Furnishing Gender

Katie E. Ott

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FURNISHING GENDER

A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

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May 2019
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Furnishing Gender is a collection of furniture and objects of the home that have been deliberately altered to explore and expose pervasive aspects of toxic masculinity. The work within examines aspects of rape culture, queer culture, and hetero-normal constructs that link our realities to the lies of masculinity and gender difference. It is my intent that the viewer become uncomfortable and my hope that they not shy away from this discomfort, but accept the exhibition’s challenge to be vulnerable, genuine, and to engage in conversations that confront the conventions of traditional gender roles and biases.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gratitude is due to my partner, Hoss for her unyielding love, support, and patience throughout these long three years. To my therapist, for creating a safe space to confront the emotional trauma triggered by the content of this thesis. To my esteemed committee, for their candor, insight, and expectations of rigor that are invaluable to my evolution as an artist. Finally, to the male kitchen staff at Burgatroy FC, for always answering difficult questions about masculinity and male genitalia with grace and poise.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In considering the title for this exhibition, I wanted to capture the concept of furnishing a home, while exploring the subjectivity of our own realities. *Furnishing Gender* is a culmination of furniture and objects of the home that have been deliberately altered to explore, expose, and comment on those aspects of toxic masculinity that have been engrained within us as normal, yet are extremely problematic and indicative of an imbalance of power within the United States, and in some cases the world. The work within examines issues of rape culture, queer culture, and gendering that link our realities to the imbalance of power that is directly related to living in a patriarchal society that thrives on concepts of masculinity. The exhibition uses common language and colloquial phrases that perpetuate gendered imbalance as a jumping off point for artworks that delve deeper into the socially “normal” behaviors that are, upon examination, extremely problematic and harmful.

The social construction of gender and gendered difference can be found everywhere, even in furniture. We interact with furniture in often specific and intimate ways, which lends furniture to creating commentary about the subconscious nature of gender biases. Even the terminology used in furniture is representative of parts of the body. Social historian, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich explores, “if tables and chairs have arms, legs, and toes, do they also have a sex” (Ulrich)? Within material culture it is common practice to gender inanimate objects, especially consumable products, thusly rendering those objects to characterize a given sex, male or female. Because furniture becomes
gendered by the way we use it (Ulrich), it is the perfect medium to explore the divisions of masculinity and femininity as exemplified in our patriarchal culture.
CHAPTER II
MATERIALS AND PROCESS

I classify my work as sculptural furniture. Each furniture piece is constructed using traditional joinery and finishing methods as though the intent of the work is to be functional. I devise and execute several decisions to remove the function of the object in a way that creates commentary based on my research and experiences. There are occasions when wood as a material requires assistance in communicating the complexities of the content. It is in these moments I have chosen to incorporate additional materials to add to the content and context of the work. My materials of choice include wood, pantyhose, textiles, and mirrors. Each of these materials adds its own history, associations, and aesthetics to the work.

Gendered representations evolve over time. In furniture this can be shown through a modern interpretation of the smooth, graceful curves of a cabriole leg that may appear ‘feminine’ to a contemporary eye, while a large chest of drawers with squat feet could be classified as ‘masculine.’ In colonial times however, these interpretations were likely reversed. A well-formed leg was a desirable feature of an upper-class man and therefore representative of a masculine ideal during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Ulrich). Likewise, the arrangement of domestic spaces can tell us a great deal about the constructions of gender roles within the home (Rodriguez Bencosme). In the nineteenth century, the interior spaces of the middle-class home were seen as increasingly feminine. However, nowhere was the hierarchy of the family more pronounced than in the dining room. The dining room was often adorned with iconography of the hunt in wall decoration and color scheme, reinforcing the presence of a competent male bread winner.
(Kirkham 15-16). Even now, dining sets often include only one dining chair with arms, reserved for the ‘man of the house,’ a modern leftover of a not-so-archaic representation of domestic hierarchy.

The home displays a duality of gender, despite being labeled as a ‘woman’s place.’ Likewise, one material stirs connotations of femininity, but has roots in strength and resilience: pantyhose. Allen Gant invented a derivative of the nylon stocking, pantyhose in 1959 at the request of his wife Ethel. Social dress codes required women to cover their exposed skin with nylons in an effort at modesty as dress and skirt lengths became shorter (Caputo). Although nylon stockings and pantyhose are products commonly associated with women, during World War II one would be hard pressed to find a pair of nylons. Because of the strength and resilience of this synthetic material, all nylon-based production was diverted to the war effort to produce parachutes, towropes, aircraft fuel tanks, flak jacket, shoelaces, and mosquito netting. In this context nylon has been hailed “the fiber that won the war” (Cutlip). It is this duality of masculine war efforts and female body associations that makes pantyhose and nylon stockings of interest in my work.
CHAPTER III

VISUAL INFLUENCES

Jenny Holzer, Sarah Lucas, Wendy Maruyama, Senga Nengudi, and Allan Wexler are all contemporary artists who employ a unique, content driven process to stand against adversities created by our contemporary culture. Though each artist forms their own unique voice on a variety of issues, their use of commonplace materials and found objects in unlikely combinations informs my exploration of furniture and social consciousness. Each artist brings to the table their own unique interpretation of this world through their choices in material, style, and content.

Jenny Holzer is an American conceptual artist that uses text-based multimedia installation. Her curiosity of social and cultural theory ultimately led her to the creation of the *Truisms* series (Raz-Russo). The *Truisms* series began as a list of thirty to forty single sentence statements that was presented throughout Manhattan on a series of posters and grew to become her calling card, with several hundred *Truisms* being featured in a variety of media today (Hughes 421).

Holzer’s work developed from this small series of posters to be incorporated into t-shirt designs, LED installations, large-scale projections, and granite and marble benches. While the formatting of the text remains the same, the mode of presentation varies and is displayed in a way that references mass-media culture and advertising. Holzer appropriates the accessibility of advertising to communicate with a wide audience. Being heavily influenced by the Conceptual art movement, Holzer endeavored to create a public, urban art form that can reach the widest audience possible (Walker 125). She achieved this goal using invented text and impersonal style that closely resembles
newspaper headlines. Proclamations of a different sort, these political, sinister, and often contradictory sayings communicate in a way that forces the viewer to draw their own conclusions (Walker 125).

In my own work, there are occasions when form alone seems an inadequate communication method. It is in these instances that I utilize text to further communicate the content of the work. Textual elements are evident in *Normalized Brutality* (fig. 5) in the form of words in place of numbers on a dartboard, as a vehicle to communicate the casual degradation of women that has become normalized within our society. Likewise, in *Boys will be Boys* (fig. 8-9), text is handwritten on the walls of the room to create an immersive environment in which the viewer can read the duality of mental states that accompany the experience and processing of a sexual assault.

While Holzer’s work took on a feminist viewpoint in the format of text-based installation, the feminist work of Sarah Lucas borders on the abject through her mixed media approach and use of found objects. Lucas is an English artist who began her career with the Young British Artists (YBA’s) in the late 1980’s. Her work utilizes visual puns and bawdy humor to explore the gendered issues that exist because of tabloid culture (MoMA). She creates her sculptural work through photography, collage, found objects, and common materials such as pantyhose and cinderblocks.

Often substituting furniture for the human body itself, or parts of the human body, Lucas’ use of found objects references the readymades pioneered by Marchel Duchamp. In her work, *Moon*, Lucas used a found wooden chair as a base on which is placed two cinderblocks wrapped in pantyhose. Affixed to the pantyhose wrapped cinderblocks are two fluff filled balls of nylon resembling a pair of breasts. This work explores female
identity in a world permeated by the male gaze and exemplifies her use of found furniture as a stand in for the female body (Prince 105).

Lucas’ early sculptural work appeared less concerned with the sculptural conventions of form and space, as in her Bunny series which features stuffed pantyhose arranged in a figurative manner on found chairs. Her NUDS series (2009-10), reaches more towards a Modernist sculptural approach. It is in this series the Lucas leans more toward abstraction with the same materials that once formed semi-literal depictions of a human form (Taylor 808). The stuffed pantyhose forms of the NUDS series are twisted and knotted together evoking the tangles of limbs and flesh presented on a plinth of cinderblocks. With an unspecifically illicit feel, these sculptures show a shift towards abstraction and away from found objects in her work. Although still exploring issues of the conventions of gender, sexuality, and identity, the NUDS series presents in the way of more Modernist sculpture by highlighting fragments of the body (Prince 106).

It is Lucas’ affinity for the abject that is of particular interest. Lucas does not shy away from content that may initiate difficult conversations or discomfort in the viewer. My own work explores challenging subject matter and strives to create discussion born out of discomfort. Nice Rack 1-2 (fig. 2-3) utilize physical representations of phalluses to explore the conventions of manhood and gun ownership, while my Trophy series (fig. 4) explores the female form through stuffed pantyhose in distorted arrangements.

Stuffed pantyhose may seem like an outlier on the materials list for many known artists, however in the realm of contemporary feminist art it holds a place of distinction. In addition to Sarah Lucas, Senga Nengudi frequently employs the use of hosiery in her installation and performance based artworks. Unlike her peers at the time, Nengudi
renounced specific political content and ethnic association; defying the belief that an
artist’s work should look a certain way based on their ethnicity (Senga). Her work alludes
at times to physical and mental restrictions placed on women within society. It is this
feminist frame that marked a rare black voice in the predominantly white middle-class
feminist movement of the 1970’s and 80’s. Despite the feminist voice found in Nengudi’s
work, her use of simultaneously masculine and feminine aspects, genderless appearance
in performance, and collaborations with musicians and performers of all genders suggest
that her work is more focused on social institutions and conventions that damage both
men and women (Doran 2).

The *R.S.V.P Reverie* series, Nengudi’s most well-known, has experienced two
different iterations. The first originated in 1975, while a revitalization of the same series
came later in 2005. These installations and performances are predominantly comprised of
pantyhose and sand. Nengudi is quoted on her choice of materials, “Because there was
always an issue about money, my concept was I could take a whole show and put it in my
purse… I liked this idea that a woman’s life is in her purse” (Sherlock 1). Following her
two pregnancies, Nengudi endeavored to create a conceptual material manifestation of
the bodily transformations experienced during pregnancy. These pieces explore the
changing state of the body during pregnancy and the analogous mental states (Odita 2).
Through performance she explores the resiliency of the nylons as a stand in material for
the body, and the breaking point that is reached when the skin can no longer return to its
previous shape.

Nengudi’s introspective work ultimately explores the idea of the transformative
self: A place where growth and change become the cornerstones to the development of
human consciousness. That is, to live one’s life as a work of art (Sherlock 1). Her interest in dance is integral to her practice and is visible in her performances where she stretches, pushes, and pulls the nylons until their original shape can never be retained. Despite her critique of the limitations of the physical body, her work also speaks to the incredible resilience of the female psyche. The title of these series, \textit{R.S.V.P}, offers an invitation. This is a cry away from loneliness. Her work reminds us that our bodies are more than the reduction of forms, and they are not demarcated by one single aspect. Ultimately, our bodies cannot be separated from the living, emotional beings within (Sherlock 2).

Often my work begins in an introspective place. In considering my experiences as a queer woman and how those different from the experiences of others, I can look within and devise concepts that express this frustration with the inequalities that I see and experience. Nengudi’s exploration of pantyhose directly informs the way I use pantyhose in my own practice. In both \textit{Trophy} series (fig. 4) and \textit{Boys will be Boys} (fig. 8-9), pantyhose as a material communicates connections to the feminine, the female body, and elicits feelings of tension and the grotesque.

Much like Nengudi’s exploration of identity, Japanese-American artist Wendy Maruyama delves into her own cultural heritage in her traditional woodworking and installation-based artworks. Maruyama is a furniture maker, artist, and educator who is a female pioneer in the woodworking field. She is one of the first women to graduate with a Master of Fine Arts degree in furniture design from Rochester Institute of Technology (Cooke 301). Her interest in woodworking craft and technique led her to the curriculum at RIT that was heavily based on cabinet making. This influence is evident in much of her early works featuring freestanding and wall mounted cabinetry objects and sculptures.
Despite this influence, Maruyama felt compelled to escape the conservative woodworking atmosphere and experiment with bold colors and surface textures within her early works. Later in her career, Maruyama expanded her work to include popular culture as well as traditional Japanese historical references (Cooke 301).

In her *Turning Japanese: Men in Kimonos* series, inspired by several trips to Japan, Maruyama examines the contradictions of Japanese culture. The series is inspired by the traditional Kubaki form of Japanese theater, named for an all-female dancing group from the seventeenth century. Despite its namesake, no women were allowed to perform in the theater due to a government regulation based on the suspicion and assumption that all women performing were prostitutes. Due to this regulation, men dressed in ‘drag’ to perform the female portions of the theater (Khan Academy). This contradiction is explored within the *Men in Kimonos* series through layers of symbols and digital prints presented via wall cabinets with sliding doors. In the piece *The Black Mirror*, the sliding door to a wall cabinet reveals different truths. When the door is positioned to the left, bars interrupt the mirror, imprisoning the viewer. Positioned at the right, the door shows the same barred view, instead of a mirror behind bars it is an image of a Japanese woman. *The Black Mirror* is additionally a reference to a practice common in early Japan in which older Japanese women would view their reflections in black lacquered mirrors to soften the appearance of lines and wrinkles (Maruyama).

For much of her career Maruyama worked with traditional woodworking techniques and furniture-based designs. In recent years, her work has taken a turn towards the social practice realm, while still exploring her cultural heritage as a third generation Japanese-American. *The Tag Project* considers Executive Order: 9066, which
rose out of post-Pearl Harbor hysteria. In 1942 President Roosevelt issued the order that effectively demanded the internment of hundreds of thousands of Japanese-Americans and resident aliens from Japan (Britannica). Maruyama, influenced by Dorothea Lange’s photographs of the internments showing children and families with identification tags affixed to their clothing, took up the monumental task of replicating 120,000 tags representing those who were interned from her hometowns of San Diego and Chula Vista (Maruyama).

*The Tag Project* is a monumental installation of these 120,000 tags, replicated by Maruyama and hundreds of volunteers. Written on the tags are the names and internment destinations of the individuals, found through government databases. The tags are installed in 11-foot columns and hung from the ceiling. These columns take on a ghost-like appearance, hovering just inches above the ground and softly rustling as the viewer passes by (American Craft). The tags represent the lost dreams, and shattered lives of those displaced by the internments. They serve as a reminder or revelation of the history of Japanese-Americans. *The Tag Project* exists not only as a powerful art installation, but as an advocacy tool to remind us all of the racist histories embedded in the history of the United States (American Craft).

As a woodworker, I find Maruyama’s combination of fine wood working and installation based work to be informative. Her intersections of these two mediums advise my practice and are evident in *Boys will be Boys* (fig. 8-9). A nine-foot table, without a top, extends across a room, held together only by the pairs of panty hose that keep the table suspended inches above the ground. Surrounding this table are handwritten narratives dictating the mental anguish accompanying a sexual assault. Like in *The Tag*
Project, Boys will be Boys (fig. 8-9) utilizes multiple elements to create tension, emptiness, and awareness.

While Maruyama explores her own historical narrative through traditional woodworking techniques, Allan Wexler delves into our general human activity and the environments we construct for ourselves. Wexler is an architect, designer, and artist who has been exploring the foundations of architecture, furniture, and clothing for over 45 years. His work seeks to find the commonalities among these materials, as well as explore an ‘unlearning’ of the conventions of design. He chooses to focus on the mundanity of our daily routines by creating semi-functional objects that are anything but mundane (Wexler).

In his 2009 work, Body Language, Wexler dissects the routine of sitting at a table through the creation of an absurd object. Body Language uses the act of sliding a chair into and away from a table to create abstract language on the floor. Each chair leg has a wooden pencil affixed to the bottom. As the user scoots the chair into and away from the table, a mark of their experience is left behind. This piece asks the question, “What is the language of sitting at a table with another person?” These chairs stand as a metaphor for human interaction and the marks we impart on each other even during something as commonplace as having a seat at the table (Wexler).

All of the aforementioned artists are influential in their exploration of current issues, material choices, and content driven approaches. By examining their work I have been able to incorporate a breadth of skill and process in my own work. Each examines our relationship with socially constructed environment and critiques aspects of human nature. Some artists choose to focus on specific political issues such as Maruyama’s
exposition of the checkered past of the United States’ treatment of immigrants or
Nengudi’s tormented installations showcasing the gendered and racial divide. While
others choose to be broader in their presentation, like Wexler’s experimental furniture
focused on redefining the familiar or Lucas’ appropriation of socially masculine
conventions.
CHAPTER IV
THEORETICAL INFLUENCES

My pursuit of theory is directly informed by my experiences navigating American society as a queer woman. The cumulative encounters of my own existence have led me to many questions and very few answers about the restrictions and freedoms that exist differently for different social groups and demographics. My search for answers looks at critiques of patriarchy that break down the existing social power structure into subsets including the social construction of gender, toxic masculinity, rape culture, and socially accepted gun violence.

The concept of masculinity is embedded within the social and economic structures of the United States, and has taken on a hegemonic state over time. Sociologist Raewyn Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 77). This structure of gendered subordination has long lasting effects on the dynamic of a society as a whole. Our socially accepted methods of communication and interaction are informed by this power structure and influence our ways of categorizing and organizing information about people. In order to communicate effectively within this culture we learn to internalize these beliefs so that they become second nature (Hatty 9). While it may not seem especially problematic to socially categorize traits of men and women for our own societal organization, a deeper examination reveals the toxic nature of a society founded on the direct subordination of one gender through a binary lens.
In order to clarify the language used throughout this thesis, it is important to point out the differences between biological sex and gender to consider how these differences lend themselves to the organization of our social structure in challenging ways.

Biological sex is defined as anatomical characteristics derived from genetic and chromosomal patterns. Female chromosomes, XX, denote female reproductive and sexual organs, while male chromosomes, XY, denote male reproductive and sexual organs (Hatty 111). It is important to acknowledge the presence of intersex individuals who genetically and physiologically exhibit a mixture of these chromosomal and physical characteristics. Gender on the other hand, is a socially constructed assignment of psychological and cultural expressions that are representative of the prevailing ideologies of masculine and feminine traits within a society at a given time (Hatty 111). Directly derived from the social construction of gender are gender roles which Suzanne E. Hatty, Associate Professor of Culture, Epistemology and Medicine at Ohio University defines as, “the beliefs, behaviors, norms, values, and cultural expectations appropriate to either the masculine or feminine gender” (Hatty 111). These ideas of difference aid in preserving the lived reality of male domination within the patriarchy.

The biodeterminist argument seeks to rationalize the socially imposed gendering of behavior by blaming biological factors such as, genes, proteins, hormones, or brain cells. These traits are said to be hereditary and excuses toxic attributes of masculinity as predispositions. Biologically deterministic arguments are often used to justify the stigmatization of women, marginalization of minority social groups, and are strutted by the social inequalities perpetuated by the patriarchy (Kaufman 46). In reality, men and women are 90% psychologically similar. It is in the slim margins of these vast
similarities that the patriarchy has sought to highlight in an effort to retain this power imbalance (\textit{The Mask You Live In}).

Social scripts are learned behaviors that begin in early childhood and take root within the subconscious before age six (Kaufman 12). These scripts are characterized by the prevailing social attitudes that link masculinity to power, including the suppression of all emotion except anger, and the rejection of everything feminine (passivity, weakness). From early childhood on, masculinity becomes a toxic pursuit. Because these learned behaviors of gendering begin even before a child is born (gender reveal parties, nursery decorations, etc.), the pressure to conform to the masculine ideal is insurmountable. In the documentary film \textit{The Mask You Live In}, social psychologists discuss the plasticity of the brain and how brain connections change as a result of experience. Anything a child spends time on, or devotes mental energy to, will strengthen those connections in their brain. If a boy focuses his mental energy on suppressing emotion and building expressions of aggression as he is being socialized to do, those will become prevailing attributes of his brain chemistry. It is no wonder then that, “we raise boys to become men whose very identity is based on rejecting the feminine, and then we are surprised when they don’t see women as being fully human” (\textit{The Mask You Live In}.)

Masculinity exists as an ideology of scripted behavior within gendered relationships and mandates the subdual of a vast array of human needs and forms of expression (Kaufman 13). Not only are the emotional and social needs of men oppressed by these ideals, but men and women also internalize these oppressions resulting in a culture of violent internalized misogyny. Simone de Beauvior states, “In spite of the
inferior role which men assign to them, women are the privileged objects of their aggression” (Kaufman 15). The domination of the other is a fundamental component of hegemonic masculinity and is characterized by the use of force and power (Hatty 181). This violent behavior becomes normalized within the hierarchy of our society. If we are teaching boys to reject the feminine and that the worst thing they can be labeled as is ‘a girl,’ then it is not surprising that violence is emblematic of what it means to be ‘a man.’ This prevailing entitlement of superiority is reinforced through social linguistics that rationalize men as violent individuals (boys will be boys). In this way, men come to view violent behavior as a means to affirm their self-identity and enhance their self-esteem (Hatty 59). It is violence against women that becomes the ultimate expression of our social value of females (Hatty 69). Likewise, Hatty notes, “the pressures to speak and act violently are everywhere… Violence is not a deviant act; it is a conforming one” (1).

A violent penchant towards women is evident especially through the lens of rape culture. Southern Connecticut State University characterizes rape culture as an environment where sexual violence is normalized, and rape is customary as excused through the media and popular culture. This is perpetuated through misogynistic language, objectification of women, and the romanticizing of sexual violence. Feminist journalists Cristen Conger and Caroline Ervin diagnose a major facet that connects rape culture with a toxically masculine culture: “If a woman resists sexual intercourse, it may be perceived as a direct threat by men to their masculinity, triggering a crisis of male identity and contributing to sexual control and violence as it is seen as a way of resolving this crisis.” This is evident in what Conger and Ervin define as a “bro-coded culture” (143). Likewise, The Mask You Live In discusses the bro-code as a silence surrounding
events and actions known to be ethically wrong but enabled by prevailing social structures. The betrayal of other men in these circumstances will result in being ostracized and it is out of fear of losing their masculine status that men often remain silent in situations of sexual violence. Hatty discusses this in terms of young male syndrome, which is the expected demonstration of continued competition for success (sexual conquest) within the hierarchy of a male social group (Hatty 55) and gender studies sociologist Michael Kimmel, in terms of locker room syndrome, “a fear of being judged as inadequately masculine by other men” (Kimmel 224).

Sexually violent entitlement has its roots in popular culture and media portrayals of masculine ideals as shown in the documentary film *The Mask You Live In*. Mainstream pornography exists as the dominant sexual education for most young people within an education system that prioritizes abstinence only sex education. Adolescents are often inadvertently introduced to pornographic media while they browse the Internet via advertisements or they turn to it in honest curiosity about sex in general (*The Mask You Live In*). The clichéd narratives that often depict violence toward women, an avoidance of foreplay, and penetration only sexual intercourse, are then interpreted as what women want from sex and how men are supposed to perform during sex (PornHub). This creates a culture of normalized brutality and the implication that women exist only for men to have sex with. The implications of these belief systems are evident in that exposure to porn increases the acceptance that women desire sexual violence (rape myths) by 31% (*The Mask You Live In*). Furthermore, we exist in a culture that rewards men for sexual conquest while shaming women for expressing any kind of sexual impulse for fear of being ‘slut-shamed.’ This contributes to a culture where most victims of rape or sexual
assault never report for fear they will not be believed (Harding 1). And within young male culture, violence can become the binding factor that knits together a community. Within this system, coercive sex (rape) and sexual violence become a “form of institutionalized recreation for young males, an explicit gesture of group membership” (Hatty 69).

In addition to the devastating effects of sexual violence and rape culture, gun violence is yet another form of toxic masculinity that has seen a pertinent rise over the last few decades to the point of social desensitization. The gun as a phallic symbol is particularly pertinent in our exploration of the link between masculinity and gun violence (Connell 212). The aggressive nature of Second Amendment entitlement within the United States is not surprising. Gun organizations are inherently masculine in their style and taking away guns is akin to emasculating the man (Connell 212). According to the news source Politico, in the past thirty-five years, nearly all mass shooters in the United States are male. This statistic looks at the ninety-six mass shootings between 1982 and January 2018. Men committed all but two. Even more harrowing is that as of November 2018 there have already been three hundred seven mass shootings in the US since January 2018 (Gun Violence Archive). Despite the stigmatization of urban America being the epicenter of violence, most school shootings happen in rural or suburban areas and the vast majority of school shooters are white and male (Hatty 244).

Furthermore, many mass shooters feel as though they have been wronged in some way through the entitlement chain of masculinity. Perhaps they have not been able to achieve financial or sexual success in a way that they deem ‘man enough.’ This perceived shortcoming often empowers men to seek revenge or compensation for being denied what
they feel entitled to (Connel 213). For example, Elliot Rodger killed six people in Santa Barbara in May 2014 after posting a YouTube video in which he expresses seeking retribution for being denied sex from women (Kiesel).

In theory, women have equal access to the cornucopia of guns available for sale in the United States. So why then are they not committing mass acts of violence at the same rate or scale as men? As discussed previously, the link lies in the toxic ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Sociologist Erid Madfis states, “Women tend to internalize blame and frustration, while men tend to externalize it through acts of aggression” (Kiesel). Our society is immersed with imagery that reinforces violent behavior as the norm such as video games, sports, and the military, among others that all work together to reinforce the distorted reality of masculinity.

Media images affect people. Numerous studies have reported on exposure to violent imagery among young men and boys. This exposure leads to less empathy to the pain and suffering of others, greater fear of the world, and a greater likelihood of behaving aggressively toward others. This constant exposure causes desensitization. An example of this can be seen in the U.S. Army, which uses video games to desensitize soldiers to the violence of combat. If one spends hours a day killing people in mass numbers in a video game, it will have a desensitizing effect on the real act of killing (The Mask You Live In).
CHAPTER V

EXHIBITION ANALYSIS

*Furnishing Gender* is composed of wall hanging furnishings and furniture that incorporate mixed media to expose the damaging effects of the living in a society divided by gender difference. Furniture and home furnishings are cultural objects. They are enmeshed within our social practices and their uses often extend beyond of the realm of functionality (Rodriguez Bencosome 138). This exhibition investigates those moments where furniture is less concerned with its function and more concerned with social interpretation. The work speaks critically of our subconscious gender biases and uses dashes of humor to break the ice of discomfort a viewer may experience.

![Image of Grow a Pair](image.png)

*Fig. 1. Grow a Pair (detail). 2018.*

*Grow a Pair* (fig. 1) is a wall-hanging diptych exploring the mental preparation of self to enter a public space from a binary (male/female) point of view. These entryway shelves are reminiscent of a furnishing that would hold keys or other essentials by the
door to a home. In lieu of keys, on one half hangs pantyhose, pierced by meat hooks and stretched by salt gathered in the feet. This testicular form references the title, *Grow a Pair* (fig. 1), and highlights the absurdity of the social expectations of manhood; that growing a pair (of testicles) will create an environment of superior masculinity, and guard the wearer against the stigma of being seen as anything less than masculine.

The second shelf of the *Grow a Pair* diptych mirrors the first, but in place of testicular representations, this portion alludes to a different ‘pair.’ That is, a pair of breasts. Pierced by meat hooks as well, a bra hangs toward the floor with large rocks sewn into the cups. These rocks add both visual and conceptual weight. The burden of femaleness, expressed by the weight of these rocks, parallels the expectations placed on female bodies to conform and perform in ways that society deems demure, passive, and conforming to the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity. On each shelf is embedded a mirror, meant to inspire self-reflection at both the absurdity and reality of existing within these gendered stereotypes.
As with many titles in this exhibition, *Nice Rack 1-2* (fig. 2-3) take their namesake from colloquial phrases common in the United States. ‘Nice rack’ is generally used to describe a woman’s breasts in a lewd manner, as a catcall or otherwise. *Nice Rack 1-2* (fig. 2-3) are comprised of two gun racks built to hold dildos as opposed to guns. According to Connell, “it is a cliché that the gun is a penis-symbol as well as a weapon” (Connell 212). Considering this insight, it is only fitting that an alternate, more feminized phallus takes the place of distinction on these gun racks. Connell elaborates that the defense of gun ownership is directly tied to hegemonic masculinity in that if you take the guns away from the man you essentially emasculate him (Connell 212). Likewise, due to widespread penis size anxiety many cisgender men view dildos as a threat to their masculinity (Almgren and Gustavsson). *Nice Rack 1-2* (fig. 2-3) take these associations and insecurities and present them proudly on the wall.
Fig. 3. Nice Rack 2. 2018.
Hunters often display their best kills in the form of taxidermied trophies hung on the wall. In a study of nineteenth-century interiors, iconography of the hunt and references to dead animals are linked to a competent male provider (Kirkham 16). 

*Trophy* series (fig. 4) explores this research in tandem with the expression ‘trophy wife,’ which describes women in terms of conquest. Likewise, sexual conquest is one of the cornerstones of masculinity (*The Mask You Live In*). With this in mind, I constructed three wooden mount boards in shapes reminiscent of antlered deer mounts, and affixed not a taxidermied animal, but stuffed pantyhose with a steel armature to hold the legs in grotesque positions. These legs protrude out and upward from the wall and communicate the absurdity of ‘collecting’ women as sexual conquests, as well as the damaging social effects of viewing women as objects.

![Image of trophy series](image)

*Fig. 4. Trophy Series, 2018.*
In patriarchal societies in which toxic masculinity and internalized misogyny become the rule, normalized brutality toward women is a vital part of maintaining the power structure. According to the documentary film *The Mask You Live In*, high levels of normalized sexual brutality among young men begin with experimentation with and exposure to mainstream pornography. This normalization is reinforced with degrading gendered terminology. *Normalized Brutality* (fig. 5) is a mahogany cabinet with an altered dartboard that replaces the number labels with derogatory slang terms for women compiled from the most popular pornography website Pornhub. To play a game of darts in this context would be to throw a sharp object toward a textual representation of the feminine. To compare an act of violence with a game parallels the social desensitization to violent acts as society habituates to the exposure to mainstream pornography and violence in video games (*The Mask You Live In*). The documentary film *The Mask You
Live In defines the great set-up of masculinity as “raising boys to become men whose very identity is based on rejecting the feminine, and then we are surprised when they don’t see women as being fully human.” Likewise, Hatty discusses a group mentality for violence as becoming “a form of institutionalized recreation for young males, an explicit gesture of group membership” (Hatty 68).
Masculinity is not a biological imperative, but a social ideology and construct that is dependent on gendered relationships. Insurmountable pressure to attain an unreachable masculine ideal is subconsciously engrained in boys as early as age six (Kaufman 12). This pressure encompasses all aspects of masculinity such as competitiveness, aggression, anger, stoicism, etcetera (Gordon). *Man Up* (fig. 6) is a visual representation of this enduring endeavor to prove man-hood and how this struggle is set for failure by design. This wooden ladder leans against the wall, signifying the climb to the top of the masculine ideal. The bottom rung of the ladder remains intact, while every other rung is broken, the shattered pieces littering the surrounding floor. The first rung of the ladder is worn with footprints showing the ghosts of those who have tried in vain to reach the top.
Other rungs are broken and engraved with the toxic idioms that have created an environment of failure and as such have been broken. The top of this ladder is unreachable by design, as is the construct of masculinity.

Fig. 7. Man Up (detail).
There are certain sexist phrases embedded within our regular and socially accepted speech patterns that carry with them devastating consequences. ‘Boys will be boys’ is one such idiom. It is socially acceptable to excuse certain negative behaviors in boys and young men by passing them off as a biological imperative of being male. Through this process many boys and men come to understand certain violent or aggressive behaviors as something they cannot control. This internalization is not only damaging to the people around these boys and men, but “contributes to a toxic foundation to boys’ senses of self” (Clemens).

*Boys will be boys* (fig. 8-9) is an installation composed of a nine foot table suspended from the ceiling with pantyhose and acrylic text mounted to the wall. The text is a fractured stream of consciousness narrative recalling my own sexual assault. Much like actual recall of a traumatic event, the acrylic text casts shadows of the words on the wall distorting the text and eluding to the difficult process of piecing together a traumatic event. The content of the text is a combination of narrative recall and inner dialogue that cycles between denial and acceptance of the event.

![Fig. 8. Boys will be Boys (detail), 2019.](image-url)
The centerpiece of the installation is a nine-foot table that serves as physical manifestation of this trauma. It stretches across the length of the room, an expanse of empty space replacing the tabletop. The aprons of the table are bent inward, creating a corset-like bow in the emptiness. Each table leg wears a leg of pantyhose, which not only suspends the table inches from the ground in a dramatic display of tension, but is the only thing holding the table together. Feelings of emptiness, powerlessness, tension, suspense, and anxiety often accompany sexual assault. This table is the static, broken emptiness of a victim surrounded by a story about how boys will be boys.

Fig. 9. Boys will be Boys, 2019.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

My work is driven by a feminist agenda and fueled by critiques of patriarchy, gender norms, theories of toxic masculinity, and my own personal narrative. The artwork provokes and questions gendered norms that result from the social acceptance of toxic masculinity, in order to start a dialogue that will aid in its reversal. That is not to say the case is hopeless. The plasticity of the brain remains throughout adulthood, but the brain must endure the same kind of social conditioning to reverse the ideals of internalized misogyny and re-learn how to exist in acceptance of gender equality.

As discussed thus far, the social implications of hegemonic masculinity as fueled by a patriarchal society are grave at best. It is not the purpose of this thesis or exhibition to solve these problems. Sarah Lucas puts it best, “I am not trying to solve the problem. I’m exploring the moral dilemma by incorporating it.” These moral dilemmas are engrained deeply within our society and the only solution will come out of discourse and communication regarding these toxic aspects of our social environment. It is the purpose of the work then to create commentary and visually communicate these issues so that we may initiate discussion about the content and shed light on the fabricated reality of gendered difference that harms us all.


Hughes, Gordon. “Power’s Script: Or, Jenny Holzer’s Art after ‘Art after Philosophy.”


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