

# STATE OF CERAMICS

January 28, 2023 10am PST

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

a discussion guide by Qwist Joseph

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### Topic

Clay is a contradictory medium. In the raw state, it's soft and sensitive. Once fired, the material is strong and rock hard. But this permanence is merely a facade, masking its underlying fragility. These two states of clay mirror our stereotypical gender binary. As this harmful system continues to erode, does clay's ability to be both flexible and static make it particularly helpful in this conversation? Are these contradictory qualities earth's lessons to us about our missteps?

It wasn't until I lost all the hair on my body from an autoimmune disease that I was forced to confront my masculinity. Clay helped me to explore my gender, revealing how it had affected me and others in my life. Once I started talking about it, I felt like I had stepped out from behind a veil. As I continue to develop this work, I'm challenged and inspired by so many other incredible artists also investigating gender. There are too many to list, and yet I'm frustrated by the lack of engagement from men, particularly white, cis, straight, able-bodied men. Why do men like me so often feel exempt from talking about identity in relation to their work? Is there more to it than a fear of losing power? Who is our silence hurting? How do we look at masculinity through an intersectional lens?

This discussion will center around the ways in which masculinity has shaped the field of ceramics. We will collectively question why the majority of our classrooms are made up of women, including the A-B Projects State of Ceramics space, while men still dominate the gallery scene and other positions of power. How can we reflect on the lessons of our material and use it to shift the field? Can clay support us as we slake down our culture's rigid gender framework and what can we form from the reclaim?

— Qwist Joseph

## Questions

### Clay as a Material

- Do you think art materials are gendered?
- How do you as an artist play into the gendering of materials?
- Is clay less gendered than other art materials?
- Is clay more egalitarian than other materials?
- What qualities do we associate with masculinity? Large scale, drippy, rough, atmospheric, heavy?
- Do you think clay is particularly useful in this conversation?

### Today's Conversation: The Classroom and Beyond

- How do we learn gender? Have you seen it shifting?
- How does masculinity affect queer, trans and people of color differently?
- 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 can we get more men in the ceramics classroom and more women represented in galleries?
- Is there any part of masculinity that is inherently biological? Nature versus nurture?
- How do we need to change our teaching of clay to un-masculinize the classroom?
- There are very few wrong ways to use the material yet I still teach a lot of rules, is this necessary?
- What is missing in the conversation around masculinity?

### Looking Forward

- Can masculinity exist outside of the binary?
- Is loss integral to growth? What can we gain by losing outdated ideas of masculinity?
- 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?
- Who were the men who made soft small gestures who we don't know about?
- What artists do you feel are talking about masculinity and are not acknowledging it?
- Who is working in ways that are outside stereotypically male approaches?

## Readings and Selected Quotes

### [Power and Equity: Sexism in Ceramics](#)

Led by Ayumi Horie and Sunshine Cobb

#### **Jenny Sorkin excerpt at 24:07**

“Women who were part of the civilian service during war time were not offered GI benefits. That means they did not get any access to higher education free from the US government. So the entirety of the MFA programs that were set up in this Golden Age, is really the expansion of higher education in this country starting in the late 40s after wartime. So this is when arts education expands exponentially to community colleges, teachers colleges and big research universities. And that is where most people end up with any craft training and that's when most art programs in this country actually begin. So most of the programs that many of us went to, start in this period. Some date before that, but most date to that period. What this means is that women are left out of the ability to get a low cost MFA. And they are routinely directed to teacher training.”

### [Antlers Do What No Other Bones Can](#)

**Katherine J. Wu**

“Antlers confess to the world the ways in which males are healthy and chock-full of primo DNA—or very, very much not. According to Emlen, the body size of male elks doesn't tend to vary by more than a factor of about two—but the width of their antlers may span a range of 30-fold or more. At least some species of female deer appear to have clued into these cues, using antlers as sexual billboards that may help them home in on the season's best sperm.”

“Pushed to extremes by the twin forces of male rivalry and sex appeal, modern male cervids have had little choice but to advance toward a pretty dicey goal. As Jeannine Fleegle, a wildlife biologist at the Pennsylvania Game Commission, puts it: “I want to grow the biggest set of antlers I can without it killing me.”

“Humans have warped the structures into an almost-toxic symbol of virility, she said; they reinforce the idea that bigger is better, that males are the more stunning sex.”

## [What Is Masculinity In Art, And Do We Have To Care?](#)

**Torey Akers**

“Uncertain, inscrutable and defensive, white masculinity in art follows a similar pattern of almost petty reification. A casual JStor search unearths the usual suspects—queer artists who subvert it, artists of color who affirm it, women artists who interrogate it. This, of course, is evidence of Ahmed’s aforementioned “citational relational;” it’s hard to get play in the canon if you don’t engage. White, straight masculinity is the benchmark, and even opposition to it helps assert its social dominance.”

“Not unlike pornography, it seems that unironically masculine art subscribes to a “know it when you see it” model. Scholarship on the subject localizes in the Abstract Expressionist realm, back when the fetish of painting celebrated process over image and the cult of caucasian Male Genius was at an all time high.”

“It’s notable that the term “toxic masculinity” was coined by the self-help-oriented mythopoetic men’s movement of the ‘70s in contrast with what they termed the “deep” masculine tenets, typically measured in loss. The mythopoeists believed that men suffered from too much domestic contact with women, too much separation from their fathers, too many accusations of sexism, which depleted their God-given, “deep-masculine” nature.

“That brings us back to aesthetics. Gender as we know it isn’t really working anymore, and neither are its visual signifiers. White men are no longer allowed to eat us, but the hunger never left. So, cue the bloody stumps, seething resentment, and wishy washy green art. If I were to take a guess, I’d say the de-skilling and found objects and digital pastiche and gutless swathes puce are all by-products of perceived exclusion from an identity political conversation that white men refuse to believe they exist inside.

## [Royal Academy Panel Discussion: Gendered Materials](#)

Ann Christopher, Coco Crampton and Mark Dunhill (Dunhill and O’Brien), moderated by Helena Reckitt.

6:10- Where women work with stereotypical gendered materials have often worried about being ghettoized because of that. We haven't really seen the same with men. Male artists who we might think of working in very overtly masculine ways. So think about minimalist artists in the 60s who were working with very butch processes and techniques. These artists were not written about as being overtly masculine or male artists.

7:42- When a review in Art Form likened Carl Andre's brick pieces to rugs he wrote to the magazine to object, saying he was referencing bricklaying and further masculinized trades and materials. Linda Benglis poked fun at this with the notorious advert in Art Forum where we see her naked, oiled up and sporting a large strap on dildo. She claims her ad was all about taking up space.

### **The Descent of Man- Grayson Perry**

Page 107-108:

"Boys grow up steeped in a culture that says that their feelings are different from girls'. Boys have fewer feelings and theirs are simpler than girls'; boys are more robust and they don't care about things so much. But this downplaying of their emotional complexity is, I think, the aspect of masculinity that we most urgently need to change. Men need to transform their relationship with violence, performance and power. That change must begin with their emotions, by allowing boys and men more emotional space.

People seem to like the idea that gender is somehow deeply influenced by our genes, no matter how little scientific evidence there is that they play much of a role. There may be biological differences in male and female brains that shape women's attitudes towards empathy, social cohesion and avoidance of danger, all things that help leaving more descendants; and in men cause a bias toward systems, a more rigidly organized view of the world and an attraction to taking risks. But these differences have a tiny effect on gender roles compared to conditioning.

We love to think that boys are "naturally" more physical, less well behaved, more stoic. I think we like the idea that gender is in our genes because it is convenient; it lets us off the hook. It lets parents off the hook for the gendered ways we treat our children, consciously or unconsciously. It lets society off the hook for how we encourage gender stereotypes, and it lets us all off the hook for acting them out every minute of every day. One thing humans have definitely genetically evolved to like is convenience.

### **The Will To Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love- Bell Hooks**

Page 54:

To truly protect and honor the emotional lives of boys we must challenge patriarchal culture. And until that culture changes, we must create the subcultures, the sanctuaries where boys can learn to be who they are uniquely, without being forced to conform to patriarchal masculine visions. To love boys rightly we must value their inner lives enough to construct worlds, both private and public, where their right to wholeness can be consistently celebrated and affirmed, where their need to love and be loved can be fulfilled.

## Images & Artwork by Contemporary Makers



[Grayson Perry](#)

*Bad Portraits of Establishment Figures*

2016

ceramic vase

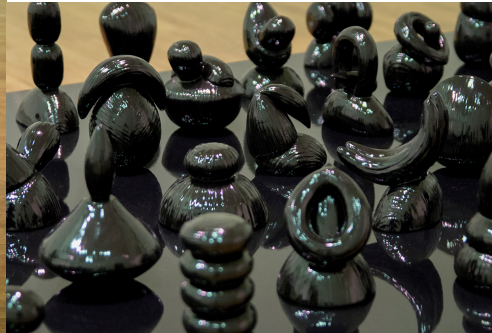


[Shae Bishop](#)

*You Lookin' At Me, Pardner?*

2021

ceramic



[Kevin R. Kao](#)

*Buns*

(modeled after Tang Dynasty court hairstyles)

2015

Ceramic, glaze, automotive vinyl wrap, mdf



[Clint Neufeld](#)

*Screaming Jimmy, the first time we met in that field I knew you were the one*

2016

ceramic, metal



[Cassils](#)

*Becoming an Image*

2013

performance with 2000 lb block of clay



[Myers Berg studios](#)

*By any means...By any means...*

2019

terra cotta, terra sigillata, glaze, gold luster, brass rod, walnut, glass cloche





[Jennifer Ling Datchuk](#)

"Tame" (video still)

[video](#)

2021



[Ehren Tool](#)

Cup

unknown date