

MALE MAN ARTIST STATEMENT

Alun Rhys Jones is an Australian-based artist, whose practice focuses on themes related to identity, commodity, media, and popular culture. Recent work has investigated the use of the body, gender and celebrity in a post internet, late capitalist, consumer society.

Masculinity is in flux. Recent articles into the effects of toxic masculinity on the male psyche have revealed the extent to which men are both the jailors and prisoners of their own emotional wellbeing. Traditional gender stereotypes that encourage men to compete with other men and dominate women (and other men) by being aggressive, worldly, insensitive, physically imposing, ambitious and demanding can cause long term damaging effects as they do not allow the ability for weakness or emotional expression and connection to occur.

This toxic masculinity plays out in the disdain for anything that is coded feminine or homosexual. Boys in the playground are still humiliated and insulted with calls of “don’t be a girl” or “don’t be a sissy”. They are constantly told “boys don’t cry” and “to man up”. This type of socialisation normalises violence and aggressive behaviour and quietly endorses it with phrases like “boys will be boys”. This curtailing of male feeling continues into adulthood with men continually being told to toughen up instead of to open up.

This adherence to traditional masculine ideals and rigid gender roles is connected to increased incidences of depression and suicide in men and to violence against women, including sexual assault and domestic violence. This toxic masculinity tells men there is only one way to be a man, that he must be dominant, aggressive and devoid of any emotion. It forces men to live within the constraints of rigid and narrow gender roles and harms both women and men.

Magazines, TV, films and the Internet are full of these negative stereotypes. Media often portray the ideal man to be muscular and by implication strong, tough and stoic. However the pressure to obtain and maintain the body beautiful portrayed by these images has led to an increase in body dissatisfaction for men and young adults. Many men are very concerned about their own physique and feel pressure to gain weight and become more toned. They were significantly more likely to become depressed and take part in behaviors like alcohol, steroid and drug use.

Suicide is now the leading cause of death for Australian men aged 15-44 and male suicide rates are three times that of women. It appears the pressure to look, act, and harden up may be making some men crack.

This exhibition investigates and deconstructs the traditional tropes of masculinity today.

The original charcoal drawings "The Wrestlers" and "Dysmorphia Playground" comprise photorealistic depictions of crumpled paper bags. However in the drawings the bags are crumpled and distorted, the image printed on their surface twisted and transformed reflecting the aspirational and often unobtainable nature of the body beautiful promoted by the advertising industry and the deconstruction of traditional masculine performance.

The installation work "Club Toxic" comprises a large scale area of gym matt flooring branded with a "Toxic Masculinity" logo. This work questions how ingrained and systemic traditional masculinity is reinforced and enabled in institutional sports and by news media.

"GAYSGAZE" comprises two sets of neon words that flash intermittently between "GAYS" and "GAZE" and is an ironic comment on the appropriation of traditionally gay concerns (such as body culture and mens grooming) by the heterosexual community and the ongoing perception of male homosexuality as the binary "Other" to male heterosexuality.

The straight/gay binary plays out similarly to the male/female binary with heterosexual maleness perceived as normal and dominant whilst femininity and homosexuality are perceived as less than or supplementary. These binaries are problematic for all concerned as they reinforce a hierarchical structure and support binary oppositions such as strong and weak, active and passive and rational and emotional. As such they enforce strict codes of practice and what is and isn't acceptable behaviour, emotion, thought or action.

"Sunbaker" (1937) the photograph taken Max Dupain is an iconic image of the digger, suntanned, strong, robust and the embodiment of Australian manhood. The epitome of national identity and the benchmark for male resilience. The portrayal of the ideal man, both tough and unemotional.

"Sunbaker 2.0" recreates the original image for today, the body is much more muscular, tattooed and a hypermasculine, turbo charged version of its predecessor. The image is crafted to reflect upon the changes in masculinity since the original. However the sand around the perfect body is agitated and disturbed, a storm is looming on the horizon and the surf crashes in the background.

This perfect image is beginning to show cracks in the portrayal of masculinity and the sentiments behind them. With the current #MeToo revelations and concerns of toxic masculinity and its destructive potential, has masculinity really changed or simply been repackaged?

The Classic tradition of Greek and Roman Art continues to this day to influence how we perceive and value the male body. In these Ancient civilisations the male body was deified in these societies becoming the personification of beauty and the physical embodiment of strength, masculinity and virility. Visual media continually rehashes and reproduces these idealised images and regurgitates them for new audiences.

"I, Full Sleeve" is a large scale drawing of a muscular, male arm, Herculean in scale and covered in tattoos drawn with meticulous detail. Disconnected from a body, yet vital and alive it indicates the increasing objectification of the male body in society and a distancing of the physical from the emotional and individual.

The perfect body has become an archetype to achieve, as by obtaining it, the hypermasculine attributes of manliness, virility, strength and power can be achieved. These idealised images of what it is to be a real man are never far away. Media constantly and persistently rehashes these images of male beauty and what masculinity means.

As such the drawing "I, Full Sleeve" encourages the examination of our relationship to masculinity and to question the heteronormative and patriarchal society that values and promotes these images as signs to be emulated.

More optimistically the charcoal drawings "Bromance" and "Hands" reflect upon a burgeoning need for emotional connection and bonding between men and increased acceptance of non traditional male friendships. These images hopefully indicate the potential for men to change, to open up, to empathise and to feel.

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