

Georges

Man Made:

The Cult of Masculinity in Art

Introduction

My objective is to examine the different aspects of dialogue concerning masculinity and art from the 1500's to the High Modernist period and up to current day; focusing largely on how this dialogue can be used as a framework to analyze the shifting constructions of gender and subjectivity. I will discuss the metamorphosis of desire, aestheticism and the Art of Masculinity. My attempt is to offer a personal view on artistic practice as it applies to masculinity, to include an investigation of the destabilization of gender, its practice, and a critique of this trans-cultural phenomenon. I hope to redress certain limitations of how the art world has sometimes interpreted masculinity as defined by the gay artist. Although not popular belief, I feel that our contemporary culture's understanding of masculinity has largely been defined by the art of gay men. In some areas of the art world, it appears the focus has been on a deliberative, belief based, attitude toward men and how masculinity is defined. Many times, systematic retrieval of one's beliefs about masculinity is limited and minimal. I will suggest that in such context, interpretation should better be predicted by implicit attitudes rather than a "normal" standard. The concept of masculinity is a free flowing idea that has been altered by sexual orientation, religion, politics and pop culture. The discussion of what is masculine today has recently been under debate, particularly with the birth of the new "metro sexual" male ~ causing the worlds of both gay and straight men to clash.

The Origins

The metro sexual movement may have begun as early as the 1500's, with the representation of the male nude as a focal point of the Renaissance period in art with artists like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Da Vinci's *John the Baptist* (1503

-1506) which hangs in the Louvre, is a clear example of the artist's interpretation of what he (as a gay man) envisioned a man to be, as the painting portrays the male in a softer more feminine way.

In a statement made by gay writer Edward Lucie Smith, he includes his own interjection of the plight of gay men: "The idea of the male nude is a vehicle for the expression of suffering." This may be considered somewhat dramatic, but not much more than the idea that the *Mona Lisa* (1503-1506) is a self portrait of Leonardo Da Vinci in drag.

The statue of *David* by Michelangelo (1501-1504) is the work of another gay artist who clearly defined the heroic image of man. David is a 14'3 foot sculpture cut from one block of marble. It was commissioned to symbolize the dominate power and influence of The Republic Florence. "Beauty was to him divine; one of the ways the Gods communicated to humanity." (Quote: Web Museum; Michelangelo 11.5.04)

Michelangelo's depiction of the male was larger than life; muscular, powerful and exaggerated. The fresco in the Sistine Chapel has been restored to a bright colorful display of pure male muscle, causing some to challenge what they view as an unrealistic and misleading vision of Christianity.

Both these artists suffered artistic oppression by a church which gave into the strong hold of its religious patrons. The church had a stern judgment against nudity finding it unsophisticated, vile and sinful. Nudes were cleverly positioned or covered with a wisp of hair, or the ever present fig leaf. These artists were obsessed with their nudes as a measure of human perfection, which led to a great deal of frustration in their lives.

Rocco painters were despised for their frivolity because their paintings rebelled against the morals of the church. Fragonard was expelled from the court of Louis the XV of France for being a libertine. The Marquis de Sade, who had a fondness for orgies and expanded his interests into male prostitution and sadism, compiled a massive library of pornography and “lewd” paintings, labeling him a heretic, which led to his imprisonment in February 1781 and eventually into an asylum where he would spend the rest of his life.

This makes one question art and it’s portrayal of the male: Is masculinity synonymous with butch? Macho? Merely male? If so, then are biker chicks, wife beaters, lesbians, hermorphidites and transvestites all equally masculine? Can the male form, displayed in any manner, ever be considered vulgar? I have my doubts. In fact, I have doubted this entire fragmented concept of masculinity my entire life. Who constructed this ideal? Who does it serve?

William Stern talks about the visions of masculinity, stating that if half of the world is male, then the other half the world must suffer from some form of masculine identity crisis. He continued to ask questions: “Was Gandhi masculine?” “Was Hitler butch?” “Is George Bush a metro sexual?” “Does Hillary Clinton suffer from penis envy?” These concepts vary by religion, culture and time periods.

I have always felt that narcissism is a launching pad to masculinity and if these artists in the Renaissance were obsessed with the creation of masculine beauty; then our contemporary gay culture has certainly embraced this concept. This has been questioned in the gay community, but I believe it to be our most empowering message that supports the growth of the artistic community. To be an artist is to be narcissist.

The work of Nineteenth Century American master Thomas Eakins embodies homosexual attitudes, but they are as erotically coded as Donatello’s *David*, the first nude statue of the Renaissance. In this painting, *The Swimming Hole*, a beautiful figure of a standing youth with his buttocks thrust out, embraces a physical ethic only marginally acceptable to the guardians of public decency. His erotic attitude is the idealization of the athletic male. It is this depiction of the naked youth that the artist is most frequently remembered for today.

The Cult

Masculinity has provided a safe place for the unsure, a suit of armor. It defines and guides; alluding to a well connected social life, better love life and an active sex life. This cult has also provided a safe haven for those who have found no alliance with organized religion, family, or institutions.

This cult alludes to the promise of change, but the restrictions of this cult becomes hypocritical in its encouragement of conformity ~ huge, surgically enhanced, muscular men; shaved, buffed, polished, waxed and spray tanned.

Wilhelm von Gloeden lived in an age that tortured men of his kind. His particular ideal of homo-eroticism is the story of a particular modern art form. Von Gloeden's beautifully composed photographs transformed working class boys into images of antique legends; some photos show girls who are in fact boys dressed as girls. This façade of masculinity put gay liberation further back into the closet than ever before. The macho man became more a man than the "average" heterosexual male. A good example of this was Tom of Finland, born Tauko Laaksonen in 1920, a Finnish born artist whose drawings first hit the American public on the cover of a sports wear, bodybuilding magazine *Physique Pictorial*. Ironically, the clothing actually added to the sexual fetishes of the characters, rather than detract.

Tom of Finland was well aware of the fetish impact produced by his carefully selected items of clothing, such as tall boots and leather biker jackets. Of course he used

this to exaggerate the masculine aura of his figures. Tom has admitted that his drawings were inspired by the German soldiers with whom he had fleeting sexual relationships with in Helsinki during World War II. He invented a new homosexual icon; a cheerful, exaggerated muscular boy-man, cousin to the super-masculine bodybuilder. In 1991 he was featured in a documentary film, *Daddy and the Muscle Academy*, which became very popular within the gay community.

In the 1980's gay men took on a different view of what is masculine. Their idea of masculinity was irradiated by the AIDS epidemic. This changed gay sexuality, ideals about beauty, and lifestyles forever. The gay population had turned from hedonism to political activism. The strength of the masculine ideology was eventually strengthened by these events as the outbreak of AIDS created a new body image. The increase of chemicals, fat injections and steroids to stay alive and appear healthy produced a new form of masculinity beauty. Gay men suddenly had to take better care of their bodies, eat well and exercise more. Gym equipment became more advanced, and scientific knowledge of how the body works and how muscles grow became much more specific. In popular gay culture, body building magazines mostly show computer enhanced buttocks, bigger biceps and ripped 6 packs ~ changing mere mortals into Gods. Have these magazines indeed become our modern day version of Michelangelo's *David*?

Gyms have become the new temple and sex clubs their shrine to shine. Drug use is ramped, whether it's steroids, ecstasy, special k, GHB, cocaine, crystal meth or

Viagra; they are all used to take one to a higher place of sexual perfection. The circuit parties, bath houses, and PnP parties attended by some gay men have been described as: "wings of masculinity." The use of black market steroids has been on a slow but steady increase for years. Doctors who treat gay men in urban centers have noted steroid abuse climbing higher and higher among their patients throughout the 1980s and into the year 2004.

Steroids are a key link between the straight and gay world. Steroids are very prevalent in our society today and easily obtainable; from teenage boys to men in their fifties, where the promise of looking better is always advantageous to a great male image and better sex life. In the past, steroids were used for weightlifter and athletes, but now with the epidemic of AIDS, our society is constantly finding other ways to look better. Use of anabolic steroids began with elite competitive athletes, but today it includes high school students who are taking anabolic steroids for cosmetic and competitive purposes. Most research estimates that three to five percent of high school age athletes, and five to fifteen percent of adult athletes, use these performance-enhancing drugs. We understand now there are chemicals and technology for us to obtain our aesthetic goals; but is this a quest for social acceptability, the culture we live in, or all those late night infomercials that continually feed our insecurities? On a psychological level, it seems to be a desperate attempt for some men to hold on to their partner, motivated by a fear that he needs the perfect body to remain in control of his relationship.

One of America's leading contemporized artist, Charles Ray, often deals with the human condition as it relates to masculinity. He is a heterosexual, white male, from California. His sculpture *Oh Charlie, Charlie* (1994) caused the international art scene to come to a screeching halt on what it originally deemed as the definition of male beauty. His sculpture contained eight, life-sized replicas of the artist naked; sucking, licking and penetrating himself in an eight way orgy that sent the art world whirling in shock and disbelief.

One self proclaimed gay art critic clearly had an opportunity to discuss the contradiction in our culture as this large pink elephant exploded in our faces. He asked, "What is masculine? We have a heterosexual man penetrating himself with himself with total self pleasure and it's gratifying. With that, he swung open the doors of sexuality ~ not restricting sexual acts usually thought to be gay, but to the popular culture as well."

Politics


In the 2004 presidential election a pivotal macho bargaining point became the Iraqi war. The question became who was bigger, better, stronger, tougher and better able to run the country. The Republicans supported the Wild West approach while Rush Limbaugh was busy downing Oxycotin and boycotting French fries. The far right vilified John Kerry, calling his desire for United Nations support and a non-preemptive strike against Iraq as wishy-washy, weak, awkward and non-masculine.

Media Influence

The television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* has also crossed some new frontiers. Here we have five gay men helping the heterosexual male to obtain the woman; the prize ~ but the catch is that he has to become somewhat “feminine” to lure his prey. This show, produced by gay men, used modern media to dictate to the heterosexual male what the idea of masculinity is; with the hook training them how to obtain ideal of masculinity. Since when did correct table manners, stylish clothing, oriental rugs, chocolate martinis, fur bedspreads, white lilies and well cooked gourmet meals become the definition of masculinity?

Summary

My sense is that all of the representations of masculinity under discussions were created in patriarchal societies and, as such, embody the pressures, ambiguities and anomalies of that system. Through their historically and culturally specific analyses, they demonstrate how capricious the so-called immutable and universal ideals can be. Taken together, they qualify our understanding of the not so eternal masculine. We have a muted understanding of what masculinity is, but in the majority of our society, we are clearly led by the not-so-limp-wrist homosexual culture. It seems the art world has been overly preoccupied with this gulf between what defines masculinity in the public view, verses the private and hidden soul of the gay artist. An artist can paint anything, and what he paints, is realized.



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