

*Manifestation: Illustrating American Masculinity*

A Creative Thesis in the Field of Visual Arts

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A thesis proposal presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University Honors College.

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## ABSTRACT

Masculinity is a quality that we *expect* of a man. It's a timeless concept that appears throughout American society. Boys are crafted and beaten until they embody what it means to be a man. Unfortunately, boys aren't the only ones who suffer. This exhibition, *Manifestation: Illustrating American Masculinity*, explores the tragic results of manhood put together to draw attention to and to rebuke the damage that pursuing toxic masculinity can cause—not just to boys—but to our society at large. On display from February 4-8, 2018—the exhibition consisted of four pieces on display in the glass gallery of Todd Hall.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Masculinity is an enigma. It is something that appears simple, yet is as complex and vast as the Labyrinth of Crete. Put plainly, it is what we expect a *man* to be. Therein lies the problem. Masculinity is the term for what *we* apply to men. When one tries to define masculinity, what one describes is completely subjective. Now, while it can be said that society as a whole can and does place certain expectations on men—even when peering through testosterone tinted glasses—what we see is our own unique creation.

Masculinity is not a benevolent creature. In many ways, it can be and is destructive to the men who abide by its rules and to society as a whole. This type of gender expression is often named toxic masculinity within the field of gender studies (though many of these ideals that would not generally be classified as detrimental have roots in and/or perpetuate this toxicity). This corrosive machismo has many negative impacts on the men who live within its ideals.

According to *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*:

Various studies have shown a link between men who embrace and act on toxic masculinity's behavioral codes and a range of problems, from fraught relationships to depression, alcoholism, rage disorders, assault and other criminal behavior, and suicide. [Meta-Analyses of the Relationship between Conformity to Masculine Norms and Mental Health-Related Outcomes conducted by Y. Joel Wong,] a survey of 78 research projects

involving nearly 20,000 participants[,] found that men who embodied stereotypically macho behaviors were much less likely to seek help for such problems and had poorer overall mental health.

Furthermore, according to Terry A. Kupers' article, "Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison," these same occurrences both are present and are magnified within the context of a prison setting (714). In this setting, toxic masculinity contributes to "fights on the prison yard, assaults on officers, the ugly phenomenon of prison rape...and other hypercompetitive, sometimes violent, interactions"(Kupers 714). These terrible behaviors and the causticity of masculinity have been plaguing America since its inception.

Masculinity has a long history of oppressiveness, from the earliest days of the American colonies to the present day. In Colonial America, masculinity was defined through acts of violence and domination. As John Gilbert Maccurdy states in the article "Gentlemen and Soldiers," "for much of medieval history manhood was tied to mastery. A man was defined by economic independence as well as his ability to assert control over dependents...[and that the] late medieval country estate remained the symbol of English society writ large" (11). Maccurdy goes on to say that, for much of this time, manhood had to be earned through the violence of battle. This sets the tone for masculinity throughout the rest of American history. From the very beginning, Americans have been defining their manhood much like animals.



In our contemporary society, men—especially those in the military and male dominated fields—are taught to be stoic and to repress all semblance of emotion to achieve manhood. As Joshua S. Goldstein suggests in his book, *War and Gender*, men are taught to be fearless machines, hide all emotions, and never complain—and are taught so from an early age (Goldstein 289-290). Weakness is viewed as effeminate or homosexual, and—as such—is incompatible with a “warrior spirit” gained through battle and the effeminization of enemies (Goldstein 374-375). Within this description, effeminacy and homosexuality are implied to run contrary to the masculine ideal, purely by socially constructed means. This is a recurring theme in discussions of masculinity. As Robert J. Corber states in his book, *Homosexuality in Cold War America*, homosexuality has been equated to communism and an “immature form of heterosexuality,” in which the man in question never grew into his own and remained fixated on his mother and her traits (166). This homosexual, as such, has yet to achieve manhood because of his perceived lack of the grasp of the masculine ideal. With this perceived inefficiency comes shame. “Shame is the glue that holds the man-making process together;” it is inherently present in those who have “failed” to complete the process (Goldstein 269). Some—such as Jennifer Moon in *Gay Shame*—would go so far as to call shame an “inescapable part of gay identity...distinguishing the queer from the normal...between the heteronormative and the queer sectors of society” (359). All this because of the toxicity inherent in American society’s description of masculinity.

I myself am the byproduct of a society ruled by this toxicity. I have never been much of a man, and would even go so far as to renounce the title itself. As a child, I was subjected to horrendous torture in the name of “turning this boy into a man.” I was living my life in the shadow of the “great man” everyone expected me to be. At every turn, I was pushed and shoved into a mold into which I never truly fit, and yet it seemed that I would find new and innovative ways to fail as a man each time. Now, I live my life in the grey area in between binary of man and woman. I have found my own path in life without succumbing to the grips of masculine expectations placed upon me. This grants me a different perspective. I explore what it means to be a man, as someone who never wanted to be one, and who could never be one if I tried. I have the ability to take a step back and examine the situation without directly being involved in it. Because of this, I continuously explore what masculinity and manhood mean to me as an adult. This is a subject that hits close to home

Unfortunately, not everyone feels the need to explore gender and what it means to them. This creates a problem. If people never stop to question their ideals then society will never move forward. Men will forever be bound by the laws of causticity. In that vein, I think it’s time for a wake-up call. When I look to myself to find the answers to the questions of gender and identity, I *want* to be uncomfortable. I want my existence to be shaken up. It is in in this moment of vulnerability where I grow the most. There were no holds barred in how I chose to explore masculinity and with the form in which I presented it. I did whatever I could to challenge and expand upon the everpresent themes of masculinity. In a

country currently spearheaded by the epitome of toxic masculine ideals and hate, personal growth and exploration are paramount for the security of ourselves and our nation at large. As Alison Reiheld states in her article, “All the Difference in the World: Gender and the 2016 Election,” “Trump’s insistence on Making America Great Again through economic domination rather than trade agreements, and through expanding America’s standing military and its array of military equipment, is precisely in this vein.” It would seem that every time Trump speaks, some new evil is released from this man molded in the image of masculinity. With this presidency has come a great divide in the populous and has brought toxic masculinity to the forefront of politics and educated discussions. America is shaken at its core, and now is the time to strike.

## II. WORKS OF ART

### A. *SHAME*

**1. Overview:** This piece consists of charcoal and graphite on white drawing paper. It measures 18” by 24”. *Shame* was the first piece I completed and helped to set the tone for the rest of the works within for my thesis. It began as a still life that I created, photographed, and recreated on paper. To help create this scene, I used a variety of still life objects, a pedestal, overhead lighting, and multiple standing lights. I went through many iterations of the original still life composition used for reference: changing objects used, positioning, lightning and camera angles. All of this was to ensure the perfect balance of these elements to invoke the feeling for which I was aiming.

**2. Meaning:** *Shame* is based on and named after the feeling of of the same name. Shame is ever-present within the world of the American man and in the process of building them. I wanted to display and challenge the aspects of this process and incorporate my own personal experience. Every piece of *Shame* has symbolic meaning and contributes to the overall thematic.

The media used—charcoal—and the employment of a still life intends to invoke a sense of classicism and to mirror the institution of manhood’s long-standing tradition and engrainment into society. Charcoal was used in one of the earliest forms of art, and has continued to see use as a drawing medium to the modern day. Charcoal itself seems have become synonymous with the process of

many modern artists and is often used to teach the fundamentals of classical drawing in colleges around the globe.

The mannequin, the singular object occupying the largest portion of the picture plane, holds much of the weight of the piece. The figure's bold stance and presentation is innately proud and is a direct representation of an unashamed sexuality. These traits stand in stark contrast to the experience of feeling shame, simultaneously referencing how people are conditioned to fear and reject sexuality that lies outside of heteronormativity and how the sexual conquest of women is often used as a milestone for achieving manhood.

The orchid and excessive floral arrangement, which overlap and follow the form of the mannequin, are flowers symbolizing virility and femininity. The flowers themselves, however, are very delicate. This references the tenuous balancing act and dangerous cocktail of manly presentation: a fight between the suppression of emotion, the facade of the invincible, the fear of effeminacy, the pursuit of power, the wanton use of violence and managing the expectations of their peers all wrapped up in a "presentable" package.

The skeletal hand reaching out from underneath the mannequin represents the encroaching hand of death on multiple accounts. The ever present possibility and looming fear of the inescapable that comes along with daring to express oneself and with the destructive path one heads down when they're stuck in the cycle of perpetuating toxic ideals. Whether one chooses to embrace one's shame or be destroyed by it, neither option provides an escape. There is none.

The butt-plug vibrator is a blatant display and presentation of queer sexuality, something people are taught to hide and be ashamed of. It is framed within flowers, presenting itself as a run-of-the-mill still life object. It acts as a portrayal of this aspect of one's identity. It is displayed as a beautiful and natural occurrence that should be celebrated in the face of overwhelming opposition.

Finally, the teapot acts as a reflection of the stereotypical association of women to household chores while also literally reflecting and distorting the image of the rest of the still life itself. This references the twisted worldview one has when living a life consumed by the pursuit of masculine ideals.

**3. Placard:** The placard read: "The veil of modesty torn, the shameful parts shown, I know—with my cheeks aflame—the need to hide myself or die, but I believe by facing and enduring this painful anxiety I shall, as a result of my shamelessness, come to know a strange beauty" by Jean Genet mentioned in "Gay Shame" (133). This quote expresses similar ideas to the piece itself, and as such, gives the piece more context.

4. Photography:



*Shame*





*Shame* Detail Photo A



*Shame* Detail Photo B





**Shame (2016)**  
Jean Cocteau (1895-1963)  
A black and white illustration by Jean Cocteau, featuring a large, pale, anatomical form, possibly a torso or a large flower, surrounded by various botanical elements like roses, lilies, and a cluster of grapes. The piece is displayed in a black frame with a white mat.

*Shame On Display*

## **B. *Love Hurts***

**1. Overview:** This piece consists of newsprint, ink, bisque paper, charcoal and printed articles on heavyweight black paper. *Love Hurts* was the third piece I completed. This was the hardest piece to work on of this entire series—not just because of difficulty in construction—but in my ability to stomach the realities of what this piece meant. This piece consists of a collage of headlines, articles, and photography gathered from magazines, newspapers, online articles, and videos.

**2. Meaning:** *Love Hurts* is a very personal piece that was created as a direct response to the many injustices and lost lives resulting from living in a society ruled by toxic ideals and is an expression of how I was shaped by these stories. Each scrap of the collage tells part of a story, one of the victims within a society governed by the rules of toxic masculinity. These are stories of rape, abuse, murder, abduction, molestation, bigotry and hate. These are all examples of this society's failures to its people and how it simultaneously views these victims as failures in upholding its rigid and harmful ideals.

The concentric circles represent promises both broken and unbroken. These are promises from society to me and vice versa. The collage rings represent the former while the bisque rings represent the later. These rings are centered around a self portrait, radiating from the back of my head. I am faced away from the viewer with my back turned. These rings form a target, as constant reminder of the danger I and people like me are in. Just existing as I am now puts me in the shoes of those who have fallen before me. At any moment, I could end up as another statistic because of forces far beyond my ability to control. It's terrifying to think about, but it is a reality with which I have to live.

In the outer collage rings, or rather the fragments of such, are the atrocities that I have come to know in the past few years. They are equally as horrid as the inner ring, only being tertiary to my experience in the sense that I learned of their existence later in my life. These rings are representative of me recognizing the further failures of society as I have aged. While not being core to my identity, they have played a large part in my development and will stay in my mind and continue to play a part in my future.

The innermost ring is a direct representation of how I have been personally shaped by these occurrences. Each story in this ring—each lost life—has directly influenced who I am today. These people have formed a core pillar of my being, and have affected me in ways beyond imagining. My experiences, and the experiences of people like me, cannot be changed retroactively. The horrors of the past will never disappear and those that they affected have to live with the fallout. This ring is my promise to those who have come before me, to continue fighting the fight that they no longer are able to.

The second ring is a promise between my best friend and me. Years ago, we swore to each other that we would keep moving forward—no matter what happens. This promise acts as a barrier of sorts. With everything that happens and has happened, this is something I will always have close to my heart. It keeps me going, and helps me to withstand the barrage of bad news and the constant failures of our society. It's a mutual bond of trust, and unwavering support and affection. To the best of our abilities, we won't allow this world to claim us. We refuse to become statistics.

**3. Placard:** The placard read “No please don’t, I have a Family.” These were the some of the last recorded words of Gwen Araujo before her death as stated by Rob Dennis in “Witness Details Slaying of Transgender Teenager.” It felt fitting to quote the person who had affected me the most throughout the process of putting together my show. This is a very personal line that helps to humanize the people referenced in this piece, beyond just being tied to a gruesome headline or article, by having the words presented as if they are being spoken to the viewer. In a sense, this puts the viewer in the position of the murderer with intent to foster a more engaging experience for said viewer.

#### **4. People Referenced:**

Gwen Araujo

Matthew Shepard

Tiarah Poyau

Ronnie Paris

Brock Turner

Anthony Avalos

Jeremaia Regis-Ngawah

Cardell Williamson

Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover

George Rekers and “Kraig”

Lawrence King

Mercedes Williamson

Eddy Lennoxx

Roy Jones

Islan Nettles

Ally Steinfeld

Leelah Alcorn

Brandon Teena

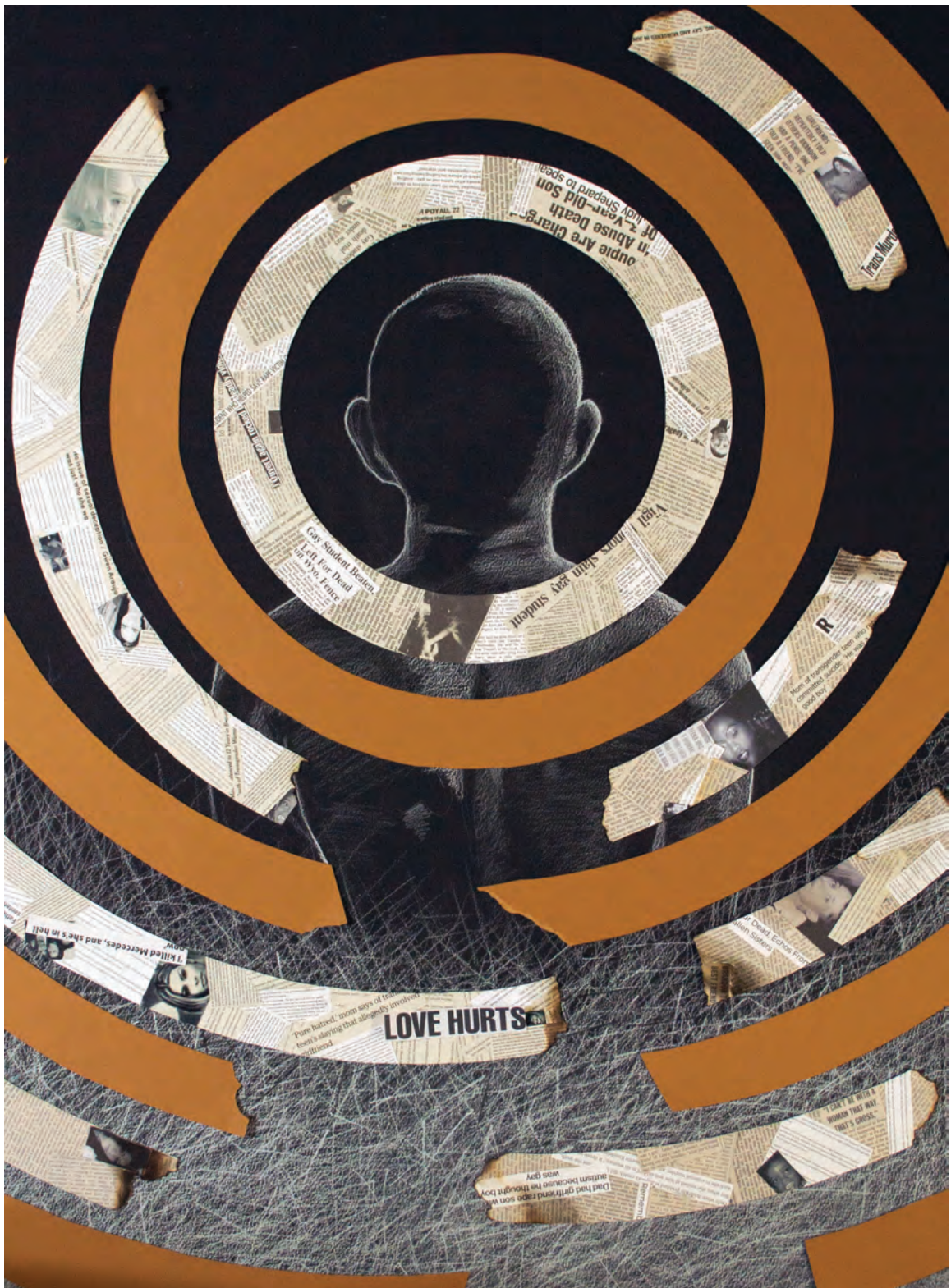
Rita Hester

Sean Brandon Cole

Angie Zapata



## 5. Photography:



Love Hurts Without Frame





*Love Hurts Detail Photo A*



*Love Hurts Detail Photo B*



*Love Hurts* on display



## ***Fear***

**1. Overview:** This piece consisted of a human tooth, a tissue, and fake blood swept under the rug of the living room scene.

**2. Meaning:** *Fear* was a manifestation of the dark recesses of my childhood, and the childhoods of people like me. It was a very simple piece in construction with a powerful and clear message. It was a gruesome depiction of the horrors of child abuse under the guise of parents toughening up their children, which is often enacted while trying to beat homosexuality or effeminacy out of their children. It implies that the father in question had knocked out one his child's teeth.

There was a trail of fake blood where the tooth had been swept under the rug of the scene. This represented the way in which society shys away from addressing and hides the issue at hand and often times refuses to acknowledge these experiences exist in the first place. It was a literal display of "sweeping this under the rug." The trail of blood leading under the rug created an interactive element. Viewers had to lift the rug themselves to discover what laid underneath. They had to get up close and personal to the horror of child abuse and the physical and emotional scarring that comes from it.

**3. Placard:** The placard read: "No son of mine is going to grow up to be a prissy little faggot." This is a direct quote from my own father, from a moment in my own childhood. This quote was very important to this piece, adding context it would otherwise lack.

#### 4. Photography:



*Fear Uncovered*



*Fear Covered*

#### ***D. The Death of Man***

**1. Overview:** This piece consists of india ink wash and layers of micron pen marks on two pieces of tan, heavyweight bristol board. It measures approximately 32” x 30” and was the second piece I completed. For this piece I took a much less personal and more abstract approach, rather than using the same elements of classicism I employed in *Shame*. I chose to take a mundane, everyday object and used replications of that form to create more complex imagery and concepts to find meaning.

**2. Meaning:** This piece holds many possible interpretations. The nails in the center are an abstract representation of the visage of the Crucifixion. This Biblical allusion is both a comment on how the ideals of toxic masculinity are perpetuated by religious organizations and to harken back to how ingrained these two concepts are in our society. Both are intricately woven into the fabric that holds our country together, and create a feedback loop of sorts that serve to uphold the status quo. The price of which has been far too much. It is a statement about and an attack of these two pillars on which we build our youth. These concepts have become hard truths for those who abide by them, leaving no room for personal exploration or growth. The solid and impermeable structure of the common nail embodies this concept. Additionally, the process of molding a nail and the act of using a nail in almost any context, are an involved process of destroying and reforming the raw metal into a form that is both acceptable and practical for society. This relationship between the material draws a direct correlation to the destructive process of molding boys into men.

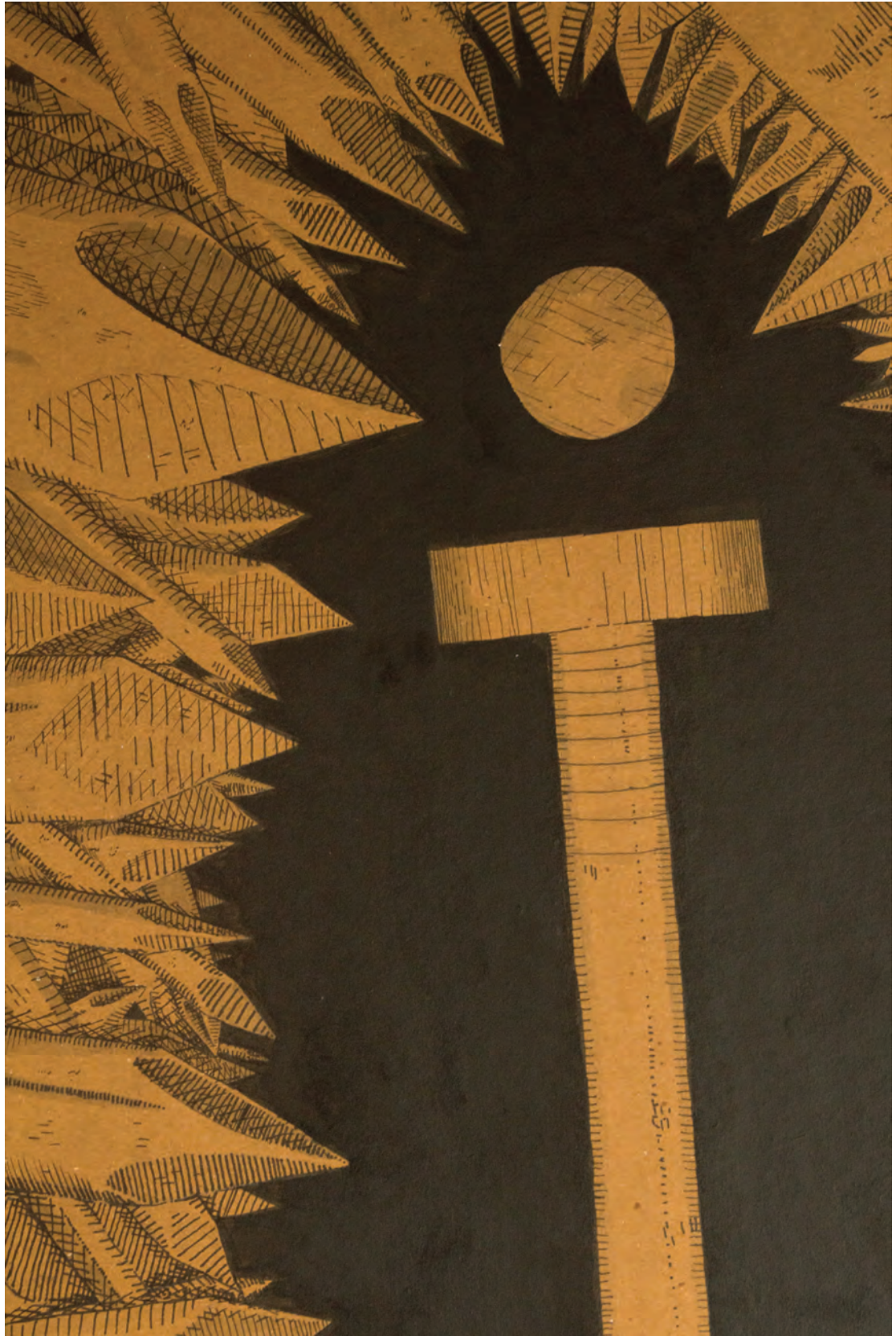
The unending bed of nails around the perimeter serve many purposes: the most prominent of which is forming an abstract vagina when combined with the aforementioned portion of the piece. This is a representation of the role that women often play in the process of building a man. By some metrics, including ones I was raised by, the sexual conquest of women is used as a stepping stone into manhood. Boys go out and seek to use women as objects to attain what they've been told it means to be a man, while also creating a double standard for the sexual liberties of the genders within the binary. This is a vicious cycle that is endlessly perpetuated, generation after generation, diving headfirst towards oblivion. It rears countless victims in its wake. The allusion to the reproductive system of women also represents the presumed deficiency of effeminate or queer men described in Robert J. Corber's work. Because of their inability to escape the grasp of the feminine they are forever trapped, never to be seen as men by their peers.

**3. Placard:** The placard contained a quote by Sam Keen from her book *Fire in the Belly: On Being Man* that read: "The average man spends a lifetime denying, defending against, trying to control, and reacting to the power of woman" (14). This quote embodies the core principles of this piece and helps to provide context to the viewer.

#### 4. Photography:







*The Death of Man* Detail Photo A



*The Death of Man* Detail Photo B



*The Death of Man* on display



### **III. GALLERY SHOW**

#### **A. Promotional Material**

For the show I developed a wordmark and designed a flier incorporating it as promotional material. This wordmark would be present in multiple aspects of my show, including being used for a vinyl decal which is discussed in detail in Section E: Vinyl. I wanted the wordmark to help sell the idea of manifestation—the embodiment and appearance of an abstract idea—in addition to playing off of the “man” in manifestation for my show about masculinity. To accomplish this, I portrayed the letterforms in various levels of opacity, implied with the use of the charcoal texture fading out. The decision to use this texture was made to mirror the frequent use of charcoal within the pieces themselves, harkening back to the feeling of classicism that the medium often implies. With this, I created a complex gradient system to draw attention to the word “man” without the effect being too garish or overbearing. Additionally, I created many type studies in order to find the perfect typefaces to embody the theming.

The flier was created creating a collage of imagery from the pieces in the show in the form of individual rectangles highlighting parts of the work. I wanted to show off small pieces of my work to give little tastes of the work to the viewer without giving it away. I arranged the rectangular pieces in a way to create rhythm, unity and visual intrigue between the individual units.

#### **B. Setup**

Setting up the show was a relatively easy affair. I assembled and installed everything entirely on my own. All of the many pedestals had to be hauled over from the



storage room on the other side of the building. The large pedestal was the only one that presented any significant problem, and it really did. It didn't balance well on a dolly and it was far too heavy to be lifted alone; somehow I still managed to haul it across the building (with minimal damage to the floors).

### **C. Choosing a Space**

The glass gallery was chosen to further express the ideas present within my show. Having created a living room scene, which both plays upon and displays the ways masculinity is portrayed in America, the idea of looking in on this scene of everyday life where you might find these ideas present makes a statement on the situation itself. I was, in a sense, putting the display of manhood and the environments in which it flourishes in the spotlight with the nature of the space itself. This created an intimate, yet compromised, environment to display my work.

### **D. Problems**

#### **1. Gallery Management and Unprofessionalism**

I would say that the biggest hurdle to my show's process was the process of reserving the space and dealing with the staff in charge of the operation. I originally had reserved the glass gallery in September of the previous year from January fourteenth to the end of the month, before the space availability were even posted for 2019. I periodically checked on the status of my reservation for the remainder of the year. By some twist of fate, the staff in-charge gave my space to a professor once the listings had

been posted. I promptly sent an email regarding this development and was told everything was fine and that this would be resolved.

When the day came to set up my show, however, this professor had set up in the space that morning. I went to talk to the professor about the mix-up and was met with rudeness I have never before experienced from a professor from any university. Every time I spoke they would reply with a rude and sarcastic comment. When they looked at the listing and realized they were mistaken, they had nothing to say. In the end, I begrudgingly rescheduled to avoid any future conflicts with this professor instead of rightfully claiming my space. This did, however, give me more time to prepare. So, after all, this bad situation wasn't without a silver lining.

Later on, once my show had already been on display for multiple days and was nearing the end of its run, a piece fell. The piece fell of its own accord, due to my mounting. Normally this would not be much of an issue, especially since I was at fault in this case, but how it was handled by the gallery management was another issue all together. Instead of notifying me that my piece had fallen, I found the aftermath myself. I came in to make sure everything was in working order and discovered that pieces of my art were missing, that the piece had been stabbed through by thumb tacks to hold it to the wall, and that it had be remounted on the wall crooked. The person responsible, a member of the gallery staff, decided it would be better to handle this issue by doing all of that without telling me anything that had happened or taking appropriate care in remounting the piece. Needless to say, my experience working with the gallery was terrible in nearly every aspect.

## **2. Filling the Space**

The decision to create a living room scene was, in part, to help complete the gallery space. Once all of my pieces were assembled, I had to put thought into how I would fill the rest of the space to create the scene. If I were to simply hang the pieces on the wall with no other decorative or thematic elements, the room would feel empty and the intimacy and impact of the show itself would be weakened. A large part of the show was the act of demonstrating how pervasive and personal these ideals are; to distance the viewer by maintaining the rigid atmosphere of a gallery setting would be counterproductive.

When I had the idea of transforming the space into a living room setting, everything I needed to create a cohesive show fell into place. All of the individual elements I had and had planned to use would fit naturally and believably inside this setting. The computer displaying advertisements fit perfectly on a computer desk in an alcove of the gallery. The individual pieces could be written off as art hanging in a den. I was able to add in pictures of the victims of toxic masculinity in the form of photographs within picture frames. My collage and statement on advertising media happened to be centered around the idea of a television. All that remained was a few decorative elements—namely a couple of tables and a couch—and the scene was set.

## **3. Emotional Conflicts**

For most of the process, I experienced no notable emotional turmoil or stressors while working on pieces. That was, however, until *Love Hurts*. When I started working on this piece, I did not expect to be affected as much I was. I worked for weeks

compiling, cutting, and collaging gruesome accounts and testimonies of heinous acts. It was not until I stumbled upon Gwen Araujo, however, that the weight of these articles started to bear down on me. Two articles in particular had a profound effect on me: “Witness tells how she learned transgender teen was male” from the *San Francisco Chronicle* and “Witness details slaying of transgender teenager” from the *East Bay Times*. Her story, and how those involved described what had happened, struck a nerve. Her story felt all-too familiar. After reading through this article, and in the weeks afterwards, I cried nearly every time I worked on this piece. There was no way to avoid the content of these articles while carefully piecing them together. Carrying the weight of everything I had found, even those which I was already acquainted with, proved to be hard to handle. For the remainder of the process of putting together the show, everything became painful to work on; everything became personal. What was originally a cathartic experience slowly became overbearing. Being constantly surrounded by the work that had helped me to express so much started to pull me back into the worlds depicted on the pages.

## **E. Vinyl**

### **1. The Vinyl Cutting Process**

#### **a) File Preparation**

To produce custom vinyl decals, the design has to be imported to the appropriate software for the vinyl cutter at hand and made print ready. Every shape and line has to be modified for the cutter to be able to read the file properly. Most cutting programs can accept files previously adjusted in Illustrator and/or Photoshop to accelerate the process.

### **b) Cutting**

Once the file is properly setup, it needs to be sent to the vinyl cutter. Vinyl has to be loaded manually into a special machine. The cut settings, namely blade pressure and cutting speed, have to be set and adjusted to ensure everything proceeds smoothly. Loading vinyl incorrectly or using incorrect settings can damage your vinyl or the cutter itself. Any lines or shapes that need to be cut out have to be of a certain thickness, otherwise one runs the risk of the blade catching on vinyl on account of the small pieces not having enough surface area to stick to the backing.

### **c) Weeding**

Once the vinyl has been cut, then the weeding process can begin. Weeding is, simply put, removing all of the unnecessary and unwanted pieces of vinyl from the backing material. This is often accomplished using an x-acto for precise extraction. Any important piece accidentally removed has to be manually replaced.

### **d) Contact Paper**

Contact paper is then applied to the vinyl. Contact paper removes the vinyl from its backing, where it is then stuck to the contact paper and is ready to be applied. The paper has to be thoroughly burnished to the vinyl beforehand to ensure they properly adhere together. Care has to be taken to make sure no important bits of vinyl are lost or damaged during the paper removal process.

### **e) Application**

Finally, the vinyl is ready to be applied. Great care has to be taken during this step. If the vinyl is applied crooked or a drastic mistake is made it can be very hard if not impossible to salvage it. At that point, another decal will have to be made. To apply the vinyl, it must be carefully yet firmly burnished to ensure it does not get damaged and that no unsightly bubbles form underneath the vinyl. While it is possible to remove bubbles after the fact, it is much harder than taking the proper steps to ensure they don't occur in the first place.

## **2. Custom Vinyl**

I designed, cut, weeded and applied a custom vinyl decal for the show. With my previously designed type treatment for the promotional material, I had the groundwork laid out for my decal. Unfortunately, the design still had to be adapted. The elaborate and rough charcoal texture would not translate well to any phase of the process. The design had to be simplified and the linework had to be expanded so everything would cut properly. The intricacies would never be able to be cut on any vinyl cutter I had access to.

To accomplish this I had to decide what aspects were important and boil the design down to those basics. The typeface largely remained the same, but instead of having the rough type treatment define the opacity of the wordmark, I decided to cut out slabs of the letterforms to sell the idea of the type fading out. I found that I needed to outline the letters to keep readability at acceptable levels when translated to vinyl.

## **F. Digital Advertising Media**

A computer was set up in the corner of the gallery space atop a wooden desk. On the computer was a repeating YouTube playlist of American advertising media that exemplify the ideals of toxic masculinity and how these are internalized and used to sell products. Here are the companies and/or ads in said playlist, and what ideas they embody and/or sell:

### **1. True Car Ad**

This ad perpetuates the idea that women have no understanding of cars and generally need a man to help them shop for a car. The premise is that with TrueCar, women no longer need a man's assistance. This assumes that men have a natural inclination to mechanical knowledge while women lack such skill. This is a harmful and limiting standard for both parties.

### **2. Carl's Jr/Hardee's**

Hardee's ads have become synonymous with the objectification of women. In these commercial, women are used as objects to sell their products with sex appeal alone. These women exist solely to pander to male audiences under the assumption that men are so simple and vapid that their opinion of Hardee's will be swayed by putting a naked women next to it. It also presents the idea that women exist to be gawked at and idolized rather than to be respected. All of their ads are essentially the same in this aspect.

### **3. Axe**

Axe is another company that consistently releases ads that objectify women. Axe sells the idea that by using this product men will be able to win the affection of women. Axe often refers to women as objects, and plays off the notion that men will actually believe that by slathering themselves with their products that they will become more attractive to women. This also implies that women are flighty and can be easily swayed by such acts.

### **4. Meet Gmail's New Inbox**

This Gmail ad seems innocuous at first, but is deceiving. It introduces the new layout of the Gmail inbox while presenting an example of a day's worth of emails and business conducted by a woman on screen. Throughout this ad, the woman in question is only interested in stereotypically feminine pursuits like knitting, manicures, and high heels. Her dating life is also brought up quite frequently throughout the video. These pursuits stand in stark contrast to how a male e-mail user would be portrayed and paint a limiting and harmful picture of what is to be enjoyed by particular genders.

### **5. Ciroc Smooth Talk**

In this ad campaign, Sean Combs perpetuates harmful ideals such as emotional stoicism and is essentially teaching the audience how to act more manly based on the toxic ideals of manhood while promoting Ciroc.



## **6. Dos Equis**

The Dos Equis ads exemplify the ideals of an exaggerated form of masculinity, seemingly rewarding the “most interesting man in the world” with a harem of women for his masculine endeavors. His acts of manliness include but are not limited to sewing closed his own wounds, cliff diving, and fighting through the rainforests. They are presented as something to be admired and duplicated by men seeking similar goals

## **7. Heineken’s Men with Talent**

This ad portrays the likes of men and women to be polar opposites and perpetuates the idea that the interests of men and women are intrinsically different. The women in this video gather around the television to watch “Top Models Singing on Ice” while the men in this video are interested in a show called “Men with Talent” in which men perform such acts as juggling glasses of beer, playing beer bottles as instruments, and popping bottle caps. This is another example of painting very narrow roles for the two genders within the binary.

## **8. GoDaddy**

GoDaddy is like the Carls Jr. of domain naming and hosting. They use sex appeal to sell their products, objectify women, and make fun of non-traditional expressions of masculinity while simultaneously pretending to be a progressive company. While the women show less skin here than Carl’s Jr., they are still incredibly sexualized and conventionally attractive.

### **9. Miller Light Man Up Campaign**

Possibly the most overtly harmful and offensive examples on this list, these commercials are horrid. They immediately equate any sort of perceived femininity as weak and laughable and are incredibly transphobic. These commercials make the men who are even slightly outside the narrow confines of the masculine ideal into objects of ridicule for mundane things such as wearing skinny jeans or a scarf to wearing skirts or simply having interests not limited to the narrow image they construct. Additionally, it also shows how women can be just as responsible for perpetuating these harmful ideals as men.

### **10. Dove for Men Commercial**

This commercial essentially plays out the life of a boy up until he becomes a man under the confines of a society ruled by ideals of toxic masculinity. Nearly everything he does plays to the narrow stereotypical concept of what it means to be a man with no room for deviance, and this is celebrated. With the exception of one or two scenes, everything that happens fits within these boundaries.

### **11. Flo TV Spineless Ad**

In this ad, a narrator says that a man's girlfriend has "removed his spine" and portrays this man having any interest similar to that of his wife or not being argumentative as problems to be fixed. The narrator also tells the man to "change out of

that skirt,” a transphobic remark that implies that a man wearing a skirt is inherently wrong and that he needs to adjust his behavior to fit that of the alpha male in his relationship.

## **12. Super Bowl Victoria’s Secret Ad**

This ad portrays women in a way that implies that they are more interested in sex after the Super Bowl than the game itself. It also implies that women will be waiting for their men in turn should they be given Victoria’s Secret products. This is yet another example of painting the genders in narrow and sexist ways.

## **G. Other Advertising Media**

A plethora of printed media was displayed in my show. This media includes video game art, video game designs, social media posts, magazine ads and other such advertisements that exemplify the ideals of toxic masculinity and the society that has formed around it in some way. These all came together in a collage surrounding an unplugged television. The two elements together symbolized how pervasive the effects of this media are and how even when no new information or advertisements are being absorbed, they still have a lasting impact on the minds of opinions of the people who have seen them.

## **H. Picture Frames**

Too often, the names of victims become lost to the public sphere. What was once a person with dreams and aspirations is relegated to a number, a statistic. A memorial placard was put up explicitly listing their names in addition to using their photos within picture frames as a way to show their faces. Presenting these individuals with their names and faces was my way of both giving them back a piece of their humanity and using that as a tie in to complete the gallery scene. By the nature of having a living room scene, that was the perfect way to incorporate them. The picture frames fit naturally inside of the scene I set and helped to complete the show.

## I. Photography and Other Material:



Manifestation on Display A



Manifestation on Display B

# MANIFESTATION

Illustrating American Masculinity

Vinyl Decal Design

# MANIFESTATION

Illustrating American Masculinity

Original Wordmark Design



Vinyl on Display A



Vinyl on Display B





Manifestation Promotional Poster



# IN MEMORY OF:

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Gwen Araujo  
Matthew Shepard  
Tiarah Poyau  
Ronnie Paris  
Anthony Avalos  
Jeremaia Regis-Ngawah  
Cardell Williamson  
Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover  
Lawrence King  
Mercedes Williamson  
Eddy Lennox  
Roy Jones  
Islan Nettles  
Ally Steinfeld  
Leelah Alcorn  
Brandon Teena  
Rita Hester  
Angie Zapata

and the countless others that die unnoticed.

Memorial Plaque

## **Shame (2018)**

Charcoal, Ink, and Graphite on Paper

“The veil of modesty torn, the shameful parts shown, I know—with my cheeks aflame—the need to hide myself or die, but I believe by facing and enduring this painful anxiety I shall, as a result of my shamelessness, come to know a strange beauty.”

**-Jean Genet (1949)**

## **Fear (2018)**

Human Tooth

“No son of mine is going to grow up to be a prissy little faggot.”

**-Dad (2009)**

## **Love Hurts (2018)**

Newsprint Collage and Charcoal on Paper

“No, please don't. I have a family.”

**-Gwen Araujo (2002)**

## **The Death of Man (2018)**

Ink Wash and Pen on Board

“The average man spends a lifetime denying, defending against, trying to control, and reacting to the power of woman.”

**-Sam Keen (2010)**

Placards



Digital Advertising Media



George Rekers



Picture Frames A. Pictured left to right: Angie Zapata, Ally Steinfeld, Rita Hester, Islan Nettles, Cardell Williamson



Picture Frames B. Pictured left to right: Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, Brandon Teena



Picture Frames C. Pictured left to right: Gwen Araujo, Leela Alcorn



Picture Frames D. Pictured left to right: Lawrence King, Tiarah Poyau



#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

This project was an experience, from start to finish. I do not know what I was expecting but it managed to exceed my expectations in ways I never imagined. It has been cathartic, given me hope, dashed it then gave it back, and has opened my eyes to so many issues of which I did not fully understand the gravity of myself. This show has pushed and pulled me and sent me down a rollercoaster of emotions. It was a beautiful experience, but a painful one. I had no idea much it would affect me.

My pieces were an expression of myself and my past. I took the lessons I had learned throughout my life and my experiences within the institution of masculinity and channeled them into my work. These works were incredibly personal, while also trying to reflect the values of the world around me. I exercised many feelings and emotions out of my system, but then I was surrounded by them. After pouring so much negative energy into my art, being around it started wearing down on me. It's put a lot of things into perspective.

The process of putting together Manifestation has forced me to take a step back and evaluate my position on masculinity and America as a whole. It's helped me to define for myself what it means to be a man, and has solidified my position on the spectrums of gender identity and sexuality. I already knew where I stood, but now there's no room for doubt. Through my show, I've had to do some soul searching, and I know where I'm going to go from here.

Moving forward, I don't think I'll be revisiting these topics any time soon. I've said what I had to say, and I like to think my show has made an impact. I'm tired of dwelling on the past. My show slowly started to become painful to work on as time went

on. It felt like I was surrounded by all the of horrible parts of my life I thought I had moved beyond. When my show was finished, the relief was immeasurable. All my hard work on my thesis and my years of working through the pain finally paid off. Everything I've had to deal with to get to where I am came to fruition at once. I'm ready to move forward with my life, and use my past to help shape my future. I hope that my work made a difference—but if nothing else—it's changed *me*.

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