

THESIS

SEE MAN

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## ABSTRACT

### SEE MAN

My research asks a series of questions about how societal pressures sculpt male cultural roles in the United States. What components constitutes being a man? How have the constructed ideologies adopted by Americans affected my livelihood? How do the patriarchal structures in place shape my world view? Being a white, heterosexual male who fits within the privileged patriarchal systems of the United States, I feel a calling and obligation to utilize my voice to expose the toxic effects these systems have had on me and the rest of the American population. Toxic forms of masculinity are creating displacement, marginalization, and oppression of large groups of Americans. My work is an investigation aiming to unveil and exploit the effects of the ideologies of Christianity, nationalism and capitalism, and how these ideologies reinforce the toxic hegemonic masculine engine. The focus of my practice is to create and incorporate coded symbols and non-traditional painting materials as metaphors for stereotyped manliness.

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## INTRODUCTION

My current body of work is an investigation into the behaviors engaged in by primarily white men 'of privilege' in American culture. Although I understand "American" to be a broad term, throughout this paper, 'American' refers to citizens of the United States of America. In addition to addressing the current state of masculinity of this type, my work also addresses the components that have brought us to this point. I am fascinated by the exploration of how I fit within American culture and my own attitudes towards it. I have grown up and witnessed countless acts of inappropriate conduct and participated in "locker room banter." I have felt pressured to be competitive and macho, and have become cognizant of how I construct myself as a man. The type of masculinity which I intend to deconstruct in my work is referred to as hegemonic. Hegemonic masculinity deals with the intentional displacement and oppression of "others." In this paper, "others" are considered to be anyone that fails to possess wealth, be heterosexual or typically look non-white.

Through my artistic imagery, I utilize my own humorous nature as a transitional entry way into the content. I employ sarcasm and sardonicism throughout my paintings in order to display dark, provocative subject matter in an approachable way. I choose to use humor to reach a broad audience, because I believe that laughing and enjoying life is a basic human desire. This type of sarcastic humor in my work manifests itself through my own personality as a heterosexual white male and my ability to connect with other people through jokes.

Through the use of symbols and materials, my work aims to unveil a specter or segment of white males' toxicity and to raise consciousness about its effect on the people, the nation and world. The materials utilized to construct my work are composed of large sheets of drywall,

insulation foam and plywood which are mass produced, sturdy building materials that are rated based on their functionality and strength. These physical traits act as metaphors, referencing the societal pressures of what it means to be a man – composed, strong and readily available.

However, with everyday tools such as hammers and saws, I can easily destroy these surfaces and reveal their soft interiors. This process is an attempt to free men from the societal structures and pressures placed upon them to conform to a specific breed of manliness.

American artist Robert Rauschenberg was fascinated with the symbols and iconography existing in our everyday lives and how they are digested and interpreted. These symbols and images of popular culture constantly surround us and communicate to people on an individual level. The term Rauschenberg used to define this exchange is the “vernacular glance.” The vernacular glance is defined by Rauschenberg as the relationship between the everyday viewer’s perception of the urban environment which from the influence of television, cinema, and advertisement is an agitated and reactive mode of vision.<sup>i</sup> My work utilizes specific symbols that speak to the notion of the vernacular glance. The symbols I incorporate are the “blimpus,” protein jugs and spotted hyenas. The goal of these three symbols is to operate as metaphors of manliness in modern American environments. Rauschenberg believed that the bombardment of television and magazines is the new way of the world, and by making work incorporating these elements are the only true way of representing current reality.<sup>ii</sup>

The multiple layers of the paintings are composed of strong materials layered upon one another in order to make the picture plane three-dimensional. Sheets of plywood, drywall and insulation foam are attached to one another by other sets of mass-produced building materials such as liquid constructive adhesive, screws and nails. The type of paints found on these surfaces are specific mixes of house paint used in buildings and homes which speaks to the

materials onto which they are intended to be applied. This type of paint can be bought in large buckets, has thick consistency and can cover these large surfaces quickly and efficiently which is beneficial to the quick and gestural nature in which I work. The marks made upon the matrixes are extremely quick and gestural, often drippy, sloppy and globular. Thick paint application allows another dimensionality to the work by creating shadows and crackling textures that mimic the overlapping qualities of the various materials beneath. Symbolically, I layer paint in this manner to represent the suppression and shrouding of masculine emotion.

### AMERICAN MASCULINITY

In order to understand the hegemonic behaviors of men in American culture, we first need to acknowledge the mythology behind the American dream. The pressures of the dream are tied to cultural norms in the United States because they are driving forces behind what forms the ideal male. American culture is based upon values of Christianity, nationalism and the capitalist economy.<sup>iii</sup> The most common religion in America is Christianity, a very patriarchal system in nature often led by males with male deities, God and Jesus Christ, at the head. American nationalism prides itself in the belief that the United States is the most advanced country in the world. Nationalism in the United States is heavily individualistic, democratic and patriarchal. As citizens of this country, Americans are supposed to be proud, independent, successful, strong and competitive. Last of these values is the American capitalist economy which is driven by materialism and consumption. Capitalism exists across the globe, but the United States operates on a level of “for profit by any means.”<sup>iv</sup> Capitalism in the United States rewards those who have money with power. Those in power reign supreme over the powerless and less fortunate. These driving factors forge extreme societal pressures on American males to be competitive, successful and powerful.

## CHRISTIANITY

America's dominant religion was adopted from western European Christianity. Perhaps the most fundamental belief is that Man was made from the image of God, who is presumed to be the supreme male arbiter who rules the universe. God and Jesus are both male figures and supreme beings. Their existence is pure and their teachings should be followed. Astrophysicist and astronomer Carl Sagan once stated,

Try to convince yourself that God created the entire universe for one of the ten million or so species of life that inhabit the Earth. Now take it a step further, imagine that everything was made for just a single shade of that species, or gender, or ethnic or religious subdivision. We can recognize here short coming in some circumstances serious, ability to understand the world. Characteristically, we seem compelled to project our own nature onto nature. Man in his arrogance thinks himself a great work, worthy of the interposition of a deity.<sup>v</sup>

Christianity is vital to understanding the patriarchal systems in place in the United States. Christians commonly project their beliefs on-to aspects of their daily lives leading to reinforced positions of patriarchy. This projection is extremely problematic for the world and specifically our youth.

I was born and raised Catholic. I attended Catholic school for twelve years. The Church's teachings greatly impacted my childhood and views of the world. Following the teachings of Catholicism, I was trained to be pure and follow a specific set of rules and guidelines. It was bestowed on me as a young boy that this is the way I should be, and those who did not follow this path were inferior to my purity. The rules and guidelines of Catholicism corrupted my world view of others. Not until my later teens did I realize how horrible I felt believing these patriarchal ideologies. With these feelings in mind, I created a painting to challenge these notions and teachings, entitled "Martyriarch."



In the painting “Martyriarch (Fig. 1),” I have created a large-scale female hyena depicted in a classical Byzantine motif. Catholic imagery surrounded my adolescent youth, resurfacing in books and churches I attended weekly. They were iconic symbols that acted as daily reminders of my faith and my worship. In this painting the matriarch symbolizes male religious figures, painted with a degree of realism while being obscured by layers of paint, foam and drywall. The obscuring of the figure speaks to my confusion of religious teaching; it paints over something precious from my past. Insulation foam creates a reflective halo or crown formation above her head while phallic gold leaf surrounds the sacred heart. The title of the work combines matriarch and martyr, and implies the notion of sacrifice for male sins. I use the symbol of the hyena as a metaphor to address and challenge Christian, masculine patriarchy through a large, strong and sturdy female gazing into the viewer with recognizable religious iconography, such as the sacred heart and reflective halo. I attempt to challenge classical Renaissance religious painting by flipping its familiar connotations and traditional imagery.

## NATIONALISM

Many people around the world have patriotic emotional attachments to their countries; however, in the United States I have observed a hyper-aggressive form of patriotism – a heightened form of nationalism. In this document nationalism should be understood as the way people in the United States feel towards patriotism and how the behaviors, attitudes and actions associated with it find their way into militarism and recreational sport. Some of the most extreme ways Americans show their love for their country are through violence in the military and contact sports. America has attained its role as a world super power through military force and dominance. In the year 2015, 54% of all federal spending went towards the Department of Defense’s war spending. 598.5 billion dollars went towards nuclear weapons and war spending

for the American arms branches.<sup>vi</sup> The amount of resources for weaponry and soldiers has established the United States as one of the most powerful countries in the world.

The military may be a more practical use of billions of dollars than organized sports; that said, a majority of the American population contributes vast amounts of money into the sports industry. In 2016-2017, Americans spent \$100 billion on sports. This number includes attending games – and paying for memorabilia, transportation, food and beverages.<sup>vii</sup> The most popular and expensive sport in the United States is American football.<sup>viii</sup> Males dominate the competitive sport of football. The sport relies on high speeds, violent impacts and collisions. Millions of Americans watch football routinely. In 2018 (a record year of low viewer ratings), the Super Bowl boasted approximately 103.4 million viewers.<sup>ix</sup> Intriguingly, only 84 million people viewed the latest presidential debates, which was the highest number in history.<sup>x</sup> Viewers celebrate football as a uniquely American sport and tradition. Due to the incredible popularity of sport, severe pressures have been put upon the American male to be famous, celebrated and beloved through means that are aggressive and dominant. These pressures to be athletic, competitive and violent affect boys at a young age, and they frequently carry these pressures with them into adulthood.

When I attended Catholic school, almost every boy in my school yearned for the age when they could represent our school through sports. No matter our physical make-up or technical skill, nearly every boy tried out for every sport. If someone did not try out, he was considered weird and nerdy. The faculty and students kept the competitive cycle moving into high school where tryouts were much more intense and cutthroat. I have never been a large muscular individual, but I specifically remember a day in high school when the wrestling coach called me to his office during class time. He urged me to try out for the team because I was

strong and agile for my weight class. The coach had never seen me do anything athletic and he barely knew me, but I knew him quite well from my friends on the team. They told me stories of how he projected unrealistic expectations on them to make specific weight classes before competitions. They were strongly urged to starve themselves and purge to make lower weights. I saw some of my friends intentionally vomiting in the bathroom at school to please the coach. I did not want anything to do with this coach or his program. When I generously declined his offer, he attempted to pressure me and had my friends on the team try to convince me to join. After a year of effort, the coach finally realized his attempts failed. When I saw him around the school, he would often crack jokes in front of other students about how I wasn't man enough and would question my school spirit. The pressure to compete and show my allegiance to my school feels very similar to how I feel about the patriotic pressures placed upon me as a male in America.

The men who participate in military and sports are required to be in peak physical condition. Their jobs depend on their athleticism and strong, healthy muscular stature. The physical needs typically demand ample amounts of time and energy in gyms. Not only is working out extremely vital to muscular upkeep, but supplements, diets and protein aid in pushing muscle growth to its limit. In doing so, this type of man creates ideal sculptures of masculine body image and can become idolized by less fit men who can live vicariously through them.

With Rauschenberg's "vernacular glance" in mind, I created a piece of work with an altered yet familiar image of patriotism and nationalism – the American Flag. "Flag (Fig. 2)" depicts an American flag composed of rows of balloon forms painted with the colors of United States. The phallic balloon shapes, which I named "blimpus," (I will define blimpus in greater

detail later in this document) represent male genitalia and function in my work as a symbol for machoism and manhood. The American flag is a symbol that we see everywhere and often, reinforcing American expectations of patriotism, militarism and strength. I intend to uncover the viewer's reactions to the flag itself and to the strength and power associated with it. The inflated phallic balloon forms speak to our current political and sociological systems and the notions of inflated, often male, egos associated with nationalist beliefs. I feel that the flag represents being a part of something greater than one's self, being part of the team and showing spirited support with a consortium of people.

## CAPITALISM

The ideology of capitalism helps define American masculine behavior. Capitalism in the United States largely focuses on profit. The more money accumulated by corporations helps a small portion of the population to grow in social status and economic wealth. The French economist, Thomas Piketty, says there is an equation that explains the wealth differentiation in the United States:

The rate of return for owned capital (**r**) exceeds the overall rate of economic growth (**g**). Thus, families and individuals who control wealth will accumulate it at a faster rate than the economy can produce it and so will control a much larger portion of the economic pie. The rich get proportionally richer, and the poor get proportionally poorer. And unless something happens to alter the status quo, this trend will continue.<sup>xi</sup>

Piketty's equation of economic disparity creates a breeding ground for hegemonic behavior. It also allows for perpetuating the marginalization of others for personal profit. The American economy thrives on big business and corporations. These private sector entities are also directly tied to our political systems. Within these systems, money equates to power and those in power rule. Those in power are most commonly men. Privileged positions breed hegemony by keeping

those in advantageous positions present and prosperous. In addition, it gives an unfair advantage to a singular societal group (privileged white males) and creates disparity amongst the rest of the United States population.

To illustrate the power inequality that is situated in gender and physical bodies, one can look at the makeup of the United States Congress in 2017. One hundred and five women hold high level political positions in America which makes up only 19.6% of our current senate and house of representatives.<sup>xii</sup> The extremely low numbers demonstrate the power difference between men and women in the United States. Not only are women on the losing end of this equality gap, so are men of color. Of the 435 members of congress, white males make up nearly 78% of the political body.<sup>xiii</sup> Not all white males respond to power in the same way, most white males come from a similar cultural background which has put pressures on men to behave in specific ways. The political bodies ultimately dictate the decision-making processes in the United States and reinforce a privileged position of power. The unequal gap of power feeds into the hegemonic engine. The system keeps the powerful present while continuously displacing everyone else.

When I completed my undergraduate career, I landed a sales position at a well-known security company in Saint Louis. My job as security advisor involved bait and switch sales techniques. The job consisted of going to family's homes based upon an appointment they had made over the phone with another salesperson, and selling and installing security systems. More commonly than not, the phone salesperson had promised the customer several things that I would be totally oblivious to and did not have the power to accommodate. The promises made were often a substantial amount of free equipment credit given to the customer for setting the appointment. It was my job to cover up the lies of the phone salesperson I had never met or

spoken to. In addition, I was required to upsell the customers into purchasing thousands of dollars of additional equipment. The bait and switch operation worked by customers being promised one thing over the phone, and when I arrived, learned that the system would be greatly more expensive. I represented the face of the company in the customers' homes and needed to reassure them of the safety our products provided.

My personal income depended upon upselling since it was a commission based job. To a certain degree, I felt guilty about selling particular pieces of equipment and overdoing quotes for equipment the families did not need. My direct branch manager and regional manager made me fill out forms called "Thorough Protection Plans" to show how much money we were trying to squeeze from the customer. The company masked the "for profit by any means mentality" by reinforcing better protection for the customer even though the company knew some of the systems were overkill. When the forms were not filled out to completion, we would be reprimanded and shamed at branch meetings in front of our fellow salesmen whom we were competing against vigorously for higher ranks within the branch. Everyone in our branch was a middle aged man between 18 and 40 and all of us were white. We competed for higher income families with better homes because they commonly spent money on their security systems. The job forced me into the competitive capitalist system in which my actual survival depended upon taking advantage of people through white lies and over-priced products. The uneasy feelings resurfaced in my graduate career and led me to create a painting entitled "Seek."

In the work "Seek (Fig. 3)," I have created a humorous labyrinth out of insulation foam that was cut apart autonomously. Throughout the composition, I illustrate hyenas running rampantly throughout and competing for an ultimate goal or reward, though no reward is evident. Layers of distractions and dead ends await them through paint application, ripping of the foil

layer and three-dimensional elements of wood and insulation foam layered on top of one another. The pieces of cut foam were in all different shapes and sizes and then carefully composed in several iterations until an uncanny language of nearly decipherable glyphs or letters spawned. The shapes form an unfamiliar code on how one can successfully navigate through the maze. In “Seek,” I explore the societal pressures of winning the race and becoming successful by rising to the occasion and capturing victory through an unfamiliar and uneven playing field. All the while, the reflective surface of the foam mimics a cloudy mirror in which the viewer and I can engage ourselves in the context of the capitalist system. French theologian Alain De Lille stated, “Every creature in the world is like a book and picture to us, and a mirror.”<sup>xiv</sup> De Lille’s words inspired me to push the metaphors I am using. Both the symbol of the hyena and that of the foam create a mirror of human/animal relationships as a metaphor to the capitalistic nature of the United States and the burden it places upon American males.

When we examine and compare the fundamental ideologies of American culture, we can recognize common veins that weave throughout. White males make up the majority of important figures in American narratives. The narratives surrounding the figures create the structures in which many males – especially white privileged ones – abide within. I believe the American Dream is largely a male one. Men have expectations to be wealthy, successful and healthy with a family lineage. Men in positions of power are often the heads of their households and heads of business. This coupled with the physical models defined by the military and sports industry sculpt the ideal form of American masculinity – a successful, handsome, intelligent man with upward mobility.

I believe the stereotypical male constructs shape narrow views of what men should be. The constructs pressure men to dress, behave, act and treat others in specific ways. In our

current system, white males like myself are born into a patriarchal position of privilege with partisan advantages over the rest of the population. The ideologies have accrued, creating a competitive system of winners and losers.

The win-all/lose-all competitiveness that results from the desire to attain an ideal has created a masculinity that is hegemonic in nature. Although hegemonic behavior is not embraced by the entire white male population, it is prevalent in many of its facets. The hegemonic mindset is an exalted and intentional way in which men legitimize constructed inequality.<sup>xv</sup> It is embraced almost entirely by white heterosexual males seeking to justify oppression and subordination of others whether they be women or other marginalized populations. Hegemony marginalizes “others” through essentializing. Essentializing occurs when people are coded by association to their physical bodies and expectations of them are derived by deficiency based upon this process.<sup>xvi</sup> “Those benefitting from inequality have an interest in defending it, while those who bear the costs have an interest in ending it.”<sup>xvii</sup> The people in positions of power and privilege seek to maintain power at all costs. As a result, hegemony fluidly moves through American media, politics, business and culture. Hegemony largely perpetuates through the expectations and cultural norms adopted by the United States. Through the assertion of control, gender and social inequality spawn. Inequality shifts the balance of power within the culture to create a socialized self-reproduction of patriarchy, and fabricates a patriarchal society, which reinforces hegemonic masculinity.<sup>xviii</sup>

I hope my work sparks conversation about the toxicity of American masculinity mentioned above. Toxic masculinity encompasses more than just hegemony. It also deals with other types of masculine gender roles that negatively affect the population and reinforce dominance. I aim to raise the viewer’s consciousness of the negative effects of toxic masculinity



as seen in American males. As an American male, I have found that a complex array of behaviors, traits, mindsets and societal pressures have subconsciously shaped me and the males around me into a particular type of man. I have felt the need to be physically, mentally and financially competitive. I strive for success, job stability, a family, financial wealth and an ideal physical appearance.

Due to the impact these oppressive systems have had on my life, it has become extremely important for me to deconstruct and dismantle what it means to be male in the United States. The vicious cycle of marginalization, subordination and inequality exists because of hegemonic expectations that subliminally pressure American boys to become the wrong type of man. Males operating within social structures of white supremacy, capitalism and patriarchy are compelled to become toxic men and to compete for status by signifying masculine practices through manhood acts aimed at the assertion of control. They do this by evoking deference, and resist being controlled. In this sense, gender is not a matter of play, but a matter of power, life and death.<sup>xix</sup> The goal of my work challenges gender stereotypes and expectations.

In the work “Odd Ball (Fig. 4),” I have assembled a repetitive pattern of black blimpus forms. The shapes were individually laser cut excavated from a plywood sheet. Each piece was rolled up with black printmaking ink, carefully arranged on paper and rolled through a press to finalize the image. The work speaks to change the current masculine mindset. The blimpus forms face the same direction, uniformly in size and spacing except for one. One of the shapes faces backwards and goes against the grain of the constructed norm. The ‘odd ball’ differs from its neighbors and represents the need for conscious change on the individual level. I place myself in the context of the piece by attempting to perform the act of breaking the pressures of conformity and view the work as a self-reflective awakening.

I am not alone in my venture to dismantle the monolithic hegemonic male. In an exhibition in New York City in March 2017 entitled “ManUp!,” an array of artists displayed work challenging masculinity in America. The show included artists such as Marshall Astor, Ryan Caruthers (Fig. 5), Cassils, Christopher Dacre, Amy Elkins (Fig. 6), Steven Frost, Pilar Gallego, Oree Holban, Wynne Neilly, Conrad Ruiz, Devan Shimoyama (Fig. 7) and Scott Vanidestine. Roman Stollenwerk curated the exhibition.<sup>xx</sup> The artists tackle toxic masculinity through the creation of staged photography, prints and family memorabilia. Along with my interests, these artists are conceptually attempting to break down issues of gender and stereotypical male constructs.

Ryan Caruthers’ photograph “Tryouts, Boxing (Fig. 4),” portrays a shirtless white teenage boy from the chest up. The teenager’s half-lit face stares directly at the viewer while sweat sparkles across his face and drips from his short, curly brown hair. Blood drips from his nose to his lips. His cheeks are red and swollen. His face appears defeated and exhausted yet strangely content. The plain white backdrop shifts all of the attention to the boy’s body and face. I believe the image speaks to expectations of toughness that starts at a very young age. The photograph addresses the societal expectations to be physical, competitive and violent. His face seems exhausted by the expectation to behave this way, yet also unable to sit outside of it. I can attest to the expression of the boy’s face and the emotional fatigue that follows conformity to societal pressures. Through materials and symbols, my work engages viewers in less obvious and more explorative ways.

## MATERIALS AND SYMBOLS

I compose my work with a variety of materials layered on top of one another which allows each piece to enter the three-dimensional plane. For the matrixes, I obtain large mass-

produced construction materials in bulk such as drywall, plywood, insulation foam and particle-board. All can be found in a hardware store. The 4 x 8 foot materials require large trucks, trains and boats to transport. The strong and sturdy building materials make up the foundations of the structures they create. The labels and stamps indicate the engineered performance to dictate the value of the individual materials. The characteristics of these materials conform to set standards, and serve as a metaphor for stereotypical masculinity. I use saws, hammers and drills to destroy the matrixes' physical make-up despite their ruggedness and strength. By doing so, I can expose the interior of these soft and fragile materials to speak metaphorically to the tough exterior facades of many men with fragile, and sensitive interiors.

I gather the remnants and incorporate the different shattered materials together. The reflective layer of insulation foam, the paper-like coating of drywall, the smooth surfaces of plywood and the textured surface of particle board resemble a thin layer of skin. As I impact the material with the tools, irreparable damage unveils the inner flesh of the individual materials to exemplify my view that even the toughest of males often have soft, malleable interiors. Intriguingly, men commit suicide 3.53 times more often than women. In 2016, middle aged white males accounted for 70 percent of the suicides in America.<sup>xxi</sup> The high suicide rate possibly correlates with the immense pressures to be an ideal male, though few fit the unrealistic stereotype.

Throughout my work, I paint and screen print symbols to add another layer of metaphor to the matrix. Symbols represent objects, functions, practices and processes. Simple objects can represent complex ideas as universal markers. Humans use symbols to represent spoken or written words of language. Symbols can be a term, name or picture familiar in daily life that possesses specific connotations in addition to their conventional and obvious meaning.<sup>xxii</sup> I

incorporate reoccurring symbols in my work (the “Blimpus,” protein jugs, and spotted hyena) as metaphors for masculinity and manliness. The symbols reference imagery of pop culture to metaphorically target the viewer with everyday objects just like Rauschenberg’s notion of the vernacular glance.

## BALLOONS

Most adolescents love balloons. Our culture sees them as a reward, a way to mark another year of life or as a condolence for someone in pain. Balloons represent innocence. They can be transformed into a variety of representational entities because they come in all shapes and sizes. I utilize the standard cultural functions of the balloon in my work as a symbol to humorously mock stereotypical masculinity.

When I was a teenager, some friends and I bought another friend a birthday cake on our way to his house party. We picked out a plain chocolate cake so we could put our own frosting design on it. I suggested the design should be a penis and we had a competition to see who could draw the funniest one – a common activity among teenage boys. As my turn approached, I noticed the birthday balloons brimming from his mailbox. I decided to disguise the penis as a balloon so the adults would not detect the distinct image of the penis. Of all the designs, we decided to draw my frosting penis on the cake.

The symbol of the penis resurfaced later in my artistic career for unknown reasons. I initially used the symbol to poke fun at male artists who have dominated their genres throughout history, artists like Renee Magritte and his work “The Treachery of Images (Fig. 8).” At one point in my studio, I painted the balloon penis, which I coined as the ‘blimpus (Fig. 9),’ and incorporated the text ‘this is a balloon’ beneath it. At that point, the blimpus began to make sense as a symbol of masculinity. Throughout art history, males have dominated the art world through

gallery representation and sales even though females make up 51% of visual artists and 50% of MFA graduates.<sup>xxiii</sup> Although female artists' gallery representation has been improving in recent years, they only make up 30% of gallery-represented artists and have a 19% wage gap with male artists. Not only are female artists' numbers of success staggeringly shy of male artists, only 24% of large operation gallery directors and owners are females.<sup>xxiv</sup> The blimpus pokes fun at the masculine dominated art world by referencing a celebrated work by Magritte.

Flaccid balloons must be blown up to reach their desired state. I relate the balloon to the inflation of the male ego and the literal inflation of the rising penis. Rubber balloons have similar properties to unoccupied condoms. If a balloon or condom pops, it becomes useless. In my imagery, I depict the fragile blimpus to portray masculine ego and emotion on the brink of its demise. I incorporate the blimpus in different shapes, sizes, colors and levels of definition using a variety of techniques.

## PROTEIN JUGS

In my artwork, I visually represent a specific hyper masculine demographic within contemporary American society called "Bro Culture" through the use of protein jugs. The term "Bro Culture" itself is a slang generalization defining a distinct type of male populous. Urban Dictionary defines Bro Culture as:

Where bro-hams, Bros, guys in groups interacting with each other (often in the work place) on the basis of suppressing their own insecurities about their masculinity by degrading women in a hope that they look big, tough and without emotions. Among many men this is almost an unconscious interaction past a certain age.<sup>xxv</sup>

Males who fit into the "Bro" stereotype often use "locker room banter" when they speak to each other. Bros flock in packs to the gym where they can be spotted pumping iron, grunting,

howling at females and competing with one another to see who can lift the most weight. They use language like “nut up, pussy and bitch” to refer to one another while working out. Bros commonly make fun of other gym patrons. The competitiveness of sports culture contributes directly to this type of machoism. Sports culture leaves the field and enters college campuses, fraternities and gyms.

Protein jugs perfectly encapsulates “bro culture.” Consumers purchase protein for personal physical enhancement to bulk up their muscles. The variety of brands and the language used by the manufacturers reinforce hegemony and competition. Popular protein brands use titles like Muscle Milk, Combat, Commander, Whey, and Elite (Fig. 10) in large bold letters across their products. Companies that produce these sports nutrition protein powders have a current net worth of 16 billion dollars.<sup>xxvi</sup>

I use protein jugs to add another three-dimensional ingredient to my imagery. I make their specificity unrecognizable by casting them in white plaster or by covering them with white ceiling texture spray paint (which eludes to semen splatter and sexual masculinity). In the work “Follow the Leader (Fig. 11),” I incorporate the white textured protein jugs as a base or structural support for a large-scale painting on drywall. The painting depicts a massive pack of uniform screen printed hyenas running westward together towards a lone alpha leader. The composition of the hyenas speaks to the subconscious pressures the ideological systems place upon me as an individual to crave for and eventually achieve the ideal representation of a man. The protein jugs aid the piece by speaking directly to the ideal alpha male in American culture.

I gravitated towards a transgender artist named Cassils from “Man Up!” They have achieved international recognition for rigorous engagement with body as a form of social sculpture and performance art. Cassils’ body has been transformed by extreme physical work

out regimes and their artwork speaks to shared experiences of violence, struggle and survival.<sup>xxvii</sup> In their own artist statement, Cassils describes their work as “juxtaposing the immediacy, urgency and ephemerality of live performance against constructed acts for camera. Bashing through boundaries, I perform transgender not as a crossing from one sex to another but rather as a continual process of becoming, a form of embodiment that works in a space of indeterminacy, spasm and slipperiness.”<sup>xxviii</sup> I believe Cassils’ work embodies the ideal sculpt of man, which is ironic due to Cassils transgender nature. Without research and knowledge of Cassils’ work, the irony could go by undetected. Their work powerfully sheds light onto the oppressive gender systems in American culture.

In Cassils’ image “Fast Twitch/Slow Twitch (Fig. 12),” they photograph the ideal body type of a muscular, shirtless American male in a reclined pose gazing at the viewer. Makeup covers the model’s face and they wear a blonde curly wig to give them a feminine sexualized appearance. Cassils leaves out their nipples and breasts to make their sex ambiguous and androgynous. The image starkly confronts viewers and keeps them present as they try to decipher the artist’s sex and gender. There are no outside clues given to the viewer other than strong, built musculature, makeup, a wig and the facial features.

### THE SPOTTED HYENA

I utilize one of the most intriguing mammals on Earth in my work – the spotted hyena. At first look, it is confusing to many what category of genus the spotted hyena falls into. Some people think hyenas look dog-like. Other people think they have big-cat features. A hyena’s appearance and body structure vastly differs from domesticated animals. Unlike traditional male-dominated American communities, the female hyenas or ‘matriarchs’ lead communes by providing for the pack.

Female hyenas have a larger stature than the less aggressive males which allow females to dominate their packs, lead hunting parties and protect their young. The female spotted hyena's clitoris' shape and external location strangely resembles the males' sex organ. The visual similarities are so close that early naturalists believed that female spotted hyenas did not exist.<sup>xxix</sup> The females' external reproductive organs are the location of male penetration and also the birth canal. Because of this biology, we have to consider the difficulties involved with this species' reproduction. Christine Drea, a reproductive biologist from Duke University, stated, "The female's unique genital physiology also presents major mating problems for the male, who must awkwardly insert his penis into the clitoris positioned well forward beneath the female's body; furthermore, to overcome this complication of male insertion, the males have evolved adaptations to aid successful copulation, including a long, angled penis with small spines at the tip."<sup>xxx</sup>

The sexual reproductive act and birth process for these animals sounds extremely painful and traumatic for the females, but it marks only the beginning of tragedy for the matriarchs. Due to their small clitoral birth canal, many females and/or their pups die during birth.<sup>xxxi</sup> Each rare chance of life that persists is essential to the females and the pack. Conceptually, I strive for the symbol of the hyena to be a stand-in metaphor for change and gender equality. Their biologically androgynous appearance metaphorically speaks to human bodies, what it is to be human and stereotypes around sex and gender.

For the large sculpture "Gazers (Fig. 13)," I laser cut three hyenas from plywood. Each differently orientated hyena rests upon a painted environment composed of particle board, cast protein jugs and stacked insulation foam. The hyenas are painted gesturally with gray-toned house paints. Their eyes are painted with yellow street paint filled with reflective glass beads.



The tallest stands in the middle at almost eight feet tall while the other two flank low to the left and right. Their glowing eyes and large bodies evoke a sense of fear, inferiority and shock for the viewers. Different sized blimpus forms make up the hyenas' spots. "Gazers" encapsulates all of the symbols utilized in my work into an extensive and confrontational piece that forces the viewers' engagement. The combined symbols conceptually display and challenge aspects of masculinity through the materials and application.

Although "Gazers" and Cassils' photograph aim to exploit and deconstruct masculinity, these pieces approach masculinity in vastly different ways. "Gazers" focuses on symbolic metaphors and layers of materials while Cassils' work is more overt. Cassils' message is clearer, more concise and effective while "Gazers" requires further investigation for understanding. Both works also have a humorous backbone that support the way the work operates and resonates.

## HUMOR

Sarcasm and humor dictate how I view the world. I cope with reality and mask my insecurities through humor. I connect with people through jokes as an icebreaker in conversations. I am aware that people view jokes as a very masculine practice; however, throughout my life cracking jokes has always been a tradition with the men of my family. I find humor in the materials I choose and the ways I construct my imagery, even though I am being intentionally critical and serious. The humor in my work reflects my personality – sarcastic, critical, loose and explorative. American artist Adam McEwen believes that "art that has no humor is art that has no humanity."<sup>xxxiii</sup> Humans live in a chaotic existence where tragedy happens to us daily. We have all bared witness to unspeakable acts of other people. Humor is my only way of coping with the horrible things that have happened to me, loved ones and people

I have never and will never meet. Contemporary painter Christopher Doyle said, “If you cannot find tremendous humor in the everyday, the sadness becomes overwhelming.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> The words of Doyle resonate deeply within me and have been applied in my practice.

Working with dark and disturbing concepts relating to intentional masculine dominance, patriarchy and oppression, I feel that the most approachable way to have my work walk in the world is through humor. Creating and layering in this way offers room for viewer interpretation and investigation instead of one-off, simplified and overtly shocking images. This type of work definitely holds legitimacy, but I believe it doesn’t seep into viewers’ minds to formulate continual dialog. By creating metaphors, puns and jokes, my work intends to have a lasting impression that reoccurs long after the viewer has seen it. I incorporate puns in my titles to hint at the underlying themes of each individual artwork and offer an apparent tongue-in-cheek tone.

In the work “Skyscape (Fig.14),” I took a large sheet of blue drywall and painted an elaborate pattern of blimpus forms in white to create a non-traditional landscape above a Gold’s Gym. The orientation of the drywall challenges the historic idea of landscape painting by being vertical. The verticality of the work towers over the viewer and puts them in an awkward interaction with the work much like being at a gym around much stronger and bulk individuals. The surface of the drywall has been punched and hammered through to speak to the violent nature of “bro-culture” and steroid abuse. Two protein jugs flank the painting and add a three-dimensional component of metaphoric humor through symbols.

I believe that laughter is one of the most imperative reactions a human being can have in relationship to the world around them. Marcel Duchamp stated, “Funny works of art have immediate visceral impact: Laughter is one of the most primal physical relations we have as humans. Complex meanings and layers reunite laughter with the conceptual.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Every one of

us has a sense of humor. Even though a joke can be dark, in bad taste or drab, a subtle smile or giggle can physically and mentally alter our emotions. Some jokes are complex and fall short, missing the target. I feel that this is a necessary aspect of understanding humor. Not everyone understands the jokes, similar to how artwork interests its viewer. Some art patrons only care about aesthetics while others discard imagery all together in favor of content.

Humor allows me to challenge gender stereotypes and dissect toxic masculinity through the ambiguity of forms, layering of materials and application of paint and ink. By combining these elements in bizarre ways and by using flashy colors and repetitive forms, the work critiques what it means to be a man through unconventional fine art painting techniques. The materials, functionality, subject matter and imagery raise awareness of toxic masculinity and its devastating effects of oppression and displacement in the United States. My work's uncanny nature of symbols and material utilizes humor to reach a broader audience through reward and personal discovery.

## CONCLUSION

American culture needs to step back from the patriarchal privilege of white males and its toxic affects upon masculinity and the rest of society. We live in a digital age that has surpassed Rauschenberg's notion of the vernacular gaze. Television, magazines, the Internet and smart phones give immediate access to countless imagery bombardment. The media flood our devices with advertisements and symbols that put ample amounts of pressure on the American male to conform to an idealized stereotypical way of living. Ultimately, our current political, economic and religious structures dominated by white males reinforce inequality and oppression. By layering symbols and materials, my work dissects what it means to be a man. It raises conscious questions in the viewer about their own behaviors and attitudes and those of their friends,

families, co-workers and contemporaries. Flowing from personal experience, my work targets the viewers on an individual level and strives to spark an inner dialog using pop culture and sarcasm as access points.

As part of the patriarchal structure, I feel a calling and obligation to use my voice to bring these issues to light through an artistic platform. The patriarchal systems have regrettably warped and corrupted my world view without my immediate awareness. At times I feel that the system has defeated me even though I have lived on the privileged side of the constructed patriarchal system. I continue to witness boys and men morph and mold into entities which have toxic relationships with society. Without an awakening, I fear that hegemonic behaviors could get proportionately worse. The ideologies and systems in place in America are not only failing the oppressed, they are a disservice to everyone. I am a white, heterosexual, privileged man who has participated in the ideologies that reinforce hegemony. I have noticed the effects upon myself. My skin and flesh are soft and malleable. I am brimming with complex emotions. Through my body and mind, I create confident work that aims to become a beacon of light in the darkness.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Adam Jones, "Martyriarch," House paint, Aerosol, Acrylic, Insulation Foam, Drywall, Gold Leaf, Construction Adhesive, Wood and Screws on Drywall, 8' x 4' x 3"

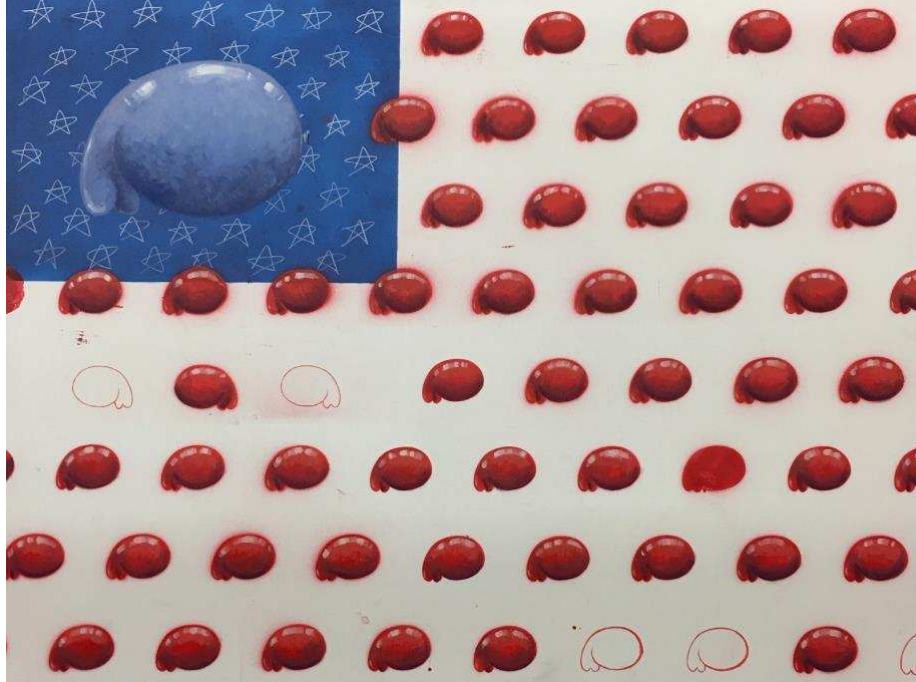


Figure 2. Adam Jones, "Flag," 2017, Aerosol and Acrylic on Canvas, 3' x 4'



Figure 3. Adam Jones, "Seek," 2017, House Paint, Screen Print, Aerosol, Ink, Carved Wood, and Gesso on Insulation Foam, 5' x 8'

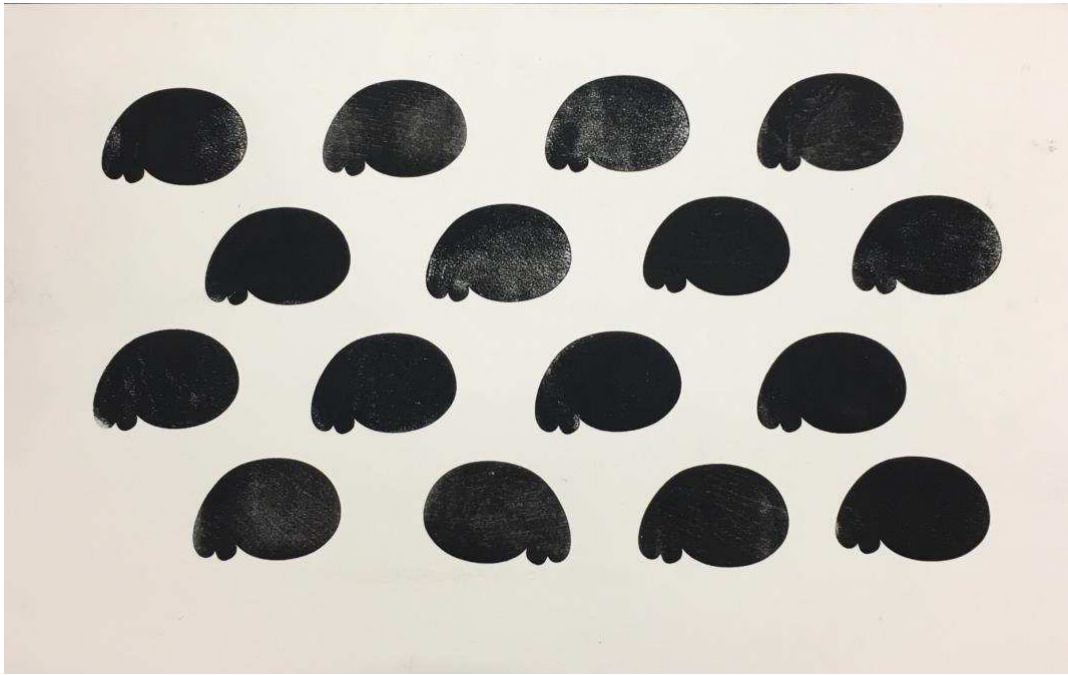


Figure 4. Adam Jones, "Odd Ball," 2017, Multiple Laser Cut Baltic Birch Plywood Wood Blocks on Paper, 14" x 22"



Figure 5. Ryan James Caruthers, from "*Tryouts, Boxing*," 2015, archival pigment print, 36 x 30 inches



Figure 6. Amy Elkins, “Danseur, Lucas, Age 12, 6th Year in Royal Danish Ballet School, Copenhagen,” 2012, archival inkjet print, 30 x 40 inches

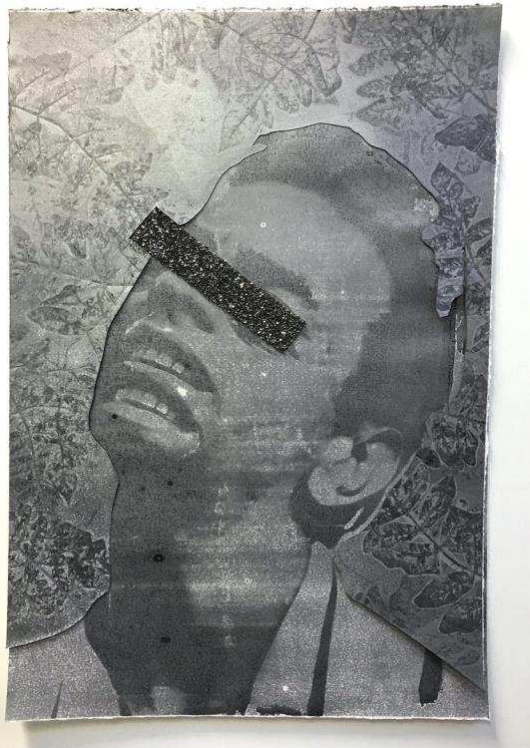


Figure 7. Devan Shimoyama, “Idol Eclipsed (Johnny),” 2016, monotype print with collage and glitter, 36 x 25 inches





Figure 8. Rene Magritte, "The Treachery of Images," 1929, Oil on Canvas, 25" x 37"

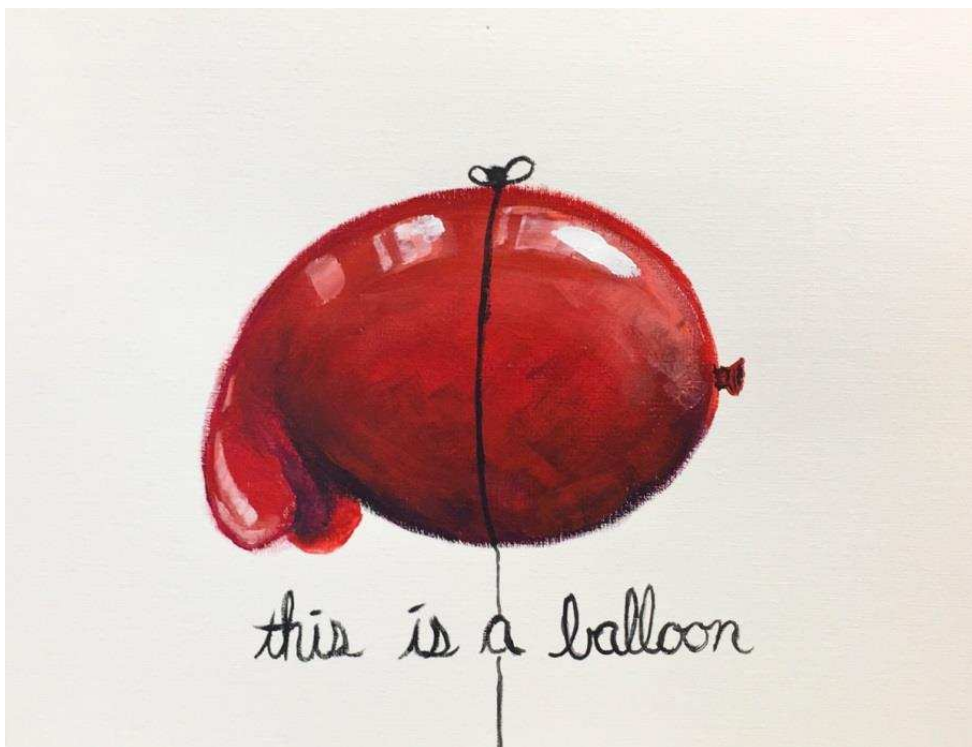


Figure 9. Adam Jones, "This is a balloon," 2016, Acrylic on Canvas, 10" x 14"

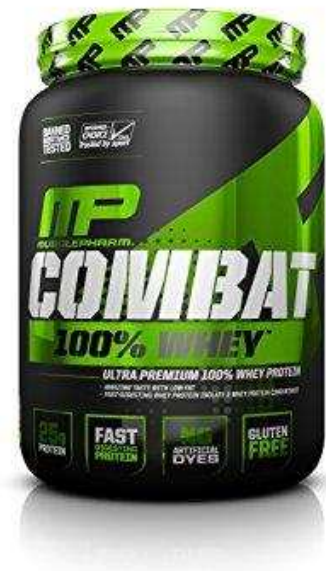


Figure 10. Example Protein Jug – MP Combat Whey Protein



Figure 11. Adam Jones, “Follow the Leader,” 2017, House Paint, Ink, Screen Print, and Aerosol Ceiling Texture on Drywall with Protein Jug, 5’ x 8’



Figure 12. Cassils, still from “Fast Twitch//Slow Twitch,” 2011, two channel video installation, TRT 11:08

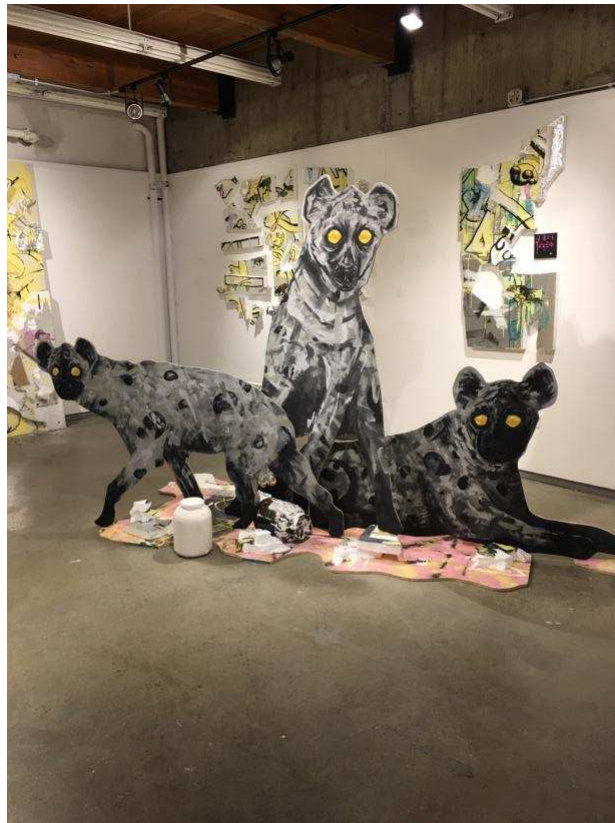


Figure 13. Adam Jones, “Gazers,” 2017, Mixed Media Sculpture on Particle Board, 8’ x 10’ x 4’



Figure 14. Adam Jones, "Skyscape," Acrylic and Laser Cut Wood on Drywall, with Protein Jugs, 2016, 8' x 5'

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