



STATE OF CERAMICS | January 28, 2023

Qwist Joseph

**Ceramics in Relationship to Masculinity:
*how clay can reshape the manly man***

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In Attendance:

Nicole Seisler, Louise Deroualle, David Kruk, Logan Thomas, Emma Sher, John Roloff, Coleton Lunt, Craig Hartenberger, Zora J. Murff, Brady McLearen, Ben Skiba, Matthew O'Reilly, Lacey Joseph, Nandini Chandavarkar, Adam S. Posnak, Aidan Mann, Mingxuan Tan, Ariel Gout, Hilary Gish, Rebekah Myers, Michael Kiyoshi Salvatore, Leo Goolden, Suhm Lee, Teal Stannard, Mathew S. McConnell, Kevin Tracy, Jamie Bates Slone, Guy Marshall Brown, Eileen Getches, Cara Getches, Kelly Witmer, Magdolene Dykstra, Taj Joseph, Anie Toole, Patrick Kingshill, Kam Chan, Bean, Natalie Eee, Austin Coudriet, Michelle Montjoy, Sara Conti, Carly Slade, Danny Dobrow, Ashwini Bhat, Jasmine Baetz, Neil Forrest, Ella Scudder-Davis, Jonathan Yamakami, Maggie Sather, Andrew, Brian Mcnamara, Nat Nicholson, Lalana Fedorschak, Hannah Cameron, Danielle Callahan, Isobel Marcus, Dustin Yager, Iso Marcus, Lelièvre, Shereen Abbas, Cindy Leung, Katerina Papazissi, Pecos, Julia Schuster, Jeannie Hulen, Johanna Mandujano, Wansoo Kim, Mike Getches, Kat, Vivianne, Haleigh Presta, Isys Hennigar, Emily Irvin, Tia Santana

Questions from Qwist Joseph

- Do you think art materials are gendered?
- How do you as an artist play into the gendering of materials?
- What qualities do we associate with masculinity? Large scale, drippy, rough, atmospheric, heavy?
- Are we still grappling with the idea of the "Male Genius," an idea that was particularly prevalent in the 1950s when ceramics entered the greater "art" world? What effect is that still having?
- How do we need to change our teaching of clay to un-masculinize the classroom?
- What is missing in the conversation around masculinity?

- Can masculinity exist outside of the binary?
- What is the cost for men culturally, by talking about this?
- Is the telling of ceramic history a global problem? Are artists getting a more well-rounded early education in other countries?

Introduction / Context from Qwist Joseph (summarized by E. Comstock)

Joseph began by introducing bell hooks' framing of the harmful aspects of masculinity in *A Will to Change* as "patriarchal masculinity" rather than "toxic masculinity." These are the aspects concerned with control. He identifies that patriarchal masculinity is indoctrinated into children assigned male at birth. He learned early on that to be masculine was to "disconnect from inherent needs."

At 22, Joseph began losing hair as the result of alopecia, an autoimmune disorder, and he eventually lost all hair on his body. He explained a recognition that he was socialized to fear hair loss because it represents a loss of masculinity, that hair and gender are linked. Much of his work related to healing from the societal powerlessness of losing hair. He showed a Rogaine ad that entangled hair and male virility. Joseph's piece *Spineless* spoke to the isolation he felt in the midst of hair loss and the tension while slowly sharing more of his journey while learning to find "beauty in oneself again." Other pieces illustrated shifting views of vanity and the inability to mourn the loss of a physical characteristic as a man, while feeling nostalgia for lost things pulling him back in the midst of rebirth.

Joseph discussed the Hellenistic bronze cast *Spinario*, a messenger tending to splinter after finishing the job, which evokes his experience of people pleasing and suppressing pain as a man. In *Accretion with Strigil*, Joseph looked to the use of the strigil, a curved bronze tool, used by Greek athletes to collect sweat and dirt from their bodies. The collected grime would be bottled and sold. Here, Joseph has collected sink silt from his studio which evidence layers of his healing and processing, and references this masculine grooming practice. While showing work from his solo exhibition *Filling Station* at the University of Denver, multiple pieces including *Ladies, Ladies, Ladies*, grappled with the shame and devaluation of women that result from many boys first learning about sex through pornography.

Joseph is working towards understanding more fully the cost of "not holding myself accountable in this conversation." He referenced that many people with similar identities to him fear breaking society codes or taking up too much space in the accountability process. Alongside Perry, he also looks to the work of Jennifer Ling Datchuk and Shae Bishop for inspiration navigating these topics. He turned the conversation over to participants by asking if they could share their own experiences with the "masculine canon" and if the group could approach a definition of "masculine work."

Summary of Discussion (written by E. Comstock)

In an attempt to define 'masculine work', attention turned towards the Brancusian ideal of monument making, an approach that appears to favor making large forms without embodied action or introspection. Such work in ceramics often has a brutalist feel, is woodfired, installed outdoors, and/or uses abstraction to avoid providing a specific entry point. In considering such monolithic work, scale becomes a form of domination; bell hooks wrote about systems of domination, interlocking white supremacy, capitalism, and masculinity.

There was frustration amongst the group because it seemed difficult to go deeper into the conversation without first establishing a definition of 'masculine'. The conversation at this point seemed to have excluded nonbinary, queer, or feminine masculinities. When it was asked if it would be better to move on from gender entirely, a participant said the notion is unhelpful because even if "the urge to dominate is a human trait," regardless of gender, class, and race, these elements are what allow a person to dominate. Ultimately, the group acknowledged that their definition of 'masculine' was very broad. This was simultaneously useful and a road block to deepening the discourse.

The discussion shifted back to the presence of masculinity in ceramic work with a focus upon educational institutions. Observations were made about hierarchies: histories of predominantly male educators with predominantly non-male students; the hierarchy of materials presented by male faculty who devalue materials or styles perceived as feminine; the put-down of the decorative by male modernists. Jenny Sorkin's book *Live Form* was mentioned in reference to the effects of GI Bill, which provided a certain group of men access to art programs and "promoted a certain way of making" as a result. This is one possible explanation for the remaining presence of the stoicism of postwar culture. Several people reference the cycle of male faculty breaking students.

If masculinity can be so broadly and inclusively defined, why is the legacy of toxic masculinity so present in institutions? Can we look to artists that use intersectional backgrounds and ideas to find a way forward? In the midst of domination that is so systemic, will speaking up change anything when it requires so much courage to do so? Would it be useful to eliminate the use gendered adjectives as a field?

Joseph asked about ways of undoing systems of control in our own academic programs and curriculum. Ideas include decentering the "old heads" of the male clay canon in a critical way and centering other artists, increasing empathy for students, and eliminating grades and critiques in the classroom in favor of in-process discussion. While wrapping up, several participants made comments about how many questions remain unaddressed: how can we actively combat the remnants and trickle-down effects of patriarchal masculinity in academic, gallery, and residency spaces?

ADDITIONAL NOTES (written by A-B Projects Director Nicole Seisler)

I want to bring attention to the fact that this discussion drew more participation by male-identifying individuals than any other program in the history of A-B Projects. Around 40% of participants were male as opposed to our historic average of 0-5% male participation. Why is this? Why are the majority of our participants female-identifying or non-binary? How can we cultivate more of a balance of participation across gender? Does the increased participation of men hinge upon addressing so-called 'masculine' topics?

I also want to note that about halfway through this conversation it became apparent that the majority of participants speaking aloud were male-identifying, while the majority of participants writing in the chat were female-identifying. It took multiple attempts of reading the chat aloud to bring that dialogue somewhat into coalescence with the spoken dialogue. I find this troubling.

There is clearly a need to further this conversation but as yet, I do not have someone in mind who can guide us deeper into it. If that might be you, please reach out.