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Man to Man

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MAN TO MAN

by

Chadric Devin Harms

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Major: Art

Under the Supervision of Professor Dana Fritz

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MAN TO MAN

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University of Nebraska, 2015

Advisor: Dana Fritz

In athletics, the phrase “man-to-man” refers to a type a defense: one where a single player is paired against another individual. They are in constant competition, and as rivals they relentlessly compare themselves to one another. This colloquial expression, which I use as the title of my thesis, also draws attention to the gendered term “man” as a social construction and signifies the diversity and complexity that exists between one representation of masculinity and another.

Throughout my childhood I felt an overwhelming responsibility and pressure from my stepfather and the small, Midwestern community in which I grew up to participate in athletics as a way to display socially delineated ideas of masculine behavior. American culture and society, in the same way, has its own set of constructed archetypes that dictate masculinity and the ways in which boys and men are expected to interact and perform their gender. My work as an artist explores the complications and subtleties of these expectations, specifically the complexity of desire and the diverse role it plays in how relationships form between men.

For me, it all starts with the basketball court as the arena where these interactions and performances take place. Within this environment men are able to physically interact and engage in a way that they are otherwise socially unable. On a very surface but still visceral level, basketball is regarded as the epitome of hyper-masculinity. It is through

physical and aggressive acts of strength and dominance on the court that athletes are championed for fulfilling a prescribed gender role. Within my work, I am interested in the relationship between physical interactions that occur through these performances and the non-physical ways a male may begin to understand, develop, and experience a gendered identity.

Objects from my past provide a connection between the physical and the emotional. The jersey I wore throughout every basketball practice in high school is saturated with the patina of sweat, spit, dirt, and tears. Blood-filled socks are residual markers of the efforts in which I exerted and pushed my body to extreme levels. Athletic tape is outwardly strong and durable, yet it is unavoidably susceptible in both its disposability and its malleability. As a coach wraps an injured ankle or broken finger with the tape, he is worried about two things simultaneously: binding the player in a way that allows the body to heal and allowing the bandage to remain loose enough so the athlete can still move gracefully and perform. There is an unspoken, and often unrecognized, intimacy that occurs, a physical interaction where I locate the multiplicities that exist within masculinity.

The materials on which I create my work are as crucial to communicating my ideas as the images I produce. Traditional Japanese papermaking utilizes three types of fibers from small trees that are native to Japan: Kozo, Mitsumata, and Gampi. Each has a significance, purpose, and connection to nature that helps to determine how and why they are used. Kozo, also referred to as mulberry, is often described as a masculine element or a protector. The fibers are thick and durable. It is the most widely used and the strongest of the three. I often choose this as the primary paper for my prints. Through the physical

processes of creating light sensitive paper with Kozo and Van Dyke brown printing solution – exposing it to light, developing it, fixing it, and washing it in multiple baths – I push the paper to its limit, transforming it into something so delicate and fragile that it can easily tear or disintegrate in the water. It is this quality of the paper as embodying both strength and fragility that mirrors my content and symbolizes how masculinity involves moments of both power and weakness.

Every work in my thesis exhibition references and signifies my actual body, the body in which I was and am still expected to perform my gender. Many of my experiences as a man are reminiscent of the anxiety and tension I felt playing basketball. When I am on the court, I am a *man*. I am good enough to play. When on the bench, however, I am obsolete, different, and not good enough. I become a spectator that longs and desires to be put in the game. Although I was never able to embody or adequately perform the expected gender roles imposed by my father and my community, the physical and non-physical experiences I encountered through athletics are still influential. I have found that unanswered questions and vulnerable memories from earlier in my life have fueled my work and desire as an artist. Through the act of making, I physically perform and exert myself the same way I did on the court. The interactions that occur between images, objects, materials, and my body remain just as significant and provocative.

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