

A Man's World

**Jon Campbell/ Adam Cullen/ Noel McKenna/ Glenn Morgan/ Dani Marti/ David Wadelton/
Ben Morieson/ Charles Robb/ Gareth Sansom/ Gordon Bennett/ John Beard/ Euan
MacLeod/ James Mellon/ Andrew Curtis**

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I like watching people looking at art and imagining what they might be thinking. While viewing this show, a 70-something gent shuffled past in his slippers and high waisted shorts. What did this, an exhibition about contemporary masculinity, mean to him? Did he relate? Might he have questioned his own wrinkled sense of self? It'd be interesting to know, particularly about someone of his generation, which has lived through the whole gamut of male/female roles.

I came to this exhibition with my own expectations. Titled *A Man's World*, and featuring fourteen contemporary male artists, I had for some reason expected a more prescriptive statement about a current male condition, whatever that might be. 'Whatever that might be' was clearly the point. It explored just how grey the area that defines contemporary masculinity is. Poor blokes. After centuries of pointy architecture, football and guns, they've 'lost' themselves.... Facetiousness excused, this was the interesting part of the exhibition's thesis. However it focussed less on identity lost and more on opening up the extreme complexity surrounding 'maleness', not to mention 'humanness'. Problematic identities are not a new crisis or revelation, but it was interesting that the exhibition should focus on 'men' – seemingly as a collective grouping – given that contemporary identity politics has blown apart such majority groups. This is not to say that curator Frank McBride reinstated them but the title of the exhibition was a kind of foil, implying that it might conclude something about men.

Instead, the show presented very few definites, or pointed out that there are, of course, no definites where subjectivity is concerned. Rather than an exhibition explicitly 'about' males, it was an exhibition where all the artists were men. Male artists make work, obviously, about a number of things: cars, drawing, politics, fathers, childhood, language, morality. Not so different to their female counterparts, they nonetheless tell their stories through male eyes. Some works had traditional masculine themes, like Glenn Morgan's witty diorama *Alan Border's final Test match* (1995). Others pointed towards male histories, like the Judd-style concrete blocks in Andrew Curtis' photographs. Conversely, the bright pink lettering of the entry signage picked up this colour in Dani Marti's very un-macho weavings (which funnily enough, the didactic read, enact a type of control or bondage). At first glance, David Wadelton's colourful portraits had a kind of feminine decorativeness though after some moments their luridness was, as the artist himself commented, rather noxious.

Perhaps within the darker side of Marti and Wadelton's works lurked an expression of manhood – a terrible stereotype in itself. And why this niggling feeling anyway that the show could grasp some male condition? It could have been the comparison with what a show titled *A Woman's World* might look like, and whether that would include art that spoke more readily about femaleness (that easily containable thing!). Female artists (Jenny Watson, Tracey Emin, Barbara Kruger...) have spoken more self-consciously and directly about their gender than have their male counterparts. This is not surprising, feminist movement considered. There have been a few male artists who have done similarly, though it is harder to list so many (locally one could find it in the work of Scott Redford, Rod Bunter or even Grant Stevens). In the show, McBride included sculptures by Charles Robb, which actively reference historical heroism in sculpture, and paintings by Gareth Sansom's titled *The man who wasn't there* and *Dorian*. Other inclusions were less pointedly reflective, though no more or less 'male'.

The amorphous character of male identity reflected in *A Man's World* suggests that this is the condition of contemporary manhood. Or more correctly, men are more readily seen as individuals as part of a collective rather than just a group of beer drinkers and cricket watchers. It's only around fifty years ago that a show like this would have been irrelevant. The shared traits previously understood as male, while not defunct, are no longer a given; the subject might indeed warrant some soul searching.

In a clever use of programming, the MoB concurrently hosted a 'female' exhibition that charted the history and eventual demise of the Miss Australia competition due to outmoded values. Opposite each other, literally, in City Hall, these two shows triggered questions about the 'separate sexes' and the future of each group. For instance, it's perhaps fair to say that the idea of the female 'community' is, despite changing attitudes, more politically correct than that of the male one. That unity between women is readily associated with recently forged identities whereas male groupings are still easily related to old-fashioned stereotypes. Where lies the sense of kinship for the 'modern man' as his attitude changes? Does he even have a future? 'Yes indeed,' write the authors of *The Future of Men*. 'And he has the power to shape it just as women shaped theirs in the last century. Man's greatest battle is not against women or other man or even changing times. It's against the inertia that falsely tells him that he's on top and will always be on top. It's against the false sense of security that what forever has been will always be. This isn't a battle women will instigate or fight on men's behalf. They've fought their own battle – and they've won. Now, it's up to men to fight their own revolution.'⁽¹⁾

1. M. Salzman, I. Matathia and A. O'Reilly, *The Future of Men*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan, p.219.