

Lynne Fanthome: 20<sup>th</sup> February 2014

Entering 'No Pain No Gain!!!' by Brian J Morrison, a thin wood bust on a plinth greets the visitor. Arms folded, emphasising pectorals and biceps, the masculine figure holds a confident posture. This is Joe Weider, declared by Schwarzenegger as 'the godfather of fitness,'<sup>1</sup> who built a global bodybuilding empire prompting international competitions, muscle enhancing products and magazines. A photograph of a bronze bust of Weider holding this iconic pose can be seen on his website, which is also the basis of the company logo. At Supercollider, an independent gallery in Blackpool, the grandiose posture is undercut by the use of cheap materials; this is not a bronze statue, but a photo blown up from a newspaper and pasted on MDF. The bronzed skin is ubiquitous of the bodybuilding industry, a surface sheen lacking mettle, value and gravitas.

In this installation from 2014 and in previous work Brian Morrison utilises the archive and icons of the bodybuilding industry, appropriating magazine images from physique magazines. For 'Ripped, Chiseled and Rock Hard' (2013) Morrison created photographic sculptures from sources in Weider's 'Muscle and Fitness' magazines from the 1980s. Images of hyperbolically posed, pumped bodies and body parts were re-contextualised in a gallery setting. An unexpected outcome saw exhibition visitors photographing themselves with these in humorous poses. Class snobbery may come into play in parody, where bodybuilding is currently perceived as an aspirational activity of the unemployed and underclass, unlike Bikram yoga or Pilates. It was significant that in Blackpool a flyer had been left for visitors near the Weider figure, advertising without irony local body building services. Morrison's approach is not to sneer at a hapless consumer, but practice a critical enquiry, which by his account is, '*research led and built on an engagement with the social theory of heteronormative...hegemonic forces in place that instil regressive gender codes*'<sup>2</sup> His recent work focuses on an industry of bodybuilding that builds its commerce by equating muscular masculinity with economic mastery, supported by commercial photography.

It may be thought that gender critique of the hyper-masculine figure of the extreme bodybuilder is late in the day, where fashion has turned toward a less muscle-bound version of masculinity and queer academia has established the camp status of the body builder; physique and muscle magazines are recognised as sources of homoerotic identification and pleasure, and valued in campy appreciation. An enquiry such as Morrison's into the objectification of masculinity and the homoerotic could be subjected

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<sup>1</sup> Angeles, A. P. i. L. (2013). Joe Weider, bodybuilding guru and Schwarzenegger mentor, dies at 93. [The Guardian](#).

<sup>2</sup> Morrison, B. J. Bio. **accessed 2015**.

to a 'minoritizing' dismissal as homosexual interest.<sup>3</sup> This would be a limiting assessment, however, as the enquiry considers masculine idealisation, including the homoerotic, *within* a majoritarian heterosexual context.

Within Morrison's installations are photographs of male bodies that have achieved the aspirational musculature of the body building industry. The photographic rendering of male bodies as aspirational objects of desire and identification installs a question of whether to *be*, or *to have* such a body; *ripped, chiseled and rock hard*, is the desire for this body so clearly a hetero / homo binary? This question queers the heterosexual male gaze, which is not to manoeuvre the enquiry toward a revelation of homosexuality at the root of such interest. A queering of the photographic gaze explores the homoerotic within the heterosexual framework of objectification produced by photographic technologies to embody, perhaps give body, to particular modes of value and capacity within capitalism. The large wall poster interrogates the viewer: 'Six months from today will you be built up or burned out?' There appears to be little choice in this rhetorical command. Morrison's enquiry into gender conformity and forms of compulsory masculinity points to the association of muscular bodies and free market capitalism, positioning photography as a technology complicit in producing spectacular versions of masculinity to confirm such ideologies.

Morrison's interest in photography as a technology of gender functioning within specific markets is apparent in his artist's statement:

*Predominantly using archive imagery found in gender specific mass-media publications, I create objects, which play on photography's relationship to three-dimensional form. These objects activate a rereading of commercial photography's hyper realities.*<sup>4</sup>

In his turn to sculptural form and photographic installation Morrison repositions photographic objects drawn from commercial body building sources to consider and critique masculine objects, but also the *objects* of photography. There is a discernable disidentification from gender identification, from conventional genres of photography and by means of a literal cutting through the photographic surface, the illusionism the photograph traditionally offers.

Duality and paradox are prominent in Morrison's work, form and signification struggling against binary separations. Whilst the photographic images are of muscular bodies

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<sup>3</sup> Eve Sedgwick's analysis of the 'minoritizing' and 'majoritarian' views of sexuality is referred to here (p.85): Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

<sup>4</sup> Morrison, B. J. Bio. **accessed 2015**.

blown up to much larger proportions in 'Ripped, Chiseled and Rock Hard,' the sculptural objects they produce are slight: thin board and slender supports are used to hold up the large cut out figures, or body parts; in profile these forms and the MDF 'bust' in 'No Pain No Gain!!!' appear only just three-dimensional. In the latter installation the photographic sheet on which the torso is printed is flimsy, draped over a thin wooden pole projecting from a gallery wall. One has to move around the draped photograph to see the upper and lower torso and the partial view disturbs the ideals of display and disrupting identification.

The torso in 'No Pain No Gain!!!' is printed onto a sheet of rubber using an innovative photo printing technology after which material was put under tension causing the surface image to peel away. Subjected to tension the ideal body is literally ripped, shred and splitting. The process of stretching the rubber strongly alludes to the process of tension, which a body is subjected to in bodybuilding and other athletic exercises, to produce defined musculature. Such tension and splitting would cause pain to the body, but any affective register of physical, psychic and emotional pain is cancelled out by interpellation to achieve masculinity at all costs. 'No Pain No Gain!!!' The exhibition title cites codes of masculinity, identifying pain as central and productive, bringing masculinity into effect. By distressing the surface of an industry perfect masculine body Morrison subjects the masculine ideal to pressure, but also foregrounds the paradox that pressure produces the masculine. The pain of this paradox is indicated, but not expressed at an affective level. Taking this further would lead to a discussion of melancholia and masculinity, which is another critical perspective suggested by this work.

As in previous installations 'Ripped, Chiseled and Rock Hard', 'No Pain No Gain' has several sculptural components. The latter includes an abstract standing frame built from thin wooden posts painted in a constructivist colour scheme, predominantly black and red. There are ready connotations given the subject of bodybuilding, the sculptural form implies a weights machine, or, viewed anthropomorphically this could be a body in tension. There are previous associations of body and machine in Morrison's work, where the male body is made 'hard' by mechanical transformation, or transformed into machines. The painted object's abstract appearance is striking in this context and unlike any in previous work from Morrison. It appears in Michael Fried's terminology from the 1960s, a 'literalist work', or object of minimalism.<sup>5</sup> According to Fried, such work always connotes the spectator's presence, as it requires the circulation of the viewer's body within the work. For Fried this destroys the autonomy of the modernist artwork, instigating a collapse of distance and a creation of a situation that he denigrated as theatrical. Others have since celebrated and perpetuated that collapse of distance, to create situations of social and political engagement though spaces of art and theatre,

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<sup>5</sup> Fried, M. (1998). Art and objecthood : essays and reviews. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

which Parker and Sedgwick theorised as 'performative... mobilizing and epitomizing transformative and interlocutory space.'<sup>6</sup> It is in this context of the 'interlocutory' and the 'performative' that we may consider Morrison's work, expanding photography as critical practice.

Angeles, A. P. i. L. (2013). Joe Weider, bodybuilding guru and Schwarzenegger mentor, dies at 93. The Guardian.

Fried, M. (1998). Art and objecthood : essays and reviews. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Morrison, B. J. Bio. **accessed 2015**.

Parker, A., et al. (1995). Performativity and performance. New York, Routledge.

Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). Epistemology of the closet. Berkeley, University of California Press.

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<sup>6</sup> Parker, A., et al. (1995). Performativity and performance. New York, Routledge.  
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