MAKING IT LIKE A MAN!

["Making Art Like a Man." *Making it Like a Man: Canadian Masculinities in Practice*. Christine Ramsay, ed. Wilfred Laurier U. Press: Waterloo, ON. 2011, 55-77.]

Making it Like a Man! is the exhibition I curated for the Mackenzie Art Gallery to accompany the conference of the same name.[1] These paintings, sculptures, photographs, and prints by a dozen male artists were selected from eighty submissions and forty studio visits in six provinces. No exhibition of contemporary Canadian masculinities can be exhaustive, only provocative. My intent was to survey the scene as deeply as time and budget allowed and present a sampling. The more than eighty works range from self-conscious interrogations of masculinity to more performative expressions. All provide insights. This text is condensed revision of the exhibition essay.

To *be a man* is to conform to social expectations assigned to male bodies. These requirements vary across cultures and over time, but there are some consistent characteristics. Traditional gender differentiation is founded on the concept that men should not behave like women. If this premise is accepted, then all sorts of ideas and behaviours seem to follow *naturally*. If women act one way, then men must act contrarily. If women are passive, men must be aggressive. Men who are not aggressive must be *like* women. Perhaps they are gay. Well, if not gay, they certainly are not-quite-men. And so the *logic* goes.

This division of qualities makes some practical sense. Binary thinking simplifies the management of social relations. However, maintaining a uniform masculinity can cause personal distortion. Being one's self and being a man are not identical. Tensions arise, for example, when a male is required to *act like a man* or *take it like a man* when those behaviours contradict their personal feelings, preferences, ethics, basic logic, or the instinct for self-preservation.

Gender division, as the foundation of patriarchy, favours 'masculine' traits. And, *naturally*, those with preferred qualities should rule and receive more goods.[2] Boys in the patriarchal tradition are raised to have an (unearned) sense of superiority over girls, and even women. However, attitudes are slowly changing in Canadian society. Faced with evidence of the inaccuracy of this doctrine, many boys and men are re-evaluating gender

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[1] The exhibition, "Making it Like a Man!" ran June 5-August 22, 2004. "Making it Like a Man! Masculinities in Canadian Arts and Cultures," the conference, ran June 10-12, 2006.

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[2] Many sources can be cited here. A favourite is Dale Spender. *ManMade Language*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

construction. I found evidence of this shift in my curatorial research: I did not find any artists producing images of iconic or celebratory masculinity. All were ironic, deconstructive, wounded, reflective, perplexed, or otherwise troubled.

FRANCIS B. SIM GALLERY[3]

WALTER MAY

Walter May's *Knockout* is a row of 105 hammers hung by their claws on a 2 x 4 beam set high on the wall. The worn steel heads face forward; the handles hang in various lengths. Flames have blackened the wooden handles. Some are scorched; others are deeply charred, twisted and broken. The phallic queue evokes the experience of being measured and compared. These metaphoric tools appear exposed, humiliated, they have endured trial by fire. They remind me of men in a line-up: worn out soldiers, prisoners, athletes? Are they waiting to be chosen, for a firing squad, for employment? The title suggests a violent contest in which, one by one, combatants are eliminated.

May's sculpture is the progeny of Duchampian readymades, Arte Provera, and other art practices that resuscitate abject things. Is this a masculine quality? I don't know. But I do know a lot of men who compulsively rescue and fix derelict things. My grandfathers were legendary for their home workshops which were stuffed with recovering appliances, and parts becoming useful wholes. This activity has grown to hyperbolic proportions for my recently retired uncle. These men not only seem to need to rescue but also to be useful in a specific way: to have meaning with others through things.

There is an expression of longing in *Knockout* for an authentic relationship to tools and craft. Many western, urban men are estranged from manual labour yet still see their masculinity dove-tailed with making and repairing. They often keep well stocked home workshops. Even if little actual work goes on in there, it is a token of masculinity.

There are mere tools and then there are tools with personalities and history. A wood handle yields to a habitual grip and is patinaed by its owner's sweat. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger explains that we only realize the full nature of a hammer when it breaks. When it works, tools are invisible. They conform to their function as part of an (almost) unconscious action. A broken tool is not itself, and its new nature is not easy to determine. We must examine the thing, turn it over in our hands. We rehearse the tool in its old ways to determine not only the nature of the damage but also the nature of the tool itself.[4] This rehearsal requires us to 'get our hands dirty', to interrupt work and relate to the object both intellectually and sensually as it is and how it ought to be.

On one hand, *Knockout* reminds us of the fragility of flesh. Even the most virile body eventually falls apart. We all return to carbon. The sculpture evokes distressed bodies damaged by external forces—hammered, knocked-out. These broken bodies bear witness and demand address. On the other hand, *Knockout* also critiques the construction of men as tools, objects defined by their use. For me, May, the most senior artist of the group,

[3] The works are grouped according to the galleries they appeared in.

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seems to be expressing anxiety about post-employment identity. If a man identifies himself with his work, who is he when he is unemployed or retires?

DEAN DREVER

I am both fascinated and repelled by Dean Drever's stainless steel *Instructional Bat Series #2*. He seduces us with shiny luxury goods and then smacks us with the fine print. The bats are engraved with 'witty' cracks. Some are movie tough guy lines: "Gather up what is left of your teeth and leave." A few hint at homoerotic panic: "We cannot continue to meet under these circumstances;" "If you can understand this you are too goddamn close." But my skin crawls when I read lines that could come from a real, domestic abuser: **"**The only thing you have ever been able to understand;" "The only way it makes sense to you;" "You've never been very good at listening;" "You have not left me any other choices."

Drever pairs the rank aspects of with the pretty surface that gilts it, and he shows the potential violent life of domestic objects. There is a sinister creative intelligence behind the design of a *stainless*-steel bat meant for beating people. A weapon designed for criminal acts that is both *stain*less and yet retains fingerprints is the very embodiment of an ambivalent object, and perhaps an ambivalent ethical position.

The *Instructional Bats* imply a perverted imaginary that seeks malignant possibilities, for either for defense or offence, wherever it looks. These cynical objects embody a basic distrust of the world and one's self. They present civilization as a thin veneer over our true, aggressive natures. Perhaps Drever view this perspective of violence as neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but realistic.

There is something cathartic and instructive about exposing private language: dark comedy can voice unspeakable experience. But Drever is not a reformer but an instructor who shares street knowledge like an old-school rapper (N.W.A.). His ambivalence toward violence is chillier than his chrome plated knuckle-dusters. When he says, in his artist statement, that society is hypocritical when it deems state sanctioned cruelty acceptable while condemning similar tactics used by street gangs, I have the feeling that he is not arguing for less violence, just less hypocrisy.

For those not living with the imminent threat of violence, the *Instructional Bats* may offer a vicarious thrill. Like gangsta rap, they present a polished taste of the thug's life without the broken bones, and the psychological scars caused by betrayal and the grinding stress of anticipation. But, also like gangsta rap, the bats offer young men in violent (under) worlds a practical guide to its codes and dangers. Drever plays Virgil; he is here to describe hell, not reform it.

MARK DUDIAK

Mark Dudiak's photograph, *Dudiak CAN (After the Alkaholiks*), is a tableau of the artist and his friends drinking and breaking beer bottles over their heads in imitation of the cover of The Alkaholiks 1997 album *Likwidation*. The artist explains:

Growing up in Saskatoon during the 90s, my friends and I followed the trend of young white men who chose to express teenage angst through product association, particularly with the image of black, urban rap musicians. We of course were not marginalized in any true sense of the word, but we found a message, which seemed to condone our general lack of ambition, and adolescent pre-occupation with fighting, partying, and minor, generally destructive crime. I can remember sitting in cold parking lots during the winter, on coffee breaks from some minimum wage job, smoking a joint and listening to groups such as the *Alkaholiks*, and honestly believing that what they said was true and that it was a representation of my life and possible future. There was seldom much reflection upon the odd scenario of a bunch of white, middle class, prairie kids believing that we were in the same position as poor, legitimately angry black men from Los Angeles.

This pre-packaged cultural set of aspirations, produced far away in a very different cultural environment came to form an aspect of my young identity, and is still present today. I think that the self-reflection encouraged by contemporary art has helped me to recognize that I may not be as completely of my own making as I might like to believe. Feminism is one of the routes that I turn to better understand my identity. This might seem like a paradox or a play to appear as a "sensitive" (read more desirable) man, but I'm specifically drawing on the critical feminism, which emerged in the mid seventies. Far from man bashing, I think that this form of academic inquiry and social action was more concerned with examining social relations, not only between men and women but subjective internal relations. Its concern with discovering why certain beliefs might be held, determining whether social behaviour was inborn or learned and if negative, divisionist beliefs could be changed has contributed a great deal to our understanding of self.[5]

CRAIG LE BLANC

Men watch broadcast sports, in part, for allegories of masculinity. These impressive images derive their power by pairing noble traits with baser drives within archetypal narratives in a compressed time and compact, theatrical space. The stories simplify life into binary contests, win/lose matches constructed to build and release tension in a regulated format. Add the mass, men-with-men ritual, and you have a very successful, form of masculine modeling. Sports is the democratic, men's lodge of the media age.

Sports narratives compose masculinity as heroic, vital, competitive and aggressive. The dominant themes are the tensions between comradeship and individuality, violence and pain, victory and loss, the love of the game and money. The great taboos of these homosocial narratives are homosexuality and women. Few media spectacles reinforce the dominant capitalistic, homophobic and sexist agenda as effectively as do sports media.

[5] All uncited quotations are from artist statements and interviews with the artists named in the section where the quotation appears.

For a man to choose not to participate in this circuit is to jeopardize his status as a *real* man.

Craig Le Blanc's installation, *I don't play* is a display of sports equipment—hockey pucks, ball caps, sweatbands, golf towels and badges. Each impressed with the slogan *I don't play*, rendering the items ironic and impotent. If you use the puck, for example, then you *do* play—but then it is no longer an *object d'art*. If you don't play with it, it may be a work of art but disabled as sports equipment. It is a wounded proposition.

Le Blanc's game reifies sport as a presence and inscribes alternatives as absence. That is, in his display, *playing* is a positive attribute signified by the presence of sports objects. *Not-playing* is signaled by the text, but no alternatives are named. The workplaces sports at the center of attention even while rejecting it; ironically, this reinforces the idea that sport is what counts. If being a man means playing, or at least watching— *I Don't Play* does not hint what a guy does if not sports, or what he may be if he refuses this way of being-a-man.[6]

Art that endeavors to critique a dominant discourse can, paradoxically, end up supporting it. If the gesture is strictly formed as an alternative, the connection to what is being rejected might not be made. But if the mode rejected is stated—and especially if it is imitated, as it is here—then the artwork is caught within the dominant mode's signifying field. In other words, someone who wears the *I don't play* clothing line is a *player* in the sports commodity circuit. Even if the message is a rejection of that discourse, it *calls up* that mode and affirms its power (only the powerful are worthy of such satire).

My temptation is to read Le Blanc's work as a rejection of sports as a positive masculine mode. But, in fact, there is a more melancholic tone. He is not rejecting sports; after all, he *did* play:

> hockey, baseball, wrestling, and volleyball. I was a goalie, a pitcher/back catcher and a setter in volleyball. All the positions that are somewhat solo. I guess I liked the clutch positions, either being the hero or the goat. I am somewhat of a non-team player now, working solo and barely liking assistance. I quit at 18-19 because I had to get a job, and it would never have been a profession. Baseball was my best chance, and I blew my arm.

Perhaps *I don't play* is more of a statement of resignation: "I don't play; but I used to."

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[6] This problem arises when challenging any hegemonic discourse, and is a central feature of feminism and masculinities studies. We cleverly deconstruct problematic masculinities but are shy about positing better ways of being men. Few are willing to point out positive role models who are not just *troubling* masculine stereotypes. Championing particular men as good examples is always vulnerable to disappointment. But until academics step up to the plate (so to speak) with credible alternatives, we will be left in our meta-textual armchairs, critics not coaches.

Please Use Me is a hockey stick with those words carved into the blade. Le Blanc reads his work as symbolic of "the commodification of the athlete; the use of the athlete as an object and tool for big business. The objects of sport becomes irrelevant, even though they are objectifying sport." It's another tool made impotent. If you were to make a single slap shot, the thing would be ruined. The words resemble the thoughts every boy has while waiting to be chosen for a team. It is also a sense many men have of themselves—as tools defined by their utility.[7] This idea is summed up in the unforgettable *Slump*, a Daliesque wooden bat mounted perpendicular to the wall, but instead of jutting out it suddenly droops downward. *Slump* emphasizes the relationship between masculinity, sexuality and power/impotence.

NORTHERN CANADIAN OILS GALLERY

ANDREW SZATMARI

An unnamed young, white male poses for Andrew Szatmari, and us. He has short hair, and, except for lean sideburns, is clean-shaven. A thin metal chain rings his neck. Below his bare chest the thick band of his Joe Boxer underwear peeks out over low-riders. The instant camera's crude flash creates a hotspot that recedes toward the edges of the picture. The man was in the dark, is briefly illuminated, and then returns to the night.

He displays his body to attract sexual attention, but the gender codes are blended. His lean yet muscular build is obviously male, but his lack of body hair, coyly tilted head and slightly puckered mouth suggest femininity. He looks at the camera/photographer/viewer with a slightly averted face, as if to invite assessment. Some of Szatmari's other *Street Hustlers* are more confrontational. All send out subtle codes that intimate preferences, specialties, receptivity and limits.

There is an implied violence and a certain risk in these photographs and their acquisition. Men wandering the streets at night—the wrong look could lead to an attack. There is a tension in the poses between availability and readiness for defense or assault. Szatmari says that he uses an instant, disposable camera, in part, "for protection against expensive equipment being stolen, my being mugged, harmed."

Szatmari sees his work as a participatory performance, a fair exchange. He approaches his subjects, explains his project, and gives them "just enough money for them to say yes." Photographers pay models all the time. But when a man pays a hustler, it signals more than an aesthetic relationship. Szatmari is not a disinterested observer and does not see his art as a just a recording of one person by another: "I don't consider the work documentary. I don't believe that documentary exists within the context of art-photography." He says that he is "fascinated by hustlers," how they "view our interaction and my activity, how they interpret what I'm doing." This exchange is captured and passed to the viewer who becomes wound up in this relationship.

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[7] The positive and negative aspects of this concept are well documented throughout Susan Fauldi. "Utility Men." *Stiffed: the Betrayal of the American Man*, (New York: Perennial/HarperCollins, 1999).

Staring at young male bodies might feel exploitative. It may have you wonder: Isn't this young guy familiar with being lied to by older men with cameras?! What is the artist's real interest? Is this voyeurism, a hunting licensed granted by the title *artist*? The photographs give the straight male viewer a taste of what it is like to look at another man with sexual interest, and to be seen sexually by a man. In this sense, these are not only pictures of *Street Hustlers,* but, perhaps, aspects of ourselves.

DEREK DUNLOP
From the center of the small, untitled, black and white digital print an eight-year-old boy grins. He looks up into a camera, which, judging from the angle, is held by at adult. Superimposed on the boy's white shirt is a text from a mid-twentieth century primary school textbook. The lines include:

> Are you a boy or a girl?
> Is "Mary" a girl's name or a boy's name?
> Was your brother a girl when he was little?
> Was your mother a boy when she was little?
> Was your father's mother a girl or a boy?

These queries would have been innocuous to most people a few generations ago. On one level, the test is not about gender but was designed to test logic and comprehension. The correct answers were supposed to be unambiguous. But today this interrogation looks like an almost comically obvious effort to reinforce the traditional nuclear family and heterosexual norms. At a time when it is conceivable that your mother *could* have once been a boy, the answers to these questions are less stable than they once were.

> The photograph was taken at my grandparent's house at some family gathering. With one arm behind my back, I am hiding something, while at the same time I am pushing one hip forward. In this unstable gesture, I stare directly into the camera and smile unselfconsciously. It is the type of candid posturing that the camera would *never* catch me in today. It was taken before a gendered physicality had been socialized into my body; it is the easy smile before my discovery of shame and guilt.

Young Derek looks genuinely happy and at ease. He has composed himself into an expected representation, but one that does not seem to conflict with his self-image—a happy boy! However, seen twenty years later, and with the addition of the questions and the artist's statement, we might find a subtle twist in this re-presentation. The boy's *contrapposto* pose and hidden right arm hint of a coyness. By concealing some *thing* behind his back, the young Derek demonstrates self-consciousness; he knows that the *thing*, whatever it is, is not appropriate to this picturing. Even at that age, he performs an awareness that some things should be concealed, repressed, hidden from the family's gaze, and from the historical record (family album). What *it* was is probably not important. Now, as a family snapshot remade into a work of art, the hidden thing is a metaphor, a preterition that stands for "a gendered physicality…socialized into my body" and "my discovery of shame and guilt."

Not accidentally, there are two boys in the background. The younger one plays on the floor. The older boy is looking into a full-length mirror on the hall wall. These figures may refer to a moment of transition that the young Derek is passing through, from pre-gender formation (unselfconscious play) to a more self-conscious inscription (reading self image in the mirror). Interestingly, the secret hidden from the camera and us is available to them.

AFSHIN MATLABI

When I first glanced at Afshin Matlabi's self-portrait, *On Technologies of man's Sensuality,* I saw a grim-faced, naked man reclining on a sofa draped with a Persian rug. Strangely, a machine gun is strategically angled across his body. *That* photograph is a disturbing blend of macho sexuality and sinister gun culture. However, a second look reveals that the object is not a machine gun but a vacuum cleaner! Racist associations are deeply ingrained. I assumed that this artwork had to be, firstly, about race. I could not see it as, first, a play on gender.

On Technologies of man's Sensuality is a hilarious send-up of Western art history and gender expectations. Matlabi mixes a 19th century orientalist fantasy with a Playgirl centerfold, circa 1975. Unlike Ingres' rubber, languorous, pale, and shaved harem girls, Matlabi is alert, uncomfortable, dark, and male. His gaze is penetrative rather than receptive. It's an "are you talkin' to me" look that challenges the viewer. Even though he is in a feminized position, he manages to cloak himself in masculine authority. It is the physical attitude of a man making a boudoir photograph but is worried about it falling into the wrong hands (seen by another man).

Matlabi, for several years a househusband, explains:

> As I was vacuuming, I could feel the absurdity of the act. Sophisticated technologies created this machine to enable the other sex to clean the house. It is a strange reciprocation. I discovered the love affair, the obsession, between making and improving this machine and objectifying its use. Maybe that is how men express their sensuality. What needs saying, expressing, translates into a design, a power to suck, or ability to clean efficiently. Man's expression of sensuality is technology, and the vacuum cleaner is his common thread of understanding with the domestic world.

PEGGY WAKELING GALLERY

JEFF NACHTIGALL

Jeff Nachtigall's sprawling, six-panel *Schwarzenegger Shrine* is a cacophonous reminiscence of his youthful worship of that paragon of late 20th century celluloid masculinity. While there is some irony in the assemblage, it is primarily an *homage* to the iconic power of the can-do muscle man and his impact on the artist and his peers. Each panel is named after a Schwarzenegger movie—*Pumping Iron, Conan the Barbarian, Commando, Terminator, Predator*, and *Running Man*—spanning Nachtigall's youth.

Nachtigall paints on an old sign, a dismantled kitchen cupboard, cardboard and wood scraps, chipboard, and metal siding. There are stained sections, areas with dripped and slathered house paint, layers of handwritten text in acrylic, fine, painterly passages, scratches and violent gouges. From the tangle of lines and marks, accident and incident, cryptic word fragments emerge: “no more, no less; true story; looking for the silver lining; somewhere somehow, someone’s going to pay; all white people look alike; sucked like me; no good; sucker…” Some are movie tag lines. Others are insults or internalized rebukes. Figures also emerge. Self-made men untangle themselves from the marks and into form. They are funny: hieroglyphic profiles with phallic noses, over blown and misshapen bodies. Veins, or nerves, pulse across their flesh as a child’s approximation rather than as an illustration of anatomic fact. It’s a rogue’s gallery of buffoon he-men trying to hold on to their dignity.

Nachtigall may use derelict materials to suggest that the masculine styles he portrays are outmoded. But it is more likely that his project is resuscitative, “looking for the silver lining” in these macho types. He still seems to admire Arnold but is more aware of the consequences for young men who emulate him. Arnold once seemed above the fray, a mortal who earned his meat the old-fashioned way. Recent admissions that he, too, used steroids might be a discouragement to wannabes, or a prescription. Nachtigall seems to be sending an ‘approach with caution’ message.

Arnold and Nachtigall appear together in *Pumping Iron*. A muscleman poses on an Olympic platform. In the bottom right, a boy pokes his head into the composition. He looks, wide-eyed at the engorged body.

> In grade 11 [*Pumping Iron*] changed my life. After seeing it, I ran to the gym to work out. Muscles meant money, fame, power and girls. My friends and I would wake up at 5 am and work out for 3 hours before school and return to the gym after school for another 2 hours. We were obsessed with body image. We were taking all sorts of supplements: amino acids, weight gain powder, carbohydrates, and lactic acid inhibitors. Many of my friends were taking steroids like candy. Some were even taking human growth hormone! This obsession for the perfect body was a frightening experience. Stupid kids doing stupid things at an age when they believe they are immortal.

We only see the boy’s head. It is as if he only signifies when he views. Perhaps this man-in-formation is not worthy of a fuller representation until he imitates the body on display.

JEFFERSON LITTLE

Jefferson Little’s *Evo-Blaster 2000* is a giant pull-toy. Mounted on a cart with heavy-duty wheels is a wood, plastic and metal structure that features the lower part of a tyrannosaurus rex, two targets, and a huge ray gun with a row of four soldiers that bob up and down when the toy is pulled. Little’s sculptures and paintings are fun. They are not critical essays but appealing but disturbing confections. His toys seem the expressions of an extended adolescence.

Few modern men have had a signal experience that marked them as men. Traditional cultures signal the transition from boyhood to manhood through elaborate ceremonies. A result of this contemporary lack is that the boy-to-man transition can be protracted over many years, and, in some cases, old boys may never feel that they have been accepted into the company of men. Many young men do not know how and when to put away the toys of childhood and assume the tools of adulthood—masculinity becomes a perpetual and unresolved contest.

The sources for Little's works are hypertrophic comic book superheroes and weapons—popular masculinity, but an older version. The references are to childhoods from ten to sixty years ago. The artist even distresses *Evo-Blaster 2000* with dulling stains to make it appear old. He seems to want to construct a generalized and nostalgic male childhood. In my research, I came across many male artists who use antique sources of broadcast masculinity—sometimes from their own childhood, but often from their fathers' or grandfathers' youths. It was as if they were conducting an archeological dig to find the legitimate roots of maleness, or the source of where things went wrong.

A common theme in Little's work is aggression. The artist acts like the evil Sid in *Toy Story*. Both break and reassemble toys into cannibalistic hybrids that are more disturbing than funny. Sid's play is not only a symptom of his personal rage, but also an elaboration of the script written into boys' playthings. The reassembled toys are just hyperbolic expressions of that latent message.

However, Little may not be critiquing stereotyped masculinity but trying to inhabit and understand it symbolically. If play is a means to apprehend social roles, then these constructions might be an effort to gain control over masculinity, or just express what they feel like. The targets on *Evo-Blaster 2000*, and darts pinning a figure in one of the paintings, is interesting because while most toys and video games position the player as a shooter, many boys' nightmares and lived experience, is of being a target.

The *Evo-Blaster 2000* **i**s artificially aged to suggest that the viewer is in the future looking at an antique. Written across the target is: "It's Apoc-o-licious!" Little may be offering this toy as a humourous artifact of the turn of the millennium that will be as absurd to the future as Cold War duck-and-cover films are to us. However, the reference to the biblical end-of-days tied to the extinct dinosaur, the soldiers and ray guy, may be hinting that our continued socialization of boys into a culture of violence may end with extinction.

KEVIN FREIDRICH

A naked angel gazes out over her right shoulder from the polychrome relief sculpture, *Bass Acwards*. She tugs on a red ribbon attached to a poorly taxidermized pike that hangs from a branch at the center of the composition. A taut line runs from the fish to a hook held gingerly by a tanned man who reclines on the right. He wears a John Deere hat and sunglasses. A cigarette juts from his lips. The setting is bucolic, in the prairie gothic mode. The mid-ground is bright with straw and chickens. The background is dark—

perhaps a storm is rolling in. The wings, ribbon, fish, line, hooks, sunglasses, and cigarette are all real objects.

Kevin Freidrich explains: "*Bass Acwards* is an allegory of "fishing" and the ying/yang between men and woman, romantic and tactile. Both characters are attempting to help the fish; one pulling the stitches shut, the other [wanting to] release the fish, ironically opening the wound. Neither is making anything any better, but both are content with their endeavors. PS: I was quite bitter about relationships at the time."

In this allegory of romantic love, the fish represents the relationship as an objectified thing *between* lovers rather than as a relation. Instead of the conventional lovers trysting in the woods, this couple is incompatible and distant: she looks at us, while sunglasses shield his gaze. The root of this strained relationship may be in the way genders are figured. The woman is an unconvincing angel, she looks like an ordinary mortal with home made wings. Perhaps the man has tried to elevate her to celestial status only to be disappointed by her humanness.

The man holds the hook, the fish has the line; this reverses the usual scenario, it's *Bass Acwards*! Perhaps he is anxious about being *hooked* by a relationship, he wants to keep *fishing*. I really can't help but see phalluses everywhere in this show. Is the pike a wounded phallus/masculinity that the man wants to repair but the woman just wants to let go?

As Freidrich explains, the lovers are "content with their endeavors," their own way of doing things, but they aren't doing the fish/relationship any good. While they both want to save the fish/relationship, they can't get together on the best method. The difference in how they perform their compassion seems stereotypically gendered. He takes heroic, medical measures; she tries to relieve the immediate pain. While some may wonder why they cannot just get together and work this thing out, the artist seems more interested in inscribing a chasm between men and women as a 'just so' story. When women are constructed as angels and men as Huck Finns, how can you be anything but fatalistic about their being able to form a mature relationship?

DANIEL FISHER

Daniel Fisher's *Wounded War Pony* is a dilapidated boys' bicycle salvaged by the artist and transformed into a mechanical horse. It is more showpiece than functioning vehicle: the bike is missing a pedal, chain, front tire and rear wheel. It has, nevertheless, been outfitted with a horsehair tail and mane, and decorated with feathers, brightly coloured beads and leather tassels. The saddle is wrapped in rabbit fur. Screwed into the red frame are new metal parts that suggest a head, back, flanks and thighs. Striped paint on the nose and thighs, and other markings, indicate that the steed is prepared for battle.

On one hand, *Wounded War Pony* draws a continuity between urban First Nations boys on two-wheelers and their ancestors on horses. The bike becomes a stallion, the boy a warrior. The sculpture is about cultural survival. This vehicle is adopted and adapted by Fisher just as his ancestors adopted and adapted the horse from the first colonizers. On

the other hand, the resuscitation is melancholic. Despite his creative efforts, the transformation is incomplete. The horse/bike missing vital parts, and an arrow pierces its side.

Fisher reminds us that Aboriginal youth have both a proud and tragic history. This legacy is written on their bodies and continues to influence their actions and sense of self. *Wounded War Pony* teeters between optimism and pessimism. The sculpture could be read as a first step on a healing journey: the body is salvaged, the repairs begun, but there is still much to do. However, these initial treatments seem cosmetic. Time and money have been spent on decorating rather than on taking care of basic repairs. The result is a wounded body/soul decked in regalia.

This object embodies an ongoing crisis. How do contemporary Aboriginal boys and men compose themselves? Do they try to revive something of what has been actively discouraged, banned and beaten out of so many generations? Do they adapt, even assimilate into the dominant culture? It isn't really an either/or debate, but there is a struggle on both personal and social levels between maintaining traditional ways and swimming in the mainstream. Many devise ingenious ways to perform, adapt and balance both. Others remain wounded and unsure which way to turn.

BLAIR BRENNAN
Making it Like a Man! has its origins in *Men in Relation*, an exhibition curated by Robert Milthorp and Monte Greenshields for several Saskatoon artist-run centres (A.K.A. and the Photographer's Gallery) in 1993. I had a peripheral involvement with the event as a writer.[8] Blair Brennan was in both shows. His present contribution is an installation of things collected and gently altered. There is a large boy scout cap, belt, shirt and leather jacket, three army cots, a ring toss game, steer horns, two propane tanks, and three branding irons: all that leather, old canvas and metal—masculine territory. The embroidered shirt, hat, and cots that might hint of feminine labour are done by machine.

The branding iron and its mark is Brennan's obsession. It has a flexible power. I see it as a profound symbol for the mark-of-the-father. The long firm hot rod with the ability to imprint itself numerous times is a fine phallic and male fertility symbol. It is also, as he explains, a painful marker of territory and property. It is a sign of masculine patrimony, an inheritance that is a privilege as well as a burden. Much of Brennan's work is about pain and the possibility of redemption.

Shirts and Skins, the title alone sends shivers of humiliation up my spine. The words drag me back to junior and senior high school gym class. For some perverse reason, boys were divided into teams who wore *shirts* and those who were shirtless. "It always takes women longer to get the *shirts and skins* reference. I was one of those unfit, overweight boys (now an unfit, overweight man) praying to be a *shirt*." *Shirts and Skins* is a white T-shirt embroidered with the word *shirt*. Draped over top is a leather jacket branded *skins*.

[8] David Garneau. "Other Men." *BlackFlash*. Winter 1994. Issue 12, #4: 21-22.

Words can sear youthful flesh with indelible meanings like a brand. Or, more hopefully, some words burn less deeply and can (like our clothes) be outgrown. They may still be in the closet as a reminder, but they don't have the same power. *Shirts and Skins'* branded leather jacket may be a proxy for human flesh. Does it suggest that men must develop a thick skin to endure the taunts designed to *make men* of us?

Supplemental to the exhibition, I created a space for comments. On a large low table in a separate room was a suitcase, paper, envelopes and pens. Participants were invited to write "Impossible Letters," notes to men who had made positive or negative impacts on their lives. The envelopes were not sealed, so anyone could read them and respond. Most were filled with messages of love, some of anger; many more expressed regrets for missed opportunities to express themselves to men in their lives. The second supplement was a tool shed which was placed just outside the exhibition space. It was outfitted with a video camera and monitor. Participants were asked to talk about men in their lives. The often-poignant results were edited and played back during the exhibition.

Altogether, the exhibition and satellite events were very rewarding. I was self-conscious of the gaps and borders inscribed into my search and result. Some people wanted to see more work by marginalized men, by gay men, by women on masculinity, by transgendered people. All right. Just as my work responded to the *Men in Relation* show, I hope someone will respond to *Making it Like a Man!*

David Garneau