

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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Seminal: Masculinity in Contemporary Art

October 13 – November 18, 2023

Opening Reception: Friday, October 13, 6:00 to 8:00 pm

219 Bowery, Floor 1
New York, NY 10002

Cristin Tierney Gallery is pleased to present ***Seminal: Masculinity in Contemporary Art***, a group exhibition in the gallery's first floor space. *Seminal* opens Friday, October 13th, with a public reception from 6:00 to 8:00 pm. Participating artists are **Melanie Baker, Jennifer Dalton, Julian V.L. Gaines, Shaun Leonardo, Joan Linder, Ralph Pugay, Roger Shimomura, Dread Scott, and Kenneth Tam**. The exhibition closes November 18th.

Masculinity is, by its nature, complicated. As a concept it is relatively recent, estimated by scholars to be no older than a few hundred years.¹ In practice it evolved in step with colonial expansion, modern institutions, and neoliberal economic systems. It continues to impact the present social

¹ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1995, 2005), p. 68.

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orders of most Western countries. Although many people would say they know what masculinity is, its definition is far less precise, often being described as simply “not feminine.” Sociologists assert there is no fixed, coherent, or natural masculine identity, but rather sets of characteristics associated with different levels of power.² They are reinforced daily through our interactions with each other and through the systems set in place by our sociopolitical foundations.

As the culture wars continue to rage, some figures advocate for a “return” to “true masculinity.” The artists included in *Seminal* instead point to the idea’s fallacy. Through varying media, they complicate the male archetype by examining how it is expressed in the arenas of politics, sports, race, class, popular culture, family, and sexuality. Each work prompts the question: what are the beliefs and behaviors that have contributed to this image? *Seminal* interrogates what we think we know about masculinity and why, creating space for further dialogues about identity.

Works by Melanie Baker and Jen Dalton explore the intersection between power, class, and masculinity. Baker’s portrait of anonymous white male politicians shows their status through context clues: each wears a dark suit and crisp white shirt, sports a similar haircut, and they stand in front of a luxurious red curtain. Although she withholds their identities, viewers understand that these are the traditional paragons of American leadership. Also concerned with men in positions of power is Dalton’s sculpture series *Mistakes Were Made*. The works feature public apologies made by well-known men, which the artist has divided into authentic and fake. Sincere apologies are placed on small lamps, their glow a metaphor for genuine amends. Disingenuous ones, on the other hand, are placed on craft store decorative plaques, their gaudy aesthetic mirroring the hollowness of the speaker’s contrition.

If a tailored suit is an indication of one kind of masculinity, Joan Linder’s painting *Objectified Man: Shark Belly* might suggest an entirely different one. This over-life-size painting of a shirtless man with rotund belly and arm tattoo was created in the late ‘90s as Linder’s response to artworks of naked sexualized women by John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, Vanessa Beecroft, and more. Frustrated with the aesthetics of third wave feminism, Linder instead directed the female gaze onto the male body, creating a series of portraits of objectified nude and partially dressed men. This junction between sexuality and masculinity is also explored in Ralph Pugay’s irreverently humorous painting *Docked*. Dating to 2020 and the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Docked* imagines a gay cruise ship that has been stranded at sea due to quarantine. The ship’s passengers crowd around the bow in their identical underwear, looking toward the dock that they cannot access.

A different kind of male relationship—that of fathers and sons—is explored in Kenneth Tam’s video *sump*. Throughout the work, the artist engages in a series of invented rituals—ranging from playful to bizarre—with his father in the basement of the latter’s home. As the two shirtless men take turns fingerpainting on each other’s abdomens or blow up balloons while sitting in a tub together, their wordless gestures encompass familiarity, tension, and everything in between. *sump* speaks to the difficulty of intimacy between men and especially fathers and sons.

The male body is implicated in another way by Shaun Leonardo’s sculpture installation *Bull in the Ring*, which consists of a circle of football helmets facing inward toward a single helmet at the center. A former football player, Leonardo named the work after a practice—now banned in American football due to its likelihood to cause injury and concussions—in which the team would

² Ibid., p. 67.

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form a revolving circle and randomly charge one player at the center. The object of the exercise was to cultivate players' awareness, but the sculpture also suggests the way in which sports cannibalize male athletes' bodies and minds for entertainment.

Another work that touches on men's bodies and labor is Dread Scott's *I Am Not a Man*. Referring to the 1968 Memphis Sanitation workers' strike where the iconic "I Am a Man" sign originated, Scott wore an inversion of the statement on a protest sign while walking down 125th Street in Harlem, performing actions that evoked the humiliation and negation defining Black people's existence. Like the original strike, *I Am Not a Man* shone a spotlight on the lack of respect, dangerous conditions, and unequal treatment faced by Black men (and women). Addressing our era, Scott's performance demonstrated that racism is foundational to America and has not abated.

Masculinity and race are further examined in works by Julian V.L. Gaines and Roger Shimomura. Gaines' sculpture *Emmett's Last Ride* consists of the tailgate of a Ford pickup truck mounted to the wall, sporting two American flags. The title references Emmett Till, who was placed in the back of a pickup truck, then tortured and lynched. This work, like Scott's *I Am Not A Man*, collapses past and present. Gaines' flag-adorned truck speaks not only to Till's murder, but to an extremely visible brand of hyper-nationalistic masculinity tied to White supremacy. Such bigotry is also a major theme in the work of Roger Shimomura. Incarcerated in a Japanese internment camp as a child, Shimomura's paintings combine pop art iconography, traditional Asian tropes, and stereotypical racial imagery to question conventions of identity. In the propaganda poster-inspired *Chinese Imposter #5*, the artist depicts himself in a crowd of Chinese men, commenting on the supposed inability of Americans during World War II to tell the difference between people of Chinese and Japanese descent. Surrounded by various state-sanctioned versions of the "ideal" man, he lifts his sleeve to reveal a tattoo spelling "Minidoka," the name of the internment camp where his family lived for more than two years. The painting is an indictment of America's incarceration of its Japanese-American population, and a criticism of the state's motivations in defining masculinity.

The works in *Seminal: Masculinity in Contemporary Art* represent a diversity of perspectives, but a primary theme is the acknowledgment that patriarchal, hegemonic masculinity is a major factor in inequality. By challenging its values and championing different stories, these nine artists offer a path toward a more just future.

Founded in 2010, Cristin Tierney Gallery is a contemporary art gallery located on The Bowery with a deep commitment to the presentation, development, and support of a roster of both established and emerging artists. Its program emphasizes artists engaged with critical theory and art history, with an emphasis on conceptual, video, and performance art. Education and audience engagement is central to our mission. Cristin Tierney Gallery is a member of the ADAA (Art Dealers Association of America).

Image

Roger Shimomura, *Chinese Imposter #5*, 2010. acrylic on canvas. 54 x 54 inches (137.2 x 137.2 cm).

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