

BENEATH THE SURFACE: SEEING THROUGH REFLECTIONS

By

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Abstract

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My work investigates memories and experiences of masculinity, myths that aided in the construction of masculinity, and the roles that those forged notions of masculinity have played in altering my concept of male identity and the self. I use time based media and performance to address these concerns and to express my understanding (or lack thereof) of my memories. I attempt to translate my searching into a spectacle through which my audience might experience my anxiety in relating to these issues. My work is also therapy, acting as a mentor and visual guide in the quest for a better understanding or a more acute awareness of the self. My work offers viewers a window, or reflecting pool, through which fragments of my memories, questions, and meditations may be experienced.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	vi
SECTION	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. FOUNDATION.....	1 - 9
3. WORK.....	9 - 16
4. CONCLUSION.....	16 - 17
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	18

Dedication

To my brother, I could not have chosen a better friend to grow up with. To my father and mother, who gave me the means to succeed and the choice to do so.

And to my wife, your immeasurable support and encouragement have allowed me to dig deeper wells than I could have ever dug alone. Thank you.

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

My work investigates memories and experiences of masculinity, myths that aided in the construction of masculinity, and the roles that those forged notions of masculinity have played in altering my concept of male identity and the self. I use time based media and performance to address these concerns and to express my understanding (or lack thereof) of my memories. I attempt to translate my searching into a spectacle through which my audience might experience my anxiety in relating to these issues. My work is also therapy, acting as a mentor and visual guide in the quest for a better understanding or a more acute awareness of the self. My work offers viewers a window, or reflecting pool, through which fragments of my memories, questions, and meditations may be experienced.

SECTION TWO: FOUNDATION

Much of what I do and make is informed by memories of specific times, places, and people. Memory has formed the foundation upon which I have built the last five years of my work. I am most fascinated with memories of exaggerated characterizations of masculinity manifested in rural regional culture. These interests and the combination of origin, access, and investigation have created an incredibly rich territory for exploration.

The concepts and materials I work with are in many ways products of my cultural and geographic background. Born and raised in a small, rural farming

community, I was exposed to very raw and boisterous forms of white, Middle America masculinity throughout my childhood. Those individuals along with deeply rooted attachments to land(scape), labor, and tools formed monolithic standards by which "men" in these regional cultures were measured. As I grew older, I found myself disenchanted with the notion of fitting into a pre-defined set of ideals. Feelings of "disassociation" served as my first incentive to discover a more specific and honest self. The way in which I "see" myself now is due to this lack of being able to "look" at myself in the light that was made available then.

In revisiting memories, I find myself both eager and apprehensive to determine their sources. The threads attaching an individual to an idea can be much more knotted and complex than the idea itself. This body of work began with the aim to peel back layers, even if this meant exposing a raw or sensitive surface. However, as my work has progressed it became increasingly apparent that through examination, a tribute or homage is being paid to these memories. This realization has uncovered a new, much more honest, respect for the source of my questioning and my work.

The Greek myth of Narcissus and of his reflection is an important starting point for discussion as well as an appropriate first step toward a better understanding of the work. In this myth, Narcissus, a young man who lived long ago, was son to a god and a nymph woman. He was also seen as superbly handsome by the people of his town. He eventually grew tired of this attention

and turned to despise those that adored him. As a way to further construct the character, in the myth it is also told that Narcissus had no knowledge of himself. This mention of Narcissus "not knowing" seems somewhat ambiguous in first reading, but it is important to note that in most of the tellings of this myth the "lack of knowing" is emphasized as a way to begin to communicate his psychological condition. As he grows closer to adulthood, his mother consults a prophet to learn of any unforeseen danger that could be lurking in her son's future. The prophet arrives at the conclusion that her son would live to a ripe old age as long as he were to do so without ever coming to know himself, which is in some versions translated to say that Narcissus could never look upon his own image.

As the story unfolds, Narcissus ventures out into the great forest on a hunt. While in the forest, he becomes thirsty and goes to a stream for a drink. When he bends to put his lips to the water he sees his reflection for the first time upon its surface. Narcissus becomes entranced with the image on the water; however he does not recognize the figure staring back at him as his own reflection. After much time spent staring at the water's surface, Narcissus is reminded of his thirst. He bends to drink from the stream again, not taking his eyes off of the figure. When his lips touch the water and he begins to drink, the reflection becomes distorted. He is frightened at the prospect of losing the image and vows not to repeat his actions. As time passes, he grows weak and tired, not able to drink for fear of chasing the figure away, and not able to eat

for fear of leaving the sight of the image. Narcissus eventually perishes beside the stream, dying of thirst and hunger.

The language used in the beginning of the myth to describe Narcissus as not "knowing himself" is an alliterate method of saying that he had never seen his own reflection, however, an alternate interpretation could be taken to understand that he truly did not know himself on any level. This would mean that Narcissus did not have a concept of his identity or of his "self." It is helpful to mention here that when our main character does indeed see (know) himself for the first time, he has done so after setting out into the forest alone. The mention of a hunt or journey in the forest is a common literary and oral tradition method of conveying a character's psychological wander or journey. This process is often undertaken as a means of self discovery, a movement away from that which is known and comfortable to the unfamiliar or dangerous. The relationship of this path of discovery to concepts of identity is given, but the relationship of an understanding of cultural notions of gender, in our case masculinity, to this journey isn't always as accessible or noticed. For a better understanding of this relationship it is useful to look to an ancient culture that practiced very obvious rituals of passage in order to prepare their youth to assume culturally mandated gender roles.

The recent interest in the ancient Spartan society (a la Frank Miller's *300*), recalls the practice of young Spartan males being sent out into the wilderness to survive as part of an initiation rite. The Spartan culture's

society was based upon a warrior-citizen model where every male was to serve a minimum length in the city-state's military. To prepare for this service and to serve as a transition from boyhood to manhood, the male children were subjected to a long list of rites, including ritual beatings and a period of exile. This exile served as method of forcing the boys to find their own feet to stand upon and their strength or sense of identity, but most importantly to form connections with their peers and to adopt the cultural masculine norms. The boys would work together, stealing or killing their food, and terrorizing the people in the countryside. Upon returning from their time in the wild, the young males were considered men and soldiers, worthy of citizen status. The male citizens' time in the wild, their physical wandering, was accepted by the Spartan society as the prominent marking point in the transition from childhood to adulthood and stood as the ceremonial capturing of the essence of their culture. This example belongs to a very long list of instances where a transition of age and gender role is marked by a journey out into the unknown.

Narcissus' journey into the wild does indeed mark a turning point in his life and provides the first introduction of his "self". However, it is also this journey, by way of the introduction, that eventually leads to his demise.

Narcissus is consumed by a wonder of the male figure reflected back at him. A compelling interpretation of this obsession finds that he is more likely consumed by the desire to question and to know the figure in the water. This infatuation with the self and the male form brings many issues of masculinity

to the surface for consideration, most notably ideals of appearance. Images of masculinity and maleness are pervasive throughout almost any culture, so much so, that young boys generally have no misgivings on how to structure their behavior and appearance in order to be seen as a "man". Whether or not the young child is comfortable with or chooses to navigate those norms is entirely secondary to this point, and in fact, having to make this choice can be a source of strong anxiety for many.

Masculinity and, more broadly, cultural understanding of gender, is heavily reliant upon looking and acting the part. When Narcissus sees what he perceives as a prime example of masculinity he is stunned and struck with a reverence for the image. Because he does not recognize the image as his reflection and has no clear understanding of himself, he is unable to see that what he desires is essentially what he already is. Elements of this relationship can be seen as homo-erotic, and indeed, versions of the myth do suggest that Narcissus is maddened by his inability to convey his love and attraction to the image reflected back at him. But I would suggest that a more profound interpretation is one of a desire to fill or span a gap, and the inability to do so.

Had Narcissus been able to bond with his reflection, he would have fulfilled a much more important, psychological need for self-awareness. The desire to understand the "other" is something embedded into human behavior, but even more profound is that the "other" in this mythology also happens to be a part, or a reflection, of our main character. The representative aspect is

one that offers a glimpse into Narcissus' relationship with his "self" and his understanding of his own masculinity. Once his reflection was displayed on the surface of the water, his being was split in two. He was no longer whole because of the strong need to know the projected or external self. It may be possible to say that he did not die of thirst or hunger, but of a fractured self.

Narcissism, which is most obviously a term derived from the myth of Narcissus, is something that is relatively well known through its largely negative connotations. Referring to someone as a narcissist is usually meant to say that the individual is consumed with themselves or, more specifically, their own image. In 1914, Sigmund Freud published what would be his sole paper devoted entirely to Narcissism, called simply "On Narcissism." As part of his analysis, Freud speaks about the condition of Narcissism being constructed by the presence of a strong ego-libido. He also speaks of a relatively new concept for the time, one where there is also in play an ego-ideal as well as a propensity for self-observation. Considering this theorized ego-ideal, which represents an ideal self that is to be sought, has helped me to understand that while my work is influenced by certain ideals, I am not in search of an idealization in my video. It is instead the inclination for self-observation that is most important. The work and research being discussed here use my personal narcissism and my interest in self-observation as a means of locating an understanding of my identity as a male.

Rosalind Krauss addresses ideas present within the myth of Narcissus as well as Freud's theories on the matter in her article "Video and the Aesthetics of Narcissism" written in 1976 for *October* magazine. In this article, Krauss discusses the medium of video, its object, as being a psychological condition of the self split through reflection. Krauss also mentions that the nature of this split echoes the specific condition endemic to narcissism, an ego-libido, or more plainly, a "self-interest." Mentioning this ego-libido is a direct reference to Freud's "On Narcissism" and by inclusion alludes to the ego-ideal. The concept of a split self suggests a duality in existence or being and dictates that these two entities be locked in fruitless struggle for reunification. In the case of Narcissus, the split occurs when he first sees his reflection and is taken over by an obsession with the figure, essentially becoming fixed in a struggle that will eventually claim his life.

Even with the article now being over 30 years old, in many ways I can agree with much of what Krauss presents as her argument and that which she uses to defend it. Vito Acconci's piece titled *Centers* from 1971 is used as a primary example of Video Art's inward focus. In this work, Acconci performs a deceptively simple task of pointing to the center of a monitor by recording himself pointing into the lens of a camera, and then having that image simultaneously relayed to a display screen. The exchange between the camera and monitor creates a reflection or mirror that presents a moving image where

Acconci is at once pointing to the audience, to the technology used to create the piece, and to himself.

The argument Acconci's *Centers* begins to make is one that I would agree with by suggesting that one of the more important ideas present within self-referential video art, as well as the myth of Narcissus, is a desire to look into the reflection and not at it. The surface of the water upon which the reflection of Narcissus was projected and the space beneath presents the physical possibility of reaching beyond. It is the narcissistic tendency, however, that offers up the possibility of looking until one is able to see through the reflection. The reflection in this case is not transparent or seen through as you might look through a pane of glass, rather, it is the conduit that allows the privileged view, much like a telescope or microscope. The goal of seeing through and into along with portions of the process relayed in the myth of Narcissus is, in short, the essence of what my work has come to be about.

SECTION THREE: WORK

All of the works exhibited share many common threads of concept and process. Each piece is a reflecting pool of sorts and each one reflects something different. In the process of making and seeing I am looking at and beyond my own reflections. In many cases, the work and its content is not fully grasped until after the piece is made and left to be contemplated. I find that I confront my own narcissism not as a disease or as an infatuation with

my own image, but rather as a method of study. I am interested in watching my own existence and how I confront or respond to situations and anxieties. I believe that the culmination of my graduate work is truly beginning to accomplish this.

Aggression and displays of masculinity are two of the elements addressed within my video performance entitled *Draw*. In this piece duality is directly referenced as well as implemented in order to allude to struggle and competition. Visually, the piece is quite simple in depicting two figures, similar in appearance, performing the action of "drawing" their chosen object in the style of a stereotypical western showdown. The figure on the left of the split screen image uses a hammer, held by the head, as the insinuated weapon, where the figure on the right uses an electric drill. Both objects themselves contain an inherent violence through their intended use. In *Draw* however, the objects are used in an awkward or ineffective manner, the hammer held by its head and the drill spinning fruitlessly in the air. This lack of effect in regard to these tools' designed implementation turns both their associated violence and the commonly understood attachments to masculinity on end.

It is important to see the figure as a male form, and then secondary to see the work visually reflecting my "self". The split screen format is a common convention used to offer either multiple views or to show events occurring at simultaneous / different times and/or places. Rather than the two videos being placed in opposition (i.e. opposing walls), they are viewed side by side.

This warp of spatial and temporal placement offers the viewer a unique insight to what can be conceived of as an internal struggle taking place on in a mental landscape. In this struggle no dominance is established, instead, only the action, repetition, and opposition are emphasized to a point of importance. The end result is a project that successfully pushed my work in a new direction.

Where *Draw* addresses aggression and competition, the video performance piece *(tape)Measure* uses a different form of competition to communicate. In this video, the torso of a figure is situated in profile to the camera. A carpenter's tape measure is attached to the pocket of the figure's pants. During the performance, the figure activates the tool by quickly extending the metal tape and then releasing it so that it dances around wildly before being pulled back into the tape measure housing. The quick action of the tape extension followed by the sudden coiling back have a kind of visual aggression that is not necessarily inherent in the tool, but is indicative of the force the object, and its conceptualization, hold.

(tape)Measure was a very fluid response to the object used in the performance. The tape measure is almost a "readymade" object poised for comment on and about the male fixation with measuring and measuring up. As mentioned previously, gender ideals are often constructed by appearance and through action. The process by which masculine types are compared to others and to the ideal is largely by way of measurement. Measurements in

body, attributes, ability, and accomplishments are used to build up or tear down constructed gender identities.

Aggression as an element in these short video performances gradually became a common secondary theme with each successive piece. In *18 and 1*, a figure stands out of frame with a pistol drawn and held at the edge of the frame. On the opposite edge of the frame sits an empty glass jar on a pedestal. The video records the hand setting and firing the pistol. After the shot is fired, the audience realizes that the weapon is a plastic pellet gun and not the high powered weapon it appears to be. When the projectile leaves the plastic gun and strikes the glass jar, an audible plink and ricochet sound as the pellet bounces off of the glass and quickly out of frame. This action replays as each of the 18 pellets is fired at the glass jar and ricochet back in the direction they came from. When the weapon is set and fired the last time, there is no pellet that exits the barrel and thus signals the end of the piece.

While aggression and various other agents associated with masculinity are quickly discerned from this performance, these are mostly byproducts from the memory this work is loosely based upon. As a child I remember receiving my first firearm as a gift and that very day trekking off into the woods with my father and grandfather. We set up glass bottles and jars on a log and I practiced taking shots at these fragile objects. This experience has been with me for quite some time, but it was only by this performance reflecting these notions that I began to understand a few of the memory's numerous

implications. Through my narcissistic tendency of self observation, I've realized that the layers of meaning and conflict in this piece show me much about myself and the nature of my constructed understanding of masculinity.

Appendage deals with a level of violence associated with objects and concepts linked to masculine formation. In this very straightforward piece another struggle is depicted. At the beginning of the video there is placed in frame a hand on the left and a hammer on the right. Almost immediately as the performance begins, a hand moves in on the right side, picks up the hammer and proceeds to assault the left hand, attempting to strike it. The left hand dodges the incoming blows, seeming to move just in time with each attempt made on it. The performance continues, escalating to a rapid pacing several times throughout the duration. Eventually the right hand surrenders and lays down the hammer, signaling the end of the performance and video.

In *Appendage*, a history of aggression and violence related to tools as objects constructing not buildings and homes but culturally formed normative masculinity. The tension between flesh and metal is already accessible due to the potential for pain or injury, and interestingly enough, the metal hammer in this video is the product of a human endeavor. As the hammer takes shot after shot on the hand, it becomes hard not to question whether the tool is attempting to damage the operator, perhaps exerting dominance in physicality, or maybe even suggesting the tools supremacy in ability. Not only does this video speak to the accidental occurrence of a user of such a hammer striking

their hand while working, it more importantly addresses the issue of how the concept of what it is to be man, or a man, maintains an uneasy symbiotic relationship with tools and labor. Ability to perform manual labor and to produce is a key factor when individuals seeking the masculine ideal assess their worth. Dependence is how I have come to see this connection, dependence on work as proof of worth. By performing this action, and experiencing the anxiety it produced, I was reminded of this attachment.

Confronted by these four works, it is difficult to dismiss the obvious similarities of aggression, which in turn makes it impossible to hide the bond between that aggression and masculinity. This was not the intention of this process, but it is an unavoidable byproduct that I have come to terms with.

Beneath the abrasive surface of this work lies a much more rich structure of content. Each performance had something new to teach and each was built upon the last. The process was fluid, contemplation was barely a factor compared to the immediacy of doing.

As an installation and in its content, *imbue* is constructed of many layers. The primary projection as it is displayed on the wall in the space shows a complex layering of figures so out of focus that it is impossible to discern the image in the beginning of the footage cycle. As the projection plays through, the image gradually becomes clearer, moving from a haze of colors and mass to a number of variations of the same figure set against a forest backdrop. These figures are layered in different levels of opacity and are shown slowly pulling

handfuls of water up from an unknown source and drenching their face. The figure is unclothed, standing in the center of the image and framed from the waist up. Seeing exposed flesh in motion can itself illicit anxiety in a viewer, however, the confrontation with this level of vulnerability can change for each individual. The figure's gaze never truly connects with that of the audience, and if it were not for the fact that the video is so framed and exists as a document, there is little to suggest an awareness of their presence. Some viewers may find themselves in a position of the voyeur; others will likely feel as though they are a participant in the rhythmic and meditative performance.

Sounds of water and of the forest are important supplements to the imagery, creating an atmosphere for the figure to exist in. The forest sound has been altered to direct the viewers' attention to the intricate details provided by the environment. By slowing the sound of the water, both a distinction and a connection are created with the video.

As part of the performance, the figure bends out of frame repeatedly, drawing a visual connection to the second projection which is displayed on the floor in front of the wall projection. A pool of water is shown in this second video. Viewers that approach the area around the frame will see their image become part of the projection as a digitally created reflection on the surface of the water. This is achieved through a camera that captures the audience in the installation space and combines that image with the footage of the water.

The result is then a constructed reflecting pool that allows the audience to confront their own image as well as their own narcissism.

SECTION FOUR: CONCLUSION

In many ways, the discussion of the mentioned works is a description of my own personal journey into the great forest, away from the known. Aside from being a physical or psychological journey, this trek was also one of personal and spiritual growth, achieving what an expedition into the unknown is supposed to. This process was not clearly defined or demanded and mostly self motivated, but none the less required. Yet, I find it difficult to suggest that it was my own doing when I feel like the largest role I played was a passive one, watching and waiting to see. A moving body performed these various pieces, but what is less noticeable and largely more important is the movement of the self and my understanding of it. These are the transitions that will last and will continue to influence my work well into the future.

Unique to this experience is that I have had the ability to watch myself throughout this wandering. My video projects have been my reflecting pools, revealing to me something valuable each time I've made the effort to see them. I mentioned that this work has allowed me to learn about my "self", and some of what I've uncovered are indeed narcissistic tendencies. Rather than treat this finding as a detriment, continuing the exploration has shown me that perhaps narcissism, in my case, isn't in line with the typical understanding

that the word connotes. For many, coming to terms with being a narcissist would mean accepting and then attempting to change the fact that they are "in love" with themselves. I would insist that I am "interested" in my "self." Not "myself" as in my physical body and how it functions, eating, sleeping, and the way it looks in a context specified by contemporary culture. I am also not suggesting this process is motivated by an existential interest; there is no "pinch" on the arm to try and prove my existence. It is my "self" that I am trying to watch, the experiencing self. It is through this, then, that I have come to understand my narcissistic tendencies and to find them invaluable in the progress that I have made. My aims are external in that I am constantly questioning how I have come to be me. By way of this questioning truths have been exposed as to how I have been formed. These have been my meditations. I have been in the wild, trekking through the forest. Now that I seem to be on a path, it has only led to another wilderness more untamed than the last.

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