Machunexity and Manhood: Hunting as a Contemporary Rite of Passage

My recent work deals with my fascination with hunting in rural regions of the United States. While I enjoy spending a great deal of my time outdoors, I have never felt compelled to spend any considerable amount of time stalking and shooting defenseless animals. I do, however, have many close relationships with other men who go hunting on a very regular basis. Since the time of my childhood, I have always felt left out as ‘one of the guys’ because my ideological beliefs have kept me from participating in this male-bonding activity.

The following is the beginning of my investigation into why men continue to go hunting in an age when doing so is no longer a necessity for gathering food. I argue that hunting is a leisure activity that mostly men enjoy in today’s post-industrial society in order to express their masculinity because many contemporary occupations (i.e. computer programming) do not offer outlets to do so.

Bibliography


Allen follows several case studies in an effort to explain why some men deny expression of anger while others cannot control theirs. Those who manifest their anger violently alienate those around them while the former become overly passive. The author notes that men who are hostile typically were raised in harsh conditions while those who choose not to display any emotions grew up in environments of repressed feelings.


Bederman chronicles the highly publicized boxing match between African American world champion Jack Johnson and the white contender Jim Jeffries. The fight was billed as ‘white versus black’ among supporters who sought to see Jeffries win back his title, thus proving his manhood. Upon his defeat, it became clear that white men would have to reevaluate their supposed superiority when a black man once again came out on top. The result of this was a look at ‘primitive man’ as a prototype for how men of the Twentieth Century ought to redefine their notions of masculinity.

The author argues that boys and men struggle to prove their manhood by avoiding psychological regression through dependency upon women, specifically their mothers. Benke claims that men seek superiority by exerting their dominance over women and ‘lesser’ men and by enduring stressful situations without expressing emotions.


JBerger discusses *Forest*, a recent body of work by contemporary Czech photographer, Jitka Hanzlová. The writing describes how her work captures the sensation of being lost in an endless sea of trees. This recurring theme has been important throughout human history, philosophical writing, and my paintings.


Blazina discusses the difficulties surrounding the development of middle-class masculinity following the Civil War. Being that the middle class was literally ‘in the middle’, men noted their confusion with regards to how genteel versus how rough they were supposed to act in the presence of others. Notions of aristocracy began to fade as economic status began to hold greater importance for men who owned their own businesses.


This essay discusses the voracious preoccupation of baseball card collectors. By hoarding and subsequent price inflation, they quickly rendered these pop culture artifacts nostalgic icons of America’s stable and innocent past rooted in male preadolescence and middle-class whiteness. Whether these men are obsessed with nostalgia, identifying with their baseball heroes, or simply collecting cards for profit, they ultimately are asking how much one will pay for their cherished memories.

This documentary follows two high school boys from rural Kentucky over the course of three years as they struggle with grades, identity, religion, and finding a place for each of themselves in the world. They have grown up in a poverty-stricken region long since forgotten by the rest of the country, but hope to one day finding happiness despite their constant hardships.


Courtenay takes a look at the unhealthy and downright harmful lifestyles of rural American men. As they frequently engage in dangerous labor, heavy drinking, and violent pastimes, the author advocates awareness to bring many of these overlooked concerns to light. For many of these men do not express their grief or pain, and frequently end up in serious harm while trying to preserve their masculine image.


Fine researches the importance of the hunting tradition among the workers of the Reo Motor Car Company. Deer season led to massive lapses in productivity, as men would spend weeks in the woods when supposed to be working. She argues that the hunting tradition is an important part of working-class identity among males in especially following World War II when most of the United States had industrialized and men had more leisure time than ever.


In this chapter, Gilmore describes two cultures that have a much different notion of masculinity that we do in the United States. The men of Tahiti are treated exactly as the women are and nearly no differences exist between their behaviors and the
occupations they may hold. The Semai of Malaysia are a group that swears by the observance of non-violence, as harming another is the un-manliest behavior of all.


Claiming that the world has already been mapped and everything has been discovered, contemporary artist Peter Doig rummages through our collective past as inspiration for his latest paintings. His initial journeys take him into the recent history of our world, which has already become unknowable. Once familiar sights and remnants from popular culture are mixed and buried under washes of paint to create places that seem almost recognizable, while strangely exotic.


Hantover’s essay is a short history of the creation of the Boy Scouts of America. He states that early scout leaders were given roles to guide young boys through new opportunities to become young men while working together in the wilderness. Such efforts were seen as a measure to prevent boys from becoming ‘soft’.


Heasley explores the gray area that lies somewhere between heterosexual masculinity and homosexuality. The author states that there are roughly five categories that most straight men fall within depending upon how they express themselves and how comfortable they are being intimate with other men. These categories are all distinguished by various degrees of ‘queerness’, which often make other heterosexual men uncomfortable around them.


Mayer examines white American men at the turn of the Twentieth Century. She writes that their culture had become one of effeminate sentimentality, and that in order to
inspire men to reclaim their manhood, contemporary books and films depicted white men venturing into the jungles of Africa as conquerors of natives and animals alike. Such works like Tarzan carried strong undertones of violence and racist white supremacy.


Takashi Murakami discusses the national phenomenon of Japanese men longing for objects of boyhood nostalgia and their refusal to grow up in an aging society. The parallels between both Japanese and American men following World War II are startlingly similar as they deviate further away from their expected gender roles and become more infantile and effeminate. Particular emphasis is placed upon popular cultural artifacts such as anime (cartoons), manga (comic books), and action figures that grown men continue to consume and collect.


Schwabsky analyzes the recent work of painter Dana Schutz. He discusses the thick, visceral brushstrokes of her paintings in relation to the humorously gruesome subjects she frequently portrays. This idea is particularly useful as transmuting concepts through the physical medium of oil paint requires a deep knowledge of painting history, skillful handling, and a daring sense of exploration.


The Deer Hunter is Michael Cimino’s film about a group of hunting buddies from Pennsylvania who are drafted into the Viet Nam War. The survivors bear deep emotional and physical traumas. Michael, the protagonist returns to the Allegheny Mountains for a deer hunt and reflects upon his philosophy of death, “One bullet, the beautiful kill,” as his once happy life falls apart around him.


This chapter discusses the nature of hunting camp, a place for men to escape their wives for days at a time, while bonding with other men in the woods. Emphasis is placed on the ramshackle structures that hunters use as their ‘man-caves’. It is a revealing look at
the disorderly messes men surround themselves with to make themselves feel more ‘at home’ and comfortable with their masculinities.


Wicks describes the hunter as the longest-standing personification of manhood in our historical imagination. This archetype is used as a basis for comparison to men of the Twentieth Century. Though innumerable advancements in technology and healthcare have been made over the course of human history, especially during the last several decades, the author points out that men still struggle to cope with stress, fierce competition for economic advancement, and dangerous workplaces.


Young offers a personal account of his struggle balancing his own identity with the expectations of rural masculinity. Raised as a boy scout and a hunter, he eventually gave up hunting after witnessing a frustrated hunting buddy unload several rounds on a frog. Years later, he would return to the sport because he felt his connection to the circle of life made him feel like he was fulfilling his duty as a human male.