

Greslé, Y. **PERFORMANCES OF MASCULINITY** in Art South Africa Volume 3, Issue 2, Bell Roberts Publishing, Cape Town, December

What is it to be a man? Why is there so much interest in Masculinity of late? Is there a crisis in Masculinity? Yvette Gresle confronts these and other questions.

A dead man
who never caused others to die
seldom rates a statue

WH Auden

Our ill-fated and most lamentable friendship has ended in ruin
and public infamy for me, yet the memory of our ancient
affection is often with me.

Oscar Wilde to Lord Alfred Douglas

A penis was thus a status symbol... It could be construed as a
certificate of sorts, like the diploma of a doctor or lawyer
today, which entitled the bearer to certain rights and privileges.

Thomas Laquer

[Masculinity, as these excerpts suggest, is a notion immersed in fraught and complex histories. In situating the notion of masculinity within the many-layered, often contradictory and ambiguous social and cultural narratives that have participated in its making, we become conscious of its inherent artificiality. There can be no coherent, essential, monolithic, all-encompassing definition of masculinity. Rather, there are many masculinities or, as Judith Butler might argue, performances of masculinity. The vocabularies with which we speak about male/female gender and sexual identities, roles and preferences – masculine, feminine, gay, lesbian, effeminate, manly, androgynous, butch, macho, straight, cross-dresser, transvestite or transsexual – are mere signposts in the vast and complicated terrain of gender, the body and sexuality.]

At a public symposium titled *Masculinity and Manhood: Struggles with Change* hosted by Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) in September, the following questions were posed by Achille Mbembe: *Why is there so much interest in masculinity of late? Is there a crisis in masculinity? What are its manifestations? What does it mean to femininity?* Papers and lively discussions debated and revealed the often startling assumptions embedded in the ways in which masculinities are constituted, defined and performed within various social, cultural and political contexts. Personal accounts revealed the fluidity and ambiguity often infusing the subjective experience of being male or female. The WISER audience either debunked or clung to the artifice of grand historical, social and cultural narratives informing the making of masculinity and femininity, as well as ideas about natural and appropriate male/female roles and identities.]

[It is unfortunate that contemporary arts' examination of current issues are not engaged in greater depth within public forums outside of the artworld and with greater sensitivity to the

vocabulary of the visual image and its histories. There are many South African artists whose work would greatly enrich public discussions, such as those hosted by WISER. For instance, the work of artists such as Paul Emmanuel, Hentie van der Merwe and Luan Nel all complicate conventional heterosexual and patriarchal conceptions of masculinity. Much of their work resonates with their personal experience of being male, South African and gay. Common to all three is the spectre of the military, which through South Africa's colonial and apartheid histories has impressed itself on conventional, heterosexual and patriarchal makings of masculinity and manhood.

In *after-Image* (2004), a work of epic magnitude, Emmanuel scratched obsessively, for several months at AGFA photographic paper with a craft knife. The paper, which turned pitch black by exposure to light, becomes the canvas for an exquisitely wrought image of a military uniform mysteriously discarded in a field. At first glance we are uncertain as to whether the work was composed of an actual photograph or whether it was made by hand. While there is no evidence of a body, the arrangement of the uniform in the field suggests the presence of a living, breathing being.

We wonder whether the uniform is all that remains of man who died because of propagandistic and socially prescribed notions of manhood, or whether it was discarded in illicit acts of love or desertion. Did this anonymous man die for "God and Country", or did he transgress conventional heterosexual, patriarchal and nationalist conceptions of manhood? Emmanuel, in fact, bought the uniform depicted from a shop attached to the Museum of Military History in Johannesburg. As the jacket's insignia indicates, it belonged to a staff sergeant in the medical corps, a healer. In foregrounding an individual neither of high rank, nor a war hero in the conventional sense, Emmanuel presents an alternative to the grand historical representations of masculinity in the context of war.]

Yvette Greslé is an arts writer and Doctoral Fellow with the Public Intellectual Life Project at Wits University.