



xy exhibition examines male identity through October 5, 2009 / Kress Gallery

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LAWRENCE— Male sexuality is determined by the x and y chromosomes, yet what does it mean to be a man? Through October 5 in the Kress Gallery, the Spencer Museum of Art will explore the complexities of this question via a large-scale exhibition with a lower-case title: *xy*. Organized by SMA curator Kris Imants Ercums, *xy* approaches the complicated issue of masculinity from a variety of viewpoints, exploring the topic across time and culture through a wide array of art drawn largely from the permanent collection of the Spencer Museum.

As part of the exhibition, the Spencer website (www.spencerart.ku.edu) will offer a “Write Your Own Label” exercise, where patrons can submit responses to 10 works included in *xy*. The best of these will be selected by the curator, produced as labels, and installed as part of the exhibition. The Museum is also planning fall 2009 programming centered on the question “Are You Man Enough?” Programming is still in development; a forthcoming press release will provide details.

“Whatever your perspective, masculinity remains a complex construct, one that is explored across a range of historical, cultural, and temporal trajectories in this exhibition,” Ercums writes in the exhibition statement. “Rather than attempting to come to a single conclusion, the exhibition strives to excavate hidden meanings, unravel assumptions and provide some new insights into masculinity.”

The first part of the exhibition explores how the physical and visual markers of masculinity such as age, body, and clothes are based on cultural concepts that inform male identity. This exploration begins with the section “Forever Young,” which reflects on boyhood through works like Aaron Siskind’s playful “Divers” series and the work of Beijing-based documentary photographer Liu Zheng. The next section, “Naked,” examines the idea of the male body as a site for both the construction and the dismantling of ideas pertaining to male physicality. Academic studies of the male nude form by artists such as Lawton Silas Parker (1868-1954) contrast with

the more contemporary work of photographers Robert Mapplethorpe (1949-1989) and John Coplans (1920-2003), and paintings by Austrian-born Max Oppenheimer (1885-1954) and Japanese artist Saeki Shunko (1909-1942).

In the final part of this section, called “The Clothes Make the Man,” male identity is explored through the world of clothing and fashion, blurring the lines between conventional norms of dress and notions of gender typically associated with the way a man “should” dress. A contemporary print by Andrew Raftery (born 1962) looks at the rite of passage associated with buying a first suit, while a triptych by Adrian Piper (born 1948) from her famous 1970s male drag performance series *The Mythic Being* complicates this privileged moment.

The second section brings the male body into dialogue with an internalized realm of emotion, feeling, and self-consciousness. In “Work Hard; Play Harder” the distinctions between casual play and more serious endeavors like labor and war become difficult to discern. Moving from a painting by Kansas City artist Ruth Harris Bohan (1891-1981)—an unusual rendition of the famous 1926 Jack Dempsey-Gene Tunney heavyweight championship fight—to the hard-hitting photojournalist depictions of Vietnam by British-born photographer Larry Burrows (1926-1971), this section strives to examine how male identity and self-consciousness are formed through the actions of work and play.

The next grouping, “Degrees of Desire,” transitions to the sexual realm of masculinity and provides a spectrum of desire. A collage by Keith Haring (1958-1990), on loan from the William Burroughs estate, contrasts with the 1950s calendar-girl art of Ernest Chiriaka (born 1910), whose work is part of the Esquire Collection at the Spencer. This section concludes with “Man Enough,” a nuanced, open-ended exploration of the “muscular” and tough side of being a man and the tender, unspoken realm of emotion. Here, a large-scale painting of an effeminate Christ by Will Hickok Low (1853-1932) resonates with a brawny cowboy bronze sculpture by Frederic Remington (1861-1909).

The exhibition concludes with a contemporary video by the Brooklyn-based artist Kalup Linzy (born 1977). This work, “Keys to Our Heart” (2008), was commissioned by Creative Capital and premiered at the exhibition *Prospect. 1* in New Orleans last year. Through a satirical, melodramatic black-and-white love story set in the South, Kalup Linzy blurs distinctions of race and gender to create an insightful portrait of the nuanced interactions between the genders.

Throughout the exhibition, the male body serves as a site of social agency through which norms of conduct and rebellion against normativity are constructed, performed, and contested. By pondering the sociocultural dimensions of male identity, whether through representations of male

space, activity, the body, or idealized archetypes, the exhibition questions the modes and methods of male behavior as realized and represented visually by artists.

Drawn almost exclusively from the Spencer's permanent collection, the exhibition includes paintings, sculptures, photographs, prints and drawings, and new media, ranging from a Roman Imperial era (100 BCE-100 CE) *Torso of Apollo* marble carving to a 20th-century photograph of American teen idol Fabian. This exhibition is part of an ongoing curatorial initiative at the Spencer to explore conceptual topics of contemporary life through the rich, historic holdings of the Museum's permanent collection.

A sampling of the many artists represented includes Brassai, Larry Burrows, Karen Chance, Albrecht Dürer, Hendrick Goltzius, Keith Haring, Dennis K. Helm, Tom Huck, Boris Ignatovich, Graciela Iturbide, Rockwell Kent, Robert Mapplethorpe, Max Oppenheimer, Gordon Parks, Frederic Remington, Sebastião Salgado, August Sander, Aaron Siskind, Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, Andy Warhol, Weegee, Utagawa Yoshitsuya, and Liu Zheng. A complete checklist is available upon request.

A number of works from the Museum's renowned Esquire Collection also are featured, including photographs by Diane Arbus, Eric Avery, Frank Bez, Carl Fischer, John R. Gossage, Rudolph Janu, Art Kane, Jill Krementz, Constantine Manos, and Neil Selkirk, a drawing by Fred L. Freeman, and paintings by Ernest Chiriaka and Howard Forsberg.

This exhibition is offered by the Spencer for educational and artistic purposes; the exhibition contains adult themes and viewer discretion is advised.

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