CONTEMPORARY
SHAPESHIFTING
MASCU LINITIES
This exhibition brings together ten emerging and established artists who question, reframe, and explore perceptions and anxieties about evolving masculinities in the 21st century. The exhibition is intended to raise—but not necessarily answer—questions about the relevance of the historical male role model, contemporary ideas about gender construction, and the purpose of fraternity.

Scholarship on gender and sexuality began with the emergence of feminist studies in the 1970s, but it wasn’t until the mid-1990s that masculinity studies came into its own. There have been a number of exhibitions exploring this topic—many of which took place in the UK, Europe, and Canada—with most using an overarching theme through which to discuss masculinity. For example, two important 2009 exhibitions, Hard Targets and Mixed Signals: Artists Consider Masculinity in Sports, used sport as a lens through which artists explored the performance of gender and homosexuality, or men persisting themselves to other men in a sporting context. SHAPESHIFTING, however, intentionally eschews an overarching theme—hence the title—to better reflect the ambiguities, anxieties, and possibilities facing men in America.

The ten artists in SHAPESHIFTING can be loosely placed into three categories—evolving cultural terrain, gender normative behavior, and the role of fraternity. In the first grouping, Robyn O’Neil, Alec Soth, Sara Greenberger Rafferty, and Hank Willis Thomas mine different aspects of evolving attitudes toward gender roles. O’Neil’s Hell series signals the end of 20th-century male norms, while Soth’s Broken Manual project investigates the life of the contemporary hermit. Hank Willis Thomas addresses questions specific to African American men, and Greenberger Rafferty melts and morphs iconic male attire. Ideas about the formation and shattering of gender normative behaviors are found in the work of Marcella Hackbardt, Michael Scoggins, Kris Knight, and Weston Ulfig. Hackbardt’s young male dancers are beautiful yet somehow uncomfortable to view, and Scoggins’ oversized marker drawings are part of a series titled Hell where men either lose a battle against the environment or inhabit an unpredictable middle ground. When asked about her impetus for creating drawings of groups of men manning bleak landscapes with little purpose, O’Neil said, “I was trying to figure out a way to explore this desire for retreat without making it like a documentary essay on rightwing survivalists.”

Learning how to live “off the grid” and out of the mainstream takes instruction, as can be seen in the stack of “how to” videos in 2007, 2010. Written on the wall in a boarded up home in 2007, (cover) there is palpable paranoia and psychological pain emanating from the phrases, “They did it,” and “I love my dad Tony, I wish he loved me.” In aggregate, the disjointed imagery of Soth’s Broken Manual speaks eloquently to a highly specific type of rupture in the social contract.

Robyn O’Neil (American, b. 1977)

Raised Irish Catholic in Nebraska, Robyn O’Neil’s psychological landscapes are, according to the artist, “reflections of what is around me.” These five drawings are part of a series titled Hell where men either lose a battle against the environment or inhabit an unpredictable middle ground. When asked about her impetus for creating drawings of groups of men manning bleak landscapes with little purpose, O’Neil said, “The men I drew were originally based on my dad and his best friend Marty. Regular family guys who would kill for anyone they love. Men who love sports and play and TV. There’s a complexity to them. More than meets the eye.”

O’Neil’s sweat-suit wearing men have a uniformity of dress that encourages a focus on their actions or lack thereof. In her drawing, The Unroomed II, 2011, men float, fall, and are dropped down by unseen forces. Familiarity, humor, misery, malaise, and hope intermingling in what might be seen as a cautionary tale about destruction. Yet O’Neil’s work is not anti-male. Rather, the artist considers these tumultuous and ominous drawings reflections on the necessary and inevitable endpoint that comes before a new beginning.

Alec Soth (American, b. 1969)

The fantasy of escaping from society and starting anew fuels Alec Soth’s Broken Manual, 2010—a photographic essay on the contemporary American hermit. Psychologically charged habitats, tools, and occasionally the person (predominantly white males) populate these oddly compelling photographs. As Soth commented on this series in the February 2012 issue of Artinfo, “I was trying to figure out a way to explore this desire for retreat without making it like a documentary essay on rightwing survivalists.”

Kitty McManus Zurko, Director/Curator
The College of Wooster Art Museum
but it also gestures to the differences between these two generations of artists: Ligon reproduces the sign wholesale (if in a painterly fashion), while Thomas playfully apokes and rearranges the sign’s words to find new aesthetic meanings.” As Thomas stated in his talk at the Cleveland Museum of Art in February 2014, he began this workshop series because he was struck by the fact that “the workers tall it was even necessary to confirm their humanity by saying they were men.”

Marcella Hackbardt (American, b. 1958)

Photographed at various dance studios in Northeast Ohio, Marcelle Hackbardt’s 2007 series, At Bay, investigates what it is like to be the minority gender in dance classes. According to Hackbardt, “Boys grow up within regulated societal pressures that are no less of a challenge for boys than girls—each faces obstacles to the development of a sense of individuality and belonging. All Boys challenges the gender normative and socially approved stereotype of being “all boy” only if they are rough and tumble.”

In a recent conversation, Hackbardt mentioned that when she embarked on this project nine years ago, the boys themselves were not anxious about whether or not to dance in an appropriately male manner. However, when work from this series was subsequently purchased and installed in non-arts public venues, visitors wondered why “gay” photographs of little boys were on display. To mitigate the public’s discomfort, the curator provided additional signage clarifying the intent of the artist. Unfortunately, the act of showing All Boys outside of the sanctioned museum/galery space clearly demonstrates the depth of conflicting ideas on culturally acceptable roles for boys in the 21st century.

About the Artists

Alec Soth was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His work has been included in the 2004 Whitney Biennial and the São Paulo Biennial (2006), and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, mounted a retrospective of Soth’s work in 2010. His documentary essays have been the subject of numerous monographs, including Singing by the Mississippi (2004), MAGNA (2006), and The Last Days of W (2008). He is a member of Magnum Photos, and his work is included in the permanent collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others. The artist lives and works in Minneapolis, and is represented by the Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, and the Weinstein Gallery, Minneapolis.

Robyn O’Neill began her education in English Studies, Art, and Architecture at Kings College, London. She received a BA from Texas A&M University-Commerce (2006), and did graduate studies at the University of Illinois, Chicago (2009). In 2013, the artist participated in Werner Herzog’s Rogue Film School, Los Angeles. Her work was included in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, and the De Maleine Art Center in Iowa, organized a retrospective of her work in 2018. Robyn O’Neill lives and works in Los Angeles, and is represented by the Sargent’s Gallery, New York, and the Talley Dunn Gallery, Dallas.


A photo conceptual artist, Hank Willis Thomas uses video, photography, social media, and installation to address the tension of identity, history, and popular culture. He received a BFA from the School of the Arts, and an MA in Visual Studies from the California College of the Arts, San Francisco, A 2011 fellow at the W.E.B. DuBois Institute, Harvard University, his work has been widely exhibited in the USA and abroad, most recently at The Cleveland Museum of Art and the Transformer Station, Cleveland (2013–16). Thomas’s work is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, The Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Brooklyn Museum—all in New York—and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, among others. Hank Willis Thomas is a native New Yorker, and is represented by the Jack Shwabsky Gallery, New York, and the Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa.

Marcella Hackbardt is an artist, curator, and professor of art at Kent College of Art, Geauga, Ohio. She received a BA from the University of Alaska, Anchorage (1993), and an MFA from the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque (2000). Selected one-person exhibitions include those at the Weston Art Gallery, Cincinnati (2011), The College of Wooster Art Museum (2008), and the Galeria de Poesía Edifusquen University, Guanajuato, Mexico (2006). Selected group exhibitions include Verbena Small Works, Galapagos Gallery, New York (2010), and Phil Valdés, MOCA Cleveland (2011). Hackbardt has been the recipient of two Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Awards (2009 and 2011), and lives and works in MT, Vernon, Ohio.
The timing of SHAPESHIFTING is somewhat serendipitous as contemporary masculinity and adulthood have been major topics in the news this year primarily because Millennials (nearly defined as ages 18–33) are taking about a decade longer than previous generations to arrive at traditional markers of adulthood. There are a variety of reasons for this shift—increased life expectancy, the economy, and changing expectations about gender roles; to name just a few. Unfortunately, this change is usually portrayed in negative terms, particularly in relation to young men, and most news reports leave out positive Millennial traits such as optimism and egalitarianism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Angie Bos, Associate Professor of Political Science, set this project in motion last year when she asked if the CWAM had any exhibition ideas that might support a political psychology symposium on gender that she was organizing. Because I had already started a file on artists investigating masculinity, it was an easy decision to move forward with what became SHAPESHIFTING.

A steering committee met to advise this exhibition, and I would like to thank the following for their expertise and guidance: Angie Bos; Nancy Grace, Director, Center for Diversity and Global Engagement and Professor of English; Scott McCallan ’15, Women’s Gender, and Sexuality Studies Major; and Ryan Ozo, Associate Director of Internships/APEX. Additionally, Doug McQuirf, CWAM Preparation/Collectors Manager contributed to the genesis of the exhibition premise, provided advice throughout and, as always, designed a sensitive installation. I would also like to thank several CWAM gallery attendants for their contributions to this project; Robin Klaus ’16, Art History, for her outstanding editing skills; and Bjorn Olsen ’15, Studio Art, for his design work. I would also like to thank the following for their expertise and guidance: Angie Bos; Nancy Grace, Director, Center for Diversity and Global Engagement and Professor of English; Scott McCallan ’15, Women’s Gender, and Sexuality Studies Major; and Ryan Ozo, Associate Director of Internships/APEX. Additionally, Doug McQuirf, CWAM Preparation/Collectors Manager contributed to the genesis of the exhibition premise, provided advice throughout and, as always, designed a sensitive installation. I would also like to thank several CWAM gallery attendants for their contributions to this project; Robin Klaus ’16, Art History, for her outstanding editing skills; and Bjorn Olsen ’15, Studio Art, for his design work. I would also like to thank several CWAM gallery attendants for their contributions to this project; Robin Klaus ’16, Art History, for her outstanding editing skills; and Bjorn Olsen ’15, Studio Art, for his design work. I would also like to thank several CWAM gallery attendants for their contributions to this project; Robin Klaus ’16, Art History, for her outstanding editing skills; and Bjorn Olsen ’15, Studio Art, for his design work. I would also like to thank several CWAM gallery attendants for their contributions to this project; Robin Klaus ’16, Art History, for her outstanding editing skills; and Bjorn Olsen ’15, Studio Art, for his design work. I would also like to thank several CWAM gallery attendants for their contributions to this project; Robin Klaus ’16, Art History, for her outstanding editing skills; and Bjorn Olsen ’15, Studio Art, for his design work.

Finally, we congratulate and applaud the artists, galleries, and collectors who so graciously participated in SHAPESHIFTING. True to form, these ten artists are attuned to the cultural zeitgeist, and we thank them for their valuable insights, critical eye, and important contributions.

Kris Knight

Kris Knight

Repurposing the style of 18th century French genre painting (such as Watteau and Fragonard), Kris Knight strategically employs this period’s lightly veiled erotic allusion in paintings of lyric landscapes and young men with blushing, dewy skin tones and dreamlike qualities. His benign yet disenchanting characters are, according to the artist, intended to be “lost between youth and adulthood . . . they examine performance in relation to the construction, portrayal, and boundaries of sexual and sensual identities.” Innocence and eroticism co-exist in these highly edited paintings.

However, it is the historical mash-up that gives Knight’s work its bite. As the artist also states, “he . . . skews historical romanticism with a contemporary interest in androgyny, psychotropic alterations, and the post-modern gaze.” Knight’s forthright use of the gaze—the figures look slyly down or straight at the viewer—propose a twist on Laura Mulvey’s Lacanian-based theory of the objectifying effect of the “male gaze,” as the artist explores the power and self-regulation inherent in who is entrancing, or not entracing, the gaze.

Michael Scoggins

Michael Scoggins’ oversized drawings explore subjects ranging from hyperbolic family values to patriotism run amuck. The artist uses his alter ego “Michael S.” to explore American society through intentionally childlike drawings that belie the artist’s serious and weighty subject matter. He combines grade school art-making materials (color pencils and markers on carefully crafted faux notebook paper) with both the language and visual currency of coming of age to create a kind of cognitive dissonance.

In The Invisible #2, 2006, Scoggins coopts comic book heroes to reanimate youthful fantasies about identifying with the incomparable hero who, along with his truly sick d-sidekick, saves the city in peril. Conan the Barbarian, 2008, speaks to personal empowerment as well, but is countered with the historical mash-up of internal projection and conquest. Both drawings ask us to recall the power of our youthful passions before they are muted by the realities of adulthood.

Kitty McManus Zurko

Kitty McManus Zurko

For the exhibition overview:

Please see VOLUME I for the exhibition overview.

CONTEMPORARY

SHAPESHIFTING

MASCULINITIES

VOLUME II

Kris Knight

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)

Kris Knight (Canadian, b. 1980)
About the Artists

Kris Knight grew up in rural Ontario, and graduated from the Ontario College of Art and Design, Toronto, Canada (2002). His exhibitions include those in Canada, the USA, and abroad. In addition to receiving awards Emerging and Mid-Career Artist Grant from the Ontario and Toronto Arts Council since 2006, his work is included in the collections of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Kansas, the Zil Museum of Contemporary Art, Louisville, Kentucky and the Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection, New York. Knight lives and works in Toronto, Canada, and is represented by MULHERIN, New York and Toronto, Canada.

Michael Scoggins attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine (2003), and received an MFA from the Savannah College of Art and Design (2006). He has shown extensively nationally and internationally, and his work is included in major collections including: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Hammer Museum, UCLA, Los Angeles, and the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, Virginia Beach, Scoggins lives and works in Brooklyn, New York, and is represented by Freight + Volume Gallery, New York, as well as galleries in Atlanta, San Francisco, Venice, and Seoul.

Weston Ulff studied at the University of Minnesota-Minneapolis, and received a BFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Influenced by animation, video games, and American Pop Art, he is a printmaker who also works in textiles and sculptures. His published prints and wearable garments have been included in numerous exhibitions including Cotting Contemporary Art Fair, New York (2014), SPRING/BREAK, Miami Beach, New York (2013), the Biennale 2012, New York, and SPRING/BREAK Public/Private, New York (2011). Ulff lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

To Fall On Your Sword means to take personal responsibility for a group notion. It is also the name of an award-winning music and multimedia art collective based in Brooklyn, New York, founded by composer Will Bates. Named Discovery of the Year at the World Soundtrack Academy Awards in 2012, Fall On Your Sword (FOYS) has won a Cannes Gold Lion and two Ocs awards for best music since launching in 2009. FOYS’s recent work includes the score to /Origins directed by Mike Cahill, and the award-winning interactive art installation Private Drive-In.

Brooks Dierdorff is a multidisciplinary artist working in photography, video, sculpture, and performance. He received a BA from the University of California, San Diego (2007), and an MFA from the University of Oregon, Eugene (2012). Dierdorff’s work has been shown in Germany and New York, and he participated in the High Desert Rail Site (HBO) project in Joshua Tree, CA, in 2013. The artist currently lives and works in Ashland, Oregon.

SHAPESHIFTING was organized by the DWM in support of the Monitoring Conference for New Research on Gender in Political Psychology, which took place at the College on October 9–11, 2014. The exhibition was funded, in part, by the Marjet Muček Kostanj Class of 1948, Endowment Fund.

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced without the permission of The College of Wooster Art Museum, all images © 2006–2013 the artists.