinity as a primary caregiver, but this role is widely accepted as a feminine occupation. My masculine aesthetic opposes the widely accepted concept of artist as feminine, and my existence as a male has left me unprepared for the role of the primary caregiver. I identify my gender role with an intellectual hermaphrodite (outcast), although a fluctuation between the two social phenomena provides a broad, layered analysis of gender associations in this search for function in the functionless.

This installation investigates the essence of being by manipulating the will of the majority as it is projected onto an object, subject, or action. My artistic practice utilizes the transformative qualities of creative exploration to closely examine the multifaceted nature of identity through an in depth analysis of everyday objects, subjects, and actions.

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