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A few weeks, maybe months …

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A FEW WEEKS, MAYBE MONTHS…

by

TYLER DAVID MANN

Under the Direction of JILL FRANK, MFA

ABSTRACT

_A few weeks, maybe months..._ is an exhibition of photographs that contemplates the societal expectations of the gender binary in the context of travel. The work considers the intersection of manhood with my transgender identity and examines definitions of masculinity and gender. The American road trip is historically a masculine rite of passage which in my case will never fully come to pass. Discrepancies in imagery throughout the work interrupt the conventional narrative structure of the road trip. Acknowledging that the acquisition of masculinity is a futile act, the journey then becomes a complex act of reconciliation.

INDEX WORDS: Masculinity, Gender identity, Travel, Road trip, Bathrooms, Photography, Poetry, Storytelling, Narrative
A FEW WEEKS, MAYBE MONTHS…

by

TYLER DAVID MANN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2017
A FEW WEEKS, MAYBE MONTHS…

by

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Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
May 2017
DEDICATION

For Mom and Dad

and for Michael, Wesley, Sara and Kitiara.
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1 INTRODUCTION

The earliest notions of this work began with the realization that I felt disconnected from my body. My formative years were spent attempting to understand a wrongness that flowed through me. Something wasn’t right, and nothing in my female gender role fit or felt comfortable. The feeling of right and wrong within your idea of self is developed from a need to understand your identity and place in society. I recognized that my body was incompatible with the gender to which I was socialized. Eventually, at the age of twenty-two, I made the decision to begin taking hormones to transition my body into a more masculine form. During these transitional years, I have attempted to understand masculinity and manhood. After many failed attempts at identifying with the men around me and by processing some self-destructive beliefs, I eventually grew into a feeling of “rightness.” This rightness, however, came along with complications connected to masculinity; namely, the strangeness of male privilege and my relationship to women. Navigating this complex terrain activated this body of work and the experimental pieces that preceded it.

A few weeks, maybe months... conceives of the American road trip as a masculine rite of passage that will never fully come to fruition. Photographs through car windshields with dashboard horizon lines and cinematic landscapes signify the road trip. These are arranged around the gallery to construct a nonlinear timeline for the viewer. Photographs of urinals interspersed periodically with these timeline images complicate the structure by breaking up the visual narrative of the road trip. Closely cropped images of my body, taken directly from a first-person perspective, also appear in the road trip timeline. These images offer analysis and examination of the bodily changes I have undergone. These disruptions emphasize the futility of acquiring masculinity and accentuate the unattainability of “ultimate” maleness/masculinity.
Figure 1.1 “In the distance.”
Archival inkjet print, mounted on aluminum, 20 x 30 in., 2016

Figure 1.2 “Arms out straight. Like telephone wires.”
Archival inkjet print, mounted on aluminum, 20 x 30 in., 2016
These images act as a form of poetry, each image a stanza within the larger “text.” Poetry is expansive in style and format. It lends itself to interpretation and experimentation. The photographs are metaphors, emotional placeholders, and/or descriptors for both literal places and figurative spaces. Symbols and metaphors are essential to developing new ways of communicating. I am using these literary tools to form a visual language for an experience in which current terminologies and theoretical writings are dynamically evolving.

Figure 1.3 Alec Soth, Cemetery, Fountain City, Wisconsin 2002

Photographs can be seen as a form of poetry. In my practice, I have always envied the power of poetry and metaphor to illuminate an idea or concept through text. Alec Soth is one photographer whose images demonstrate the poetic possibilities of a visual medium. My initial introduction to Alec Soth’s work was not particularly impactful; however, as my interest in the interaction of narrative, poetry and photography grew, his work grew in relevance. In an interview in April 2015, Alec Soth talks about the analogous relationship between photography and poetry. Soth says that there is a rhythm and flow to the ways that images can interact and
have a suggestion of narrative.¹ He contrasts this suggestion of narrative with film’s capabilities. Film is beholden to a certain format of storytelling, he says, whereas photography and poetry are free from the constraints of traditional narrative structures. These traditional structures have felt limiting in my own practice: in my previous video work, I struggled with developing a cohesive narrative. Poetry’s expansive style and format lends it to many interpretations and experiments. I am interested in the ways that photographs can behave in a similar way and how the relationship between images evolves through this process.

Concepts of time and the passage of time form another theme in this body of work. Instead of following a linear timeline, this work invokes a timeless space in which summer, winter, fall, and spring concurrently exist. Past, present, and future are indistinguishable, and the amount of time between events is unknowable. The title of this exhibition, A few weeks, maybe months..., directly references this timelessness by being intentionally unclear on how much time has passed or is passing. In the following sections, I expand on these topics and their importance in this body of work.

Figure 1.4 “Holding on to dissonance.”
Archival inkjet print, mounted on aluminum, seven 8x12 in. images stacked, 2016
2 GENDER AND MASCULINITY

Judith Butler defines gender as a performance that is socially conditioned to maintain gender within a binary system. Bodies are therefore traditionally placed in one of two categories: female or male. The presentation of gender is determined by certain acts, which are inherently recognized as either expected or unexpected based on the perceived biological sex of the individual. Operating within these cultural standards, an individual’s body is gendered based on repetitive behaviors that are perceived as female or male in nature. Gender as a constructed identity can change with great fluidity; fluctuating quickly as behaviors adapt to different situational experiences. How fluid can the spectrum of gender be? A person might shift across that spectrum within a single day or over a lifetime.

Butler further implies that gender is a performative act based in a societal belief system. Masculinity and femininity each have their socially constructed responsibilities and expectations. In an American society belief system of gender, masculinity is traditionally associated with stoicism, power, and strength; femininity with intimacy, fragility, and weakness. Society uses these expectations or preconceptions to delineate male from female. When an individual strays from these standards, misunderstandings and negative responses commonly occur. Gender rules are carefully guarded by western society and change is a difficult path.

These dualistic relationships are echoed within the LGBTQ+ communities. Behaviors such as gender and sexuality policing, misogyny, and privilege are equally present, if not magnified. Femme-presenting people are judged to be weaker or less important in society at

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3 Ibid.
large, and that pattern is reiterated within the queer community. This behavior stems from the
belief that gender is not fluid, but constant, and that certain privileges should be aligned with
gender conformity.

A masculine-presenting individual is endowed with extreme privilege passed on through
social hierarchy and systemic oppression. As someone who could be defined as “passing” (my
appearance aligns with society’s expectations of what a man should look like), I have
consequently gained those privileges associated with masculinity. Through that acquisition, I
have experienced a level of personal security that many trans-people are not afforded. I consider
these ideas of status and power in terms of travel and the freedoms that I’m granted. During the
creation of A few weeks, maybe months... I experienced many moments in which the fear and
anxiety of being “discovered” were intense.

As the project progressed, I became increasingly aware of the privileges I possessed
traveling as a white man. I have always been interested in the concept of masculinity; the road
trip gave me fresh example through which I could analyze masculine privilege in a new way. By
being raised and socialized female, then transitioning later in life, I am able to compare and
contrast the different ends of the gender spectrum and the social consequences and benefits of
each gender presentation. This experience has made me intently cognizant and methodical in my
analysis of gendered privilege. Through this project I have discovered both a sense of inner
strength as well as an intense discomfort with the extreme systemic imbalances present within
American culture.
3 THE AMERICAN ROAD TRIP

Figure 3.1 “Hot or Cold”
Archival inkjet print, mounted on aluminum, 20 x 30 in., 2016

Travel is exciting, dangerous, and is often a self-defining experience. It redefines our understanding of home and what it means to belong. The road trip develops a rhythm. The road noise, the blurred landscapes, and the constant motion create a sense of change and possibility. The car maintains a consistency, giving you a sense of home; it is a unifying presence. The car is also an intimate space that provides a safe and secure place for self-reflection. Traveling alone is a cathartic experience, but can also produce anxiety for a trans-individual. The road trip has the ability to amplify all fears but also to diffuse them with the beauty and romance with which the road trip is often associated.
The road trip appears repeatedly in American popular culture. Many of these tales glamorize life on the road. Road trip films and literature propagate the idea of the road trip as a time of self-discovery and unbounded freedom. Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, one of the most notable pieces of literature on road culture, embellishes those sentiments through wild descriptions of travel and explicit masculine centered ideals typical of the time in which the book was written⁴. Mary Paniccia Carden notes that the character Neal Cassidy “puns on the word ‘auto’ making it mean both ‘car’ and ‘self.’ He merges the two into a vehicle for performance of an alternative masculinity, a site where male sexual virility, male freedom, and male power converge.” She goes on to state that both Neal Cassidy and Jack Kerouac “attempt to replace the model of

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manhood dominant in capitalist America with a model of manhood rooted in foundational American ideals of conquest and self-discovery.\textsuperscript{5}

The road trip is a common theme throughout photographic history as well. Photographers such as Robert Frank, Ed Ruscha, Inge Morath, Garry Winogrand, Joel Meyerowitz, William Eggleston, Lee Friedlander, Jacob Holdt, Stephen Shore, Bernard Plossu, Victor Burgin, Joel Sternfeld, Alec Soth, Todd Hido, Ryan McGinley, Justine Kurland, and Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs, have all tapped into the road trip experience.\textsuperscript{6} They all were drawn to the American highway for various reasons, as Ronald Primeau describes in \textit{The Romance of the Road},

Free from the constructive context of the day-to-day, life on the road brings what anthropologists have called a liminal process of “mid-transition in a rite of passage” […] where people in motion are suspended not only in space and time but between what they think they know about the past and what they have reason to suspect will be inevitable when they get home.\textsuperscript{7}


\textsuperscript{6} David Campany, \textit{The Open Road: Photography & the American Road Trip} (New York: Aperture, 2014).

The photographer revels in artistic freedom, journeys of self-discovery, and the search for “authentic” American experiences. Driven by the desire to find the essence of America,
documentary photographers traveled the country to gather “factual evidence” by recording people, places, and cultures. The photographers employed by the Farm Administration Act of the Great Depression highlight this window into America. This body of work dramatized the depression era experience—mediated, of course, by the personal subjectivity of the photographer. According to David Campany, Robert Frank’s pioneering work *The Americans*, published in 1958, was the beginning of the photographic roadtrip genre. The images in this book not only chronicled 1950s American culture, but also significantly affected by Frank’s own subjectivity.

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Campany.
Bathrooms are traditionally designed for male convenience: urinals provide walk-up relief, men’s bathrooms are often closer than women’s bathrooms, and men’s bathrooms typically have more toilets because urinals take up less space than toilet stalls. These design features reiterate the social status of men and masculinity as the dominant gender. In the article “Stalled: Gender-Neutral Public Bathrooms,” authors Joel Sanders and Susan Stryker reference the bathroom as “a space that upholds the status quo by maintaining gender binaries accomplished through the spatial segregation of the sexes, justified by anatomical difference.”

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In Judith Plaskow’s article “Taking a Break: Toilets, Gender, and Disgust” she lays out the societal understandings of where each person belongs and the beliefs around gendered bathrooms: “Sex-segregated lavatories declare that there are two and only two genders, that everyone is either male or female, that gender is fixed and self-evident, and that there is some undefined danger in men and women using toilets in a shared space.”\(^{10}\) Implied by both of these theories is the cultural belief that the regulation of bathroom use is somehow a publicly defined business.

\[Figure 4.2 \text{“Urinal #29”}
\text{Archival inkjet print, mounted on aluminum, } 7\times5\text{in. 2016}\]

The hyper-gendering of public bathrooms means that relieving yourself is not a right if you do not conform to these gendered standards. A person who does not conform, therefore, has absolutely no access to a public restroom. Rather than providing a sense of relief, bathrooms were a source of stress during my road trips, as the worry over discovery loomed each time I stopped. These layers of significance made the urinal a useful signifier for a trans-man’s bathroom anxiety.

In *A few weeks, maybe months*... the photographs of urinals complicate the viewer’s understanding of the road trip narrative by processing it through the lens of queer identity. Placing the urinal images between road trip “stanzas” disrupts and redirects the viewer’s attention to something that seems out of place. This visual disruption mimics my experience of being on a road trip and having the long stretches of tranquility interrupted by short bursts of bathroom-induced stress and annoyance.

By photographing urinals, I am also looking at their object-ness or thing-ness. Urinals have feminine qualities in their shape and design. The urinal is specifically designed for genitalia commonly associated with men, yet the urinal is frequently vaginal in shape and structure, which emphasizes heteronormative ideals.

The urinal is a significant part of modern art history thanks to Marcel Duchamp and his ready-made urinal, placed upside down in a gallery in 1917 and titled *Fountain*. Through this act of re-contextualization, the urinal takes on a new, non-utilitarian meaning. The urinal’s intended use is no longer present. In the queer or trans context, the urinal is again rendered non-utilitarian. In both cases, the urinal’s function is subverted.
Duchamp had a feminine alter ego, Rrose Sélavy, which lends greater relevance to Duchamp within discussions of queer identity. Although the associations of cross-dressing and queerness were not quite the same as they are today, Duchamp’s place in queer art history is crucial and relevant.

4.1 Are Urinals Camp

I would be remiss if I did not address camp when talking about photographs of urinals. Specifically: are urinals camp? Urinals are fixtures that directly reference sex and sexuality. They are designed explicitly for the male body, but are feminine in form. Camp, as described in Susan Sontag’s essay “Notes on Camp,” is exaggerated sexuality and “things-being-what-they-are-not.” She further goes on to describe Art Nouveau objects that “convert one thing into something else.” A urinal is functional for specific type of body; however, to those who cannot use the urinal for its intended function, it becomes something else entirely. The shape and design become the focus, and through a typological comparison, the urinal evolves into a multitude of sexual and non-sexual objects, masculine and feminine.

From the perspective of someone who has no use for a urinal, the futility of these objects is palpable. The urinal also has a performative quality that demands presentation of masculinity.
is in its most extreme form. This act of masculine presentation is concurrently homophobic and homoerotic.

Although they are used for elimination, the urinal’s feminine aesthetic demonstrates the exaggerated sexuality Sontag describes in her explanation of “camp.” This over-design seems campy: vessels that accept the male penis, but for the purpose of elimination (often next to another man) rather than intercourse.

![Figure 4.3 “Urinal #56”](image)

Archival inkjet print, mounted on aluminum, 7x5in. 2016

Men’s rooms traditionally are a site for sex amongst men, and the urinal is a fixture where sexual acts may occur. Therefore, the urinal symbolizes the homoeroticism of the men’s room. In his article “Warhol’s Camp,” Matthew Tinkcom defines camp as:
The alibi for gay-inflected labour to be caught in the chain of value-coding within capitalist political economies…. This sense of camp’s alibi preserves the tension of gay work as being produced under conditions where it is frequently a hazard to risk being named as gay, either by self-proclamation or through the act of being ‘outed’ by others.¹⁴

There is a level of risk and innocence in the cruising of a bathroom for sex. These qualities amplify the campiness of both the urinal and the men’s bathroom. The bathroom’s place in queer culture is prominent and directly relevant to current politics on bathroom use. Who is and who isn’t allowed to use a bathroom?

5 THE POETICS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

I am not male nor am I female. I am not straight nor am I gay. By releasing these binaries, can I resolve my identity through the creation of something else entirely? When changing one’s gender, the term “transition” is used: a gender transition. This process is defined as “a period of changing from one state or condition to another.”  

When a transition occurs, you must become the other, male to female, female to male, as if a person could ever really be one or the other after experiencing both. After the transition, a person is labeled as Trans(gender), and is never really able to be situated within the binary. Transcendence or transcendent are terms more relevant to the experience. Transcendence is defined as “extending beyond the limits of ordinary experience,” or “exceeding usual limits.” Using this term creates less pressure to conform to a definition that may never truly fit. Reflecting on experiences from both sides of the gender spectrum gives a deeper understanding of the world that exceeds the usual.

According to its Greek etymology, metaphor literally signifies a “carrying over.” And indeed, on the traditional understanding, metaphor is considered to carry a term beyond its original, literal meaning and toward a new, figurative sense (as when we say for instance, that an idea is over your head). By transporting a word beyond what is proper to itself, would not the metaphorical operation exemplify how transcendence is at work within language? And more broadly, if the meaning of each word could be said to point toward something other

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than itself, would not all language be metaphorical and, as such, a mode of transcendence…

A metaphor causes the production of something that didn’t previously exist to become evident. It is an understanding and image of the world that wasn’t clear before. Davidson writes:

A word does not serve, first and foremost, to designate an object; its literal meaning, or reference, is not primary. Instead, the meaning of a word is always in deferral, because it is always deferred to another word or context. [...] To see something as this or as that – to see one thing as another– is to see metaphorically, and since the meaning of words is always in deferral to other words, it can be said that all language is governed by the rule of metaphor.

Metaphor is an important device upon which art is heavily reliant. Art is inherently a symbol and therefore a mediation between the literal and the metaphoric. Metaphors are a product of symbol development. Symbols are conceived in order to better understand and convey our experiences. Symbols are created and recreated; the more this process is repeated the more insight is gained. A symbol is a transformation: the literal into the metaphorical, a meaning that shifts into something else. Metaphors are a way of explaining a particular phenomenon through the use of familiar objects. These objects often contain a hidden, implied, or implicit comparison that are seemingly unrelated.

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18 Ibid.
Metaphors are helpful in defining and understanding myself. Metaphors are stand-ins, a thing that is really something else. They are precise linguistic and visual tools that help illustrate my gender experience: the idea that I am stand-in for something else, hidden or implied, the thought that I am one thing and another. I have thought about these are distinctions in terms of the binary definitions of gender. Metaphor allows for the blurring of those binaries; some things are not always what they seem.

Photography is also inherently metaphorical, a vehicle to explain an experience. Feinstein references Susanne Langer: “it [the work of art] is an outward showing of an inward nature, an objective presentation of subjective reality (1957).”²⁰ This presentation of subjective reality is photography at its best: a still image of something mediated by the artist’s subjectivity. Seeing itself is a mediated and implicitly subjective experience. What is seen or perceived by one person is not necessarily seen by another. These experiences can all be conveyed through metaphor to clarify something that is subjective.

²⁰ Ibid.
Figure 5.1 “Ruminate”  
Archival inkjet print, mounted on aluminum, 10x15in., 2016

Figure 5.2 “A brief movement”  
Archival inkjet print, mounted on aluminum, 10x15in., 2016
6 THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition presentation of *A few weeks, maybe months*... is directly based on concepts of poetry, metaphorical language, and storytelling. These concepts inform the ordering of the imagery, and the sizing of each photograph, the sequential placement of the images, and the photographs’ materiality. All the photographs are mounted on aluminum and have no borders. Images are bled to the edge. They float an inch off the wall and are left unframed with no mediation between the viewer and the printed surface. The surface is velvety paper that is soft, sensual, even dreamlike. Displaying the work in this manner is intended to remove any barrier between myself and the viewer: they are looking directly through my eyes and see what I see at exactly the size I perceive it to be.

![Figure 6.1 Installation shot #1](image)

The urinals are small vignettes that create a visual and physical interruption. Their femininity directly opposes their masculine associations, rendering them powerless. “Sentinels” is the only urinal that is almost life size. The urinals in this image have an obligation, referenced
in the title: to act as watchmen and to police the men’s bathroom. It is unclear who they work for, but they are designed to elicit a feeling of uneasiness, like seeing a police officer and becoming uncomfortable even when you’ve done nothing wrong.

Figure 6.2 Installation shot #2

Figure 6.3 Installation shot #3
Ultimately, *A few weeks, maybe months...* is intended to raise questions on social constructions of gender, our ideas of American culture, and the photographic image itself. The exhibition was a significant step toward the realization of how functional these questions were. Storytelling is a form of learning and I believe these themes will continue to be significant in my practice over many years. *A few weeks, maybe months...* is a body of work that is the beginning of something and does not only signify the end of my experience in graduate school.
WORKS CITED


