

Wood

A Thesis Submitted to the College of  
Graduate Studies and Research  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Masters of Fine Arts  
In the Department of Art and Art History  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

By

Kevin Bishop

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I love Indiana Jones. My work says as much – he was my first man crush (Fig 1). The whole idea appealed to my childhood sensibilities. Indiana was rugged and heroic; he was punching out Nazis left and right with satisfying thwacks. I grew up with dreams of learning how to swing on whips – I spent an entire week attempting to swing from tree to tree with a leather belt until my parents confiscated it. Handsome, strong, intelligent, and the ultimate ladies man, Dr. Jones was everything a man could and should be. He was my Idol.

One of the most challenging aspects of going to school, especially grad school, is that now I am expected to be an “educated observer.” No more blissful viewings of *The Last Crusade* in wide-eyed wonder and ignorance. Now it is deconstruction and content analysis – my brain has become wired that way. I can only enjoy *Temple of Doom* “ironically”. I have to acknowledge that while being a first-rate Nazi puncher, Indiana’s reckless archaeological methods probably ended in the destruction of countless important fictional finds. More importantly I now have to recognize the normative influences that such popular culture icons have upon the post-modern identity.

When it comes to how I think and feel about masculinity, Indiana Jones is of personal importance. The heroic figure played by Harrison Ford, though obviously fictional, features prominently in my own imaginaries. He embodies the zeitgeist and belongs within our cultural meta-narrative. As with most heroes, Jones points to possibilities and poetics beyond the everyday, he is a model of how to exist beyond the mundane. The heroic male figure is but “one mechanism we use to tell ourselves what it is we stand for. For those who have them, then, heroes are an important marker of identity.”<sup>1</sup> Specifically, within this exhibition, *masculine* identity will be discussed. *Wood’s* main goal is to examine the sites and practices of this negotiation of masculinity and these cultural ideals that exert such

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<sup>1</sup> D.V. Porpora, “Personal Heroes, Religion, and Transcendental Metanarratives” in *Sociological Forum*, 11 (2) (1996) pg 211

normative pressure. The heroic male figure is just one of many components of the epistemology of manhood - defining an idealized man in the age of late capitalism.<sup>2</sup>

My initial interest with heroes capitulated into an examination of the subject of masculinity in a similar manner in which one paddling down a tributary may find oneself in a much larger body of water. The topic of masculinity encompasses just about every subject known to man: culture, politics, economics, sociology, and psychology. Articles and investigations into the complex nature of masculinity are found in nearly every major academic stream because, in the end, a study of masculinity is a study of power relationships.<sup>3</sup> Even the myth of Indiana Jones is essentially a power fantasy.

It is important to highlight this notion of power at the heart of masculinity early on because I want to specify what this analysis is not about first of all. *Wood* does not investigate “masculinity” to identify reasons why masculinity is in crisis. Let me be clear: masculinity is not in crisis. Nor is my project an attempt to articulate an epistemology of the dominant through the vocabulary of the dominated. That position would be academically untenable, especially from the standpoint of a white straight man. Gender is intrinsically a relational structure of hierarchy – a hierarchy which men still dominate.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to go forward without first acknowledging this subject-position. Any investigation of masculinity must therefore also be an investigation of the masculine hegemony. The concept of hegemonic masculinity, as theorized by R.W. Connell is “defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.”<sup>5</sup> Connell emphasizes the “currently accepted answer” portion of her theory –

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin Alexander Boon, “Heroes, Metanarratives, and the Paradox of Masculinity in Contemporary Western Culture” in *The Journal of Men’s Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2005) pg 303

<sup>3</sup> Dean Lusher and Garry Robins, “Hegemonic and Other masculinities in Local Social Contexts” in *Men and Masculinities* (2009) pg 390

<sup>4</sup> Lusher pg 387

<sup>5</sup> R.W. Connell *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) pg 77

hegemony is contextually sensitive. Thus hegemony is a fluid and reactive entity; it is not a “fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable.”<sup>6</sup>

Hegemony, in the context of Connell’s theory, is heavily influenced by the work of Antonio Gramsci.<sup>7</sup> In brief –and it must be so or I could spend this entire paper on it - Gramsci’s theory of hegemony is a theory of cultural domination and a deconstruction of class. It:

analysed the social norms that establish the social structures (social and economic classes) with which the ruling class establish and exert cultural dominance to impose their world view — justifying the social, political, and economic status quo — as natural, inevitable, and beneficial to every social class, rather than as artificial social constructs beneficial solely to the ruling class.<sup>8</sup>

In order for an idea to be considered hegemonic it must be so widespread and disseminated throughout society that is not only the dominant view, but it is perceived as the “normal” way of looking at the world.<sup>9</sup> When voice is not explicitly denoted, the default hegemonic voice is assumed. This is certainly the case with gender. Thus *Wood* is an attempt at ‘power structure research’ - an analysis of the dominant in order to understand and change power structures for the better.<sup>10</sup> Within the context of Connell’s theory, while not an exact transference of terms, for the most part masculinity takes the place of the ruling class within the conceptualization of gender. Yet what, exactly, is masculinity?

That question is a lot harder to answer than it seems. It obviously goes beyond just a Y chromosome – and depending on the context not even that is required. A coherent “science” of masculinity has yet to be produced; each field of study tackles the problem differently. This science

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<sup>6</sup> Connell 76.

<sup>7</sup> Lusher 388

<sup>8</sup> Alan Bullock and Stephen Trombley, eds., *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Third Edition (1999) pp. 387–388

<sup>9</sup> Benedetto Fontana “Politics and History in Gramsci” in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* (2011) pg 227

<sup>10</sup> Nikki Wedgwood “Connell’s theory of masculinity – its origins and influences on the study of gender” in *Journal of Gender Studies Vol. 18, No 4* (2009) pg 337

does not reflect on the quality of research performed – i.e. sociological studies, psychological profiles - moreover it points to the fact that epistemological coherence is impossible. Any attempt to form an empirical definition of masculinity would result in an incoherent collection of concepts and relations.<sup>11</sup>

Connell, reflecting on this state of affairs calls for “an account of the larger structure and how masculinities are located in it.”<sup>12</sup> In general terms, this account is an attempt to create a holistic definition of masculinity, recognizing it’s proliferation throughout the many structures that shape everyday life and identifying the power arrangements within them.

In *Wood*, there are several pieces that serve as metaphors for this basic expressive difficulty within masculine epistemology. This basic problem is the failure to accurately pin down what it is we are measuring, dissecting and examining. *Measure of a Man(Hood)* (Fig 2) and *Dissection* (Fig 3) are possibly the most acute examples of this basic expressive deficiency when dealing with masculinity. Both deal with the attempt to try and glean something concrete and empirical from the study of something that is inherently abstract. The result of trying to come to some clinical answer usually results in a reductionist version of a mind / body dichotomy or an extrapolation of some physical trait. *Measure of a Man(Hood)* takes the most literal path directly to the centre of the physical – a measurement of the phallus. The title is an obvious take on the turn of phrase “measure of a man” which in itself can be read as an attempt to get some qualitative out of a quantitative measurement. What does measurement really tell us or explain about masculinity? How does one measure a man? *Dissection* is also a type of visual metaphor; the penis in this case replaced with another phallus – the tie. A symbol of masculine authority is literally dissected and what is gleaned? Felt and stitches. Thus the need for a wider lens and a broader scope. Looking at tiny details and scrutinizing them only gets

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<sup>11</sup> Connell (1995) pg 67

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

one so far. What extrapolations can be gleaned from these analyses? How do we avoid blanket application of specific quantitative result?

Masculinity in its contemporary usage usually refers to the way someone acts. The meanings of those actions are then extrapolated and applied to the “type” of the person that takes those actions. A “masculine” man will act differently than an “unmasculine” man - the former being more aggressive, domineering, the latter more passive and mollifying. As Connell notes typology “presupposes a belief in individual difference and personal agency” - a concept developed in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe which shows that it is a fairly recent conceptualization.<sup>13</sup> At its core, thinking of masculinity this way is completely relational. Its existence is dependant on what it is not – feminity. Without this dichotomy or polarization the concept of masculinity, as we know it in Western society could not exist. Men and women are seen as repositories of different characteristic and “types”. Common stereotypes result: i.e. men do not like to ask for directions, and Women will. Stephen whitehead, another prominent gender theorist, suggests “merely talking about men and women as separate entities contributes to the nature/nurture dualism that underpins our understanding of ‘reality ‘and our individual place within it.”<sup>14</sup> Before this, the qualitative differences in character were generally attributed to class. Thus a modern notion of masculinity is – at the most – a hundred years old.<sup>15</sup> Thus, when looking for definition, our Western cultural standpoint must be taken into account.

Connell, in her seminal book *Masculinities* identifies four main strategies theorists have used to try and pinpoint a definition. Each strategy follows its own logic and in practice they are usually combined to some degree. These strategies are not completely separate and will usually incorporate

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<sup>13</sup> Connell (1995) pg 68

<sup>14</sup> Stephen M. Whitehead *Men and masculinities: key themes and new directions* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002) pg 10

<sup>15</sup> Connell (1995) pg 68

components of one another.<sup>16</sup> The first of these approaches is what Connell identifies as “essentialist.” For the most part, essentialist way of thinking is similar to the process described previously by trying to identify masculinity by recognizing “essential” or “natural” masculine traits. In short, stereotypical “masculine” traits include physical strength, aggressiveness, emotional distance, success or money orientated etc.<sup>17</sup> The problem arises when one takes these stereotypes and tries to apply them to individual analyses.<sup>18</sup> Not everyone will fit neatly into the stereotypes and thus be considered less “manly” for their deviance.

The obvious weakness of taking the essentialist road is its inherent arbitrary nature. This strategy relies on a subjective linking of character types and traits. Is a trait considered masculine because it was first performed by a masculine person? Or is a person considered first masculine because of the traits they possess? Eventually an assumption has to be made that is not supported by a logical narrative. As Connell states “claims about a universal basis of masculinity tell us more about the ethos of the claimant than about anything else.”<sup>19</sup> This line of inquiry is also subject to ecological fallacy – wherein specific details of the nature of an individual are presumed based on the aggregate or average traits of the group to which that individual belongs.<sup>20</sup> A blanket application of traits results in unwarranted and harmful stereotypes.

A positivist perspective is the next method that Connell describes.<sup>21</sup> Positivism approaches research and epistemologies in a highly quantitative manner and an emphasis upon empiricism. The onus is placed upon the scientific method to yield “replicable, exact measurements, empirical

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Martin P Levine, *Gay Macho* (New York: New York University Press, 1998) pg 13

<sup>18</sup> Connell(1995) pg 70

<sup>19</sup> Connell (1995) pg 69

<sup>20</sup> Baodong Liu, “EI Extended Model and the Fear of Ecological Fallacy” in *Sociological Methods & Research* Volume 36 (1) (2007) pg 3

<sup>21</sup> Ibid



relationships and statistical techniques.”<sup>22</sup> A prime example of the positivist approach is the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) which was developed by psychologists Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp in 1973. Respondents would rate their personal response to different situations. For example: never cries / cries easily, the respondent would rate themselves A to E, A being never and E being always. At the end the interviewer would give the respondent a masculinity value based on their responses.<sup>23</sup>

Again, the most obvious problem with this approach is its inherent arbitrary nature. It is basically an essential approach put on a scale with numbers taped to it. As previously mentioned *Measure of a Man(hood)* (fig 2) is an attempt to lampoon these efforts. The creation of a Masculine to Feminine Scale or index requires that the two polarities – masculine and feminine – be split up into identifiable groups; gender and sex being not completely interchangeable terms. In order to create these categories for indexical analysis, researchers must fall back on what Connell calls “common sense typologies of gender. Positivist procedure thus rests on the very typifications that are supposedly under investigation.”<sup>24</sup> Positivist gender typologies must be ultimately defined by the very concepts that are under investigation.

In addition, such a strict empirical approach squeezes out the possibilities of “masculine” women and “feminine” men or behaviour that indicates such. Such contradictions do not easily fit within a scale. One of the crucial elements of an epistemology of masculinity to push beyond mere sex difference and to analyse how men differentiate from other men. The last two approaches semiotic and normative methods take into account the differences between men that are focused on in *Wood*.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> David Gartell and John Gartell, "Positivism in sociological practice: 1967-1990" in *Canadian Review of Sociology*, Vol. 33 No. 2. (1996) pg 146

<sup>23</sup> J.T. Spence and Helmreich. *Masculinity and femininity: Their psychological dimensions, correlates, and antecedents*. (Austin: University of Texas Press. 1978)

<sup>24</sup> Connell (1995) pg 69

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

Semiotics is effective within the context of cultural analysis – and in this case art. Originally focusing on structural linguistics, semiotics has been applied to a wider variety of cultural critiques. It is necessary within the case of gender to deconstruct the language and symbols used in the legitimization of hegemonic behaviour. How these discourses are framed is tremendously important to the epistemology of masculinity, especially when it comes to common gender assumptions. Connell’s “common sense typologies” or understanding of the “natural” masculine entities are one of the key – if not *the* key - components in the maintenance of a masculine hegemony. In order for hegemony to be maintained it must be seen as natural and legitimized. These common sense epistemologies provide the language and the discourse for hegemony of masculinity.<sup>26</sup> Why do men dominate? It is their nature. Men are naturally aggressive and naturally strive for success. When this thought becomes ingrained in the public consciousness it becomes an implicit justification for hegemony, and a perpetual self-legitimization.

In *Wood*, one of the primary goals of the exhibition is to highlight and deconstruct the symbols and language that go into forming a contemporary understanding of masculinity. Visual symbols obviously always play a quintessential role in art. The most prominent use of visual signifiers within *Wood* is that of the necktie. Within pieces such as *Monument* (Fig 4) and *Does this tie make me look fat?* (Fig 5) the signifier, which in this case is the tie, can be observed as an inquiry into what is actually being signified within a contemporary context. In a lot of ways the necktie is a perfect blend of ideas and interpretations with respect to hegemonic masculinity. “In the semiotic opposition of masculinity and femininity, masculinity is the unmarked term, the place of symbolic authority. The phallus is the

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<sup>26</sup> Whitehead pg 9

master signifier.”<sup>27</sup> The necktie references this master-signifier quite clearly, and is a powerful symbol for masculine authority.

Government, corporations, and other such powerful institutions all require the uniform wearing of a suit and necktie by their staff, which is for the majority male. The necktie is an overt symbol of masculine domination on the chest of every prime minister and CEO. When we can deconstruct this symbol it provides an insight into the structure and hierarchy of masculinity. *Monument* (fig 4) is meant to be reminiscent not only of the 555 feet tall structure in Washington D.C, but also of institutional power in general.<sup>28</sup> *Monument* references Aboriginal women who are receiving reparations for the implementation of the residential school system. This educational policy, implemented by the Canadian government, is a heinous example of cognitive imperialism and oppression of an entire culture. Juxtaposed with images of oppression and dominance, *Monument* serves to ask what happens when we remember or commemorate the dominating actions of that institutional power? *Does this tie make me look fat?* (Fig 5) more specifically deals with the necktie both in terms of the consumption of commercial good and its role in providing masculine identity in the gender hierarchy. These ideas will be discussed in more depth later.

*Wood* deals heavily with language as well, but mostly within the context of advertising. This context falls squarely within the last method of masculine epistemologies that Connell describes – *normative* influence. Simply put normativity impresses onto the public imaginary what men *ought* to be.<sup>29</sup> Normative definitions find their way into many studies of popular media, and *Wood* is no exception. In the context of “sex role theory” normative describe what is the “normal” way to be a man

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<sup>27</sup> Connell (1995) pg 70

<sup>28</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions about the Washington Monument” last modified September-01-11  
<http://www.nps.gov/wamo/faqs.htm>

<sup>29</sup> Connell (1995) pg 70

and deviations from this norm result in the subject being less “manly.”<sup>30</sup> What is basically created is a cultural “blueprint” or “rules” for manliness. Sociologist Robert Brannon’s summary of this blueprint is widely quoted: No Sissy Stuff, The Big Wheel, The Sturdy Oak and Give ‘em Hell.<sup>31</sup>

No Sissy Stuff means that emotions are strictly prohibited from being expressed because real men don’t cry. Emotions are a weakness and men must avoid any traits that are perceived as feminine. Drawing upon the trope of perceiving man and women as separate and distinct entities plays directly in the maintenance of the hegemony. The Big Wheel correlates one’s level of machismo to one’s personal success in terms of wealth and power. This is of course a result of a gendered hierarchy. Masculinity is located on the top of that pyramid, and the more authority and agency one wields within the hierarchy the more manly they are perceived as being. Be A Sturdy Oak – phrased as such in the most ironic way possible – denotes how a real man should act in any given situation. They should be unflinching, unyielding, and self-reliant. Once again the emphasis is placed on the perception of power and authority. Give ‘em Hell describes that true manly men are daring and aggressive – risk takers and innovators in the face of fear and adversity.<sup>32</sup> What all of these “rules” have in common is that they reward higher masculine status for more dominating behaviour. In other words the more “manly” one is perceived the more one propagates the hegemony.

What separates an essentialist approach from a normative approach – both deal with masculine “traits” – is that essentialism tries to pin down what men actually are while normative deals with the *perception* of what men are actually. Grounding these perceptions in concrete reality is not a requirement for normative influence. All that is required is the perception of making something manly. As Wetherell and Edley observe, “hegemonic masculinity is not a personality type or an actual male character. Rather it is an ideal or set of prescriptive social norms, symbolically represented, but a crucial

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<sup>30</sup> Connell 70

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Levine pg 145

part of the texture of many routine and disciplinary activities.”<sup>33</sup> The first example given in this paper is indicative of the normative influence of fictional characters. Indiana Jones portrays all of the qualities that Brannon describes. He is strong and forceful, taking insane risks to reap benefits. He is an expert in his field, and simultaneously exudes intellectual and physical authority. He is the perfect man. The fact of his fictionality does not stop him from being one of my models for manhood. Normativity reinforces hegemonic masculinity by providing narrative content in order to aid the perception that the norms are just that: the normal way to be a man.

A normative approach underlines the inherent relational and socially constructed nature of masculinity. These masculine norms create a set of rules which men may choose to embody if they do not want to be considered feminine. These guidelines make up a “gender role” in society. How men deal with these pressures to conform to masculine norms make up a large portion of their own masculine identity. Indeed many psychological studies suggest that an important component of proper mental health is a strong identification with gender-role.<sup>34</sup> Yet, as Connell suggests, few if any men actually embody normative ideals.<sup>35</sup> Indiana Jones is fictional – he is an impossible model – yet still exists as a source of normative influence. Studies into gendered norm point to the fact that cultural perceptions shape behaviour: “Culture restricts the articulation of alternative because culture produces expectancy and naturalizes certain relations while stigmatizing others.”<sup>36</sup> Hegemonic masculinity, in Connell’s theory is presented “as an aspirational goal rather than as a lived reality for ordinary men. Indeed a key characteristic seems to be its ‘impossibility’ or ‘fantastic’ nature.”<sup>37</sup> Thus the paradox of

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<sup>33</sup> M. Wetherell and N. Edley, “Negotiating hegemonic masculinity: Imaginary positions and psycho-discursive practices” in *Feminism & Psychology* 9 (3) (1999) pg 336

<sup>34</sup> Richard M. Eisler, Jay R. Skidmore, and Clay H Ward, “Masculine-Gender Role Stress: Predictor of Anger, Anxiety and Health-Risk Behaviours” in *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 52(1) (1988) pg 133

<sup>35</sup> Connell (1995) pg 79

<sup>36</sup> Dean Lusher and Garry Robins, “Hegemonic and Other Masculinities in Local Social Contexts” in *Men and Masculinities Volume 11 (4)* (2009) pg 400

<sup>37</sup> Wetherell and Edley, pg 337

normativity is whether anyone is masculine in a population where the vast majority of men fail to meet hegemonic ideals.<sup>38</sup>

Thus there exists “a distance, and a tension, between collective ideal and actual lives.”<sup>39</sup> Within a post-modern western society the onus is placed upon the individual to negotiate with this tension and make up the difference themselves.<sup>40</sup> Research suggests that

male homosocial environments as arenas where the interplay of personal masculinity must be negotiated with shared understandings of masculinity...Masculinities that differ from the norm of hegemonic masculinity, are generally experienced as “private dissatisfactions rather than foundations for questioning the social construction of gender”<sup>41</sup>

Personal responsibility is taken for normative affects, which is in keeping with the individualistic nature of western society. What are the forms this negotiation takes? Furthermore, what is the primary site for that negotiation? As most post-modern theory suggests, the primary site for expression of identity is the body. As “secure and stable self-identity no longer derives automatically from one’s position in the social structure, and in its place we are seeing attempts to ground identity in the body, as individuals are left alone to establish and maintain values with which to live and make sense of their daily lives.”<sup>42</sup> Yet the individualistic nature of this expression leaves the body vulnerable to a very powerful external structure: consumerism as the maintenance of one’s individual identity. This gender maintenance provides valuable market incentive. With the onus placed on the individual to negotiate gender identity against the normative ideal, this create intense pressure to live up to an impossible standard.

*Wood* includes several works that directly reference normative influence on the masculine body.

Now more than ever a visual economy – the overwhelming emphasis placed on visual market stimuli -

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<sup>38</sup> Connell (1995) pg 70

<sup>39</sup> T. Carrigan, R.W. Connell and J. Lee, “Toward a new sociology of masculinity” in *Theory and Society* 14 (5) (1985) pg 592

<sup>40</sup> Rosalind Gill, Karen Henwood and Carl McLean, “Body Projects and the Regulation of Normative Masculinity,” in *Body & Society* 11: 37 (2005) pg 40

<sup>41</sup> S.R. Bird, “Welcome to the men’s club – homosociality and the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity” in *Gender and Society* 10(2) (1996) pg 123

<sup>42</sup> Gill et al, pg 40

has emerged based on the sexual objectification of men's bodies (Fig 6). While the objectification of women has been historically rampant and widespread within culture, the objectification of men's bodies is a relatively recent development. Men's bodies which have been historically invisible have become an object of desire and are now displayed in an increasingly sexualized manner. This shift in visual culture exerts its normative influence upon the contemporary male psyche.<sup>43</sup> What results is a growing fetishization of muscularity.<sup>44</sup> *Stretch* (Fig 7) and *When You Grow Up You Gotta Drink Beer* (Fig 8) explore these concepts of the embodiment of these physical normative influences. Both reference the figure of Arnold Schwarzenegger – perhaps the best symbol that exists in popular culture for the obsession with muscularity. The phrase “Milk is for babies” alludes to the 1977 documentary *Pumping Iron*. When asked if he drinks milk, Arnold replies “No, milk is for babies. When you grow up you gotta drink beer.” This is an attempt to link the building of mass to the failure to meet expectations within homosocial situations.

What is being discussed when one references the body? Especially in a post-modern context, it is no longer a simple matter of physicality. The physical body is an object over which we can exercise a certain amount of agency – and is the material site of human experience. In conjunction with this object-body there is also the concept of embodiment: a concept that can best be described at the point of contact between the personal and the social, or between cultural expectations and individual preceptions.<sup>45</sup> Shilling argues that “high modernity has produced an unprecedented ‘individualization’ of the body, in which meanings are privatized and the body becomes the bearer of symbolic value.”<sup>46</sup> Thus the negotiation of gender norms in some respects takes the form of a “body project.” Distance from hegemonic ideal reinforces the notion that one identity or body is incomplete and thus is a project

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<sup>43</sup> Rosalind Gill, Beyond the “Sexualization of Culture” Thesis: An Intersectional Analysis of ‘Sixpacks’, ‘Midriffs’ and ‘Hot Lesbians’ in Advertising” in *Sexualities* 12 (2009) pg 143

<sup>44</sup> Gill et al, pg 40

<sup>45</sup> Alex Hall, Jenny Hockey, and Victoria Robinson, “Occupational Cultures and the Embodiment of Masculinity: Hairdressing, Estate Agency and Firefighting” in *Gender, Work and Organization. Volume 14 (6)* (2007) pg 536

<sup>46</sup> Gill et al pg 40

that needs to be improved upon and maintained.<sup>47</sup> Because of this, the door is then opened to consumer culture.

It is not the desire for identity that drives consumption, but rather the desire for a unique and individual identity that does. A desire to be one's "own man" is a powerful pull towards consumption. In their interviews of young British men in the early 2000's Rosalind Gill et al found that these men were nearly unanimous in their desire for difference:

This feeling [for uniqueness] was clearly strongly held and central to the men's senses of self. Few men made any attempt to account for their sense of difference, either in terms of their personal biography or social location/identity; for the vast majority it was asserted as a self-evident truth.<sup>48</sup>

Consumer culture – especially advertisement – has latched onto one's need for individuality and self-realization. Modernist ideals of "self-cultivation" became intertwined with consumption as material goods were touted as a powerful means of self-expression. In other words, "the clothes make the man." As stated above, individuality is an influential normative standard. Having agency over one's own destiny is a symbol of masculine authority. In order to be a "Big Wheel," a man must be able to express his autonomy and be in control. In this sense, consumption becomes the means for that expression. The buying of commercial goods in order to augment one's outward appearance is one of the main ways of actualizing one's own picture of self-identity. In order to be considered real men, we must consume. This notion is linked up with many of the prevalent hegemonic ideals. An abundance of material goods is a strong indicator of financial and personal success, which in turn are indicators of authority and power. Consequently, material goods, such as suits and ties, have become repository for masculine identity and power.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Gill et al pg 44



These themes are explored by many works in *Wood*. Considering the individualistic responsibility taken for the construction of identity, it only follows that I should use myself as a model in order to investigate the themes analyzed above. *Does this tie make me look fat?* (Fig 5) and *Buying Confidence* (Fig 6) both directly explore the consumption of material goods. *Does this tie make me look fat?*, being the more literal of the two, depicts myself shopping for the masculine status and power symbol – the necktie. *Buying Confidence* (Fig 6) is meant to parody this process by replacing one phallus for another – a necktie for a dildo. The performance of shopping for such objects is displayed quite literally as the search for more male power. Both pieces serve to analyse the force and impetus at work with regards to masculine consumerism. The juxtaposition of Superman is meant to intertwine the process of consumption with the concept of the heroic male or hegemonic male ideal. Superman is male ideal taken to hyperbole. He has immense power and authority. The widespread use of advertising material within these prints is meant to hammer home the narrative discourses at play. The ads highlight what men are encouraged to buy in order to improve their self identities- both in an instructional and satiric way. In *Protein Rich* (Figure 10) there is an ad for “Extend”- a male enlargement breakthrough. The language in a Chevrolet ad, “everything’s bigger in Colorado” mirrors this desire for greater size in cars. The juxtaposition of the two serves to perpetuate the notion that “bigger is better.”

This paper summarizes the theoretical framework that supports the art within *Wood*. This exhibition examines various texts and images and tries to examine the ideological assumptions ingrained within them. By studying the ways in which masculinity is understood and the methods that are used to vocalize and express those understandings, the common assumptions surrounding masculinity become apparent. These assumptions perpetuate the unequal power relationships within the hierarchy of gender. By highlighting what is generally taken for granted as “common knowledge” or ‘the way things are’ Wood tries to interrupt these

ways of thinking. Admittedly *Wood* proposes many questions but offers fewer solutions. It is one thing to assert observation and draw connections, but it is an even greater task to point towards an answer or an alternative toward improving and changing the situation. What does it mean to be a man? What is the measure of a man? What should we admire and strive toward instead of the hegemonic ideal? Those are questions that one cannot hope to answer for those who come to the exhibition. Hopefully upon leaving *Wood*, they are a little closer to answering for themselves.

Images



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

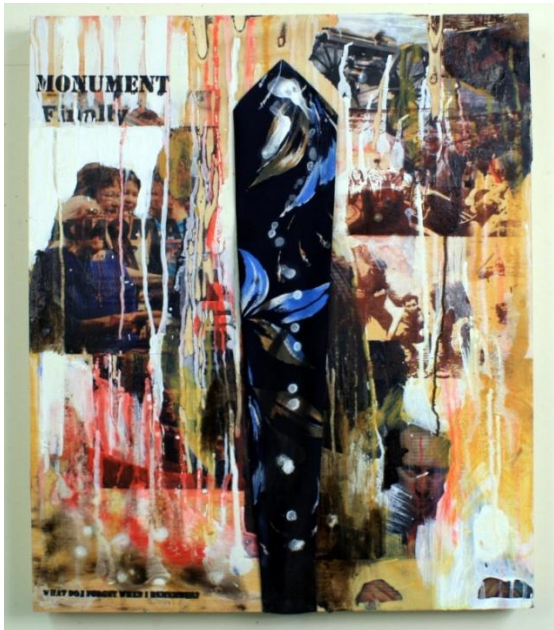


Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

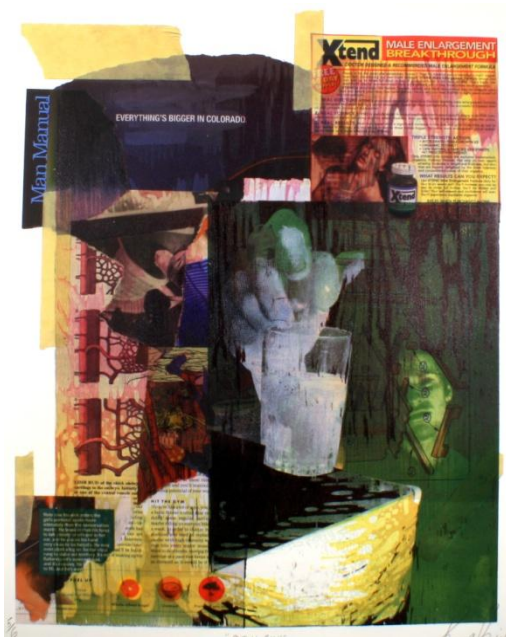


Figure 10

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