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# THE DISINHERITANCE OF POWER

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## ***Abstract***

Patriarchy as a system of cultural organization is entering a new period of existence where the notion of masculine predominance is challenged and the power of maleness is redressed. This shift is extremely slow and just begun, but felt nonetheless by men. Masculine identity has long been dependent on patriarchy for definition. Modern masculinity, shaped by the tenants of patriarchy, emphasizes the power of the masculine over the feminine and perpetuates the supposedly inherent entitlement of the male condition. As cultural power is rebalanced the inherited power of masculinity will diminish. The inheritance of power that has allowed men to shape and control society has been an essential component of masculine gender identity and modern male socialization. What will men do when they lose this power? This thesis intends to address this question through the medium of sculpture. Inspired by the writing and work of Louise Bourgeois, Eugene Monick, and Robert Morris, among many others, this thesis proposes a symbolic language for the aesthetic investigation of the masculine. It discusses the primary symbols of masculinity, and establishes a material framework within which to consider the relationships between these symbols. It seeks to divorce masculinity from the patriarchal mold and establish a masculine self-regard that is not reliant on the subjugation of the un-masculine.

## *The Disinheritance of Power*

Now is the period in which patriarchy will inevitably be remade. The balance of power in the cultural epoch of patriarchal predominance, characterized by the assumed social superiority of the masculine and a hierarchy of dominance and submission, is beginning to shift. This shift is slow and recently begun, but profoundly felt by men. The social patterns of the patriarchal system have provided a dependable mold for masculine gender identity. Masculinity is cast in the image of patriarchy, emphasizing the inherent rule of male over female and bestowing upon men a position of entitlement justified by the very condition of maleness. The move away from a rigidly patriarchal society toward a more balanced system of cultural organization will diminish the entitlement of men, steadily distancing them from the position of assumed power that has allowed them to control and shape their environment. This power has been fundamental to masculine gender identity and essential in its development. What will men do when they lose the inheritance of power? This is the question my work intends to address.

Two beliefs shape my consideration of this question, both as an artist and as a man. First: the steady diminution of patriarchy, and the accompanying loss of entitlement and assumed power, is a fundamentally positive shift for men. Psychologically, the dependence of masculine gender identity on patriarchal design inhibits sensitivity by emphasizing only the conscious and the rational. The divorce of masculinity from patriarchy will leave men freer to consider the innumerable conditions of male experience, the unconscious and the emotional among them, which have been rejected as un-masculine by the patriarchal schema. Masculinity must develop a self-regard that is not reliant on the subjugation of the

un-masculine. Second: the development of a masculine identity separate from patriarchy will necessarily be a mystical process. By this I mean in addition to being intellectual, psychological, and philosophical it will undoubtedly be intuitive, abstract, and mysterious. To quote Eugene Monick, the Jungian Analyst and philosopher whose examination of the male psyche is fundamental to this thesis: "Intellect must be used but... intellect is handmaiden to mystery... Mystery emerges in an almost alchemical way" (Monick, "Potency" 8). In consequence, I believe art to be an effective medium for an investigation of this scope and nature. Finally, a brief note on the gender specificity of this essay: my aim is to address the critical issues present in the development of male gender identity. Women clearly play an essential role in this process, but female gender identity is not discussed herein. I believe that an investigation of feminine identity is of equal importance to that of masculine identity. However, I do not address the development of female gender identity because I believe that both my experiences as a man and my interest in understanding the implications of my own identity, are less applicable to a study of the feminine.

To begin, I was concerned with the development of an aesthetic language in which to couch my investigation. I composed a language of symbols that refer to distinct experiences of masculinity, femininity, patriarchy, dominance, subservience, rage, shame, and castration, as well as other less-prominent themes. These symbols are not necessarily explicit in the work produced for my thesis, but they inspire and inform it to varying degrees. They are personal and self-referential, but often also universal, or at least familiar in the context of modern, western socialization. It is not necessary for the viewer to understand or even be aware of every symbol, but there are several that bear discussion.

The first is 'phallos', the archetypal symbol of masculinity. To speak of phallos is to speak of the penis erect. A flaccid penis is not phallos; it contains only the potential for it. "Phallos is subjective authority for a male, and objective for those who come into contact with him. This is what makes phallos archetypal. No male has to learn phallos. It presents itself to him, as a god does" (Monick, "Phallos" 9). Phallos is autonomous. Its presence or absence is felt regardless of the conscious self's desire. All men are experienced in the reality of this autonomy. Phallic autonomy can be seen as an effective metaphor for the autonomy of the unconscious, specifically as it exists within the masculine experience. The arrival of phallos is hierophanic, representing an intrusion of the unconscious into conscious presence. Phallos is the foundation of the symbol language that informs my work. It necessitates a response from all other symbols, although not necessarily in equal degree. For this reason it is fundamental to my work, though the symbol itself is visually rarely present.

The grid is present. The grid as a figure, deployed and redeployed in service of the avant-garde, is an allegory for masculine power inheritance within the patriarchal system. The grid form is revealed through an absolute reduction of pictorial space. It presents itself as origin for the structure of the picture surface. There is freedom in the revelation of this origin. It is the freedom of the blank slate, the freedom that precedes organization. The allure of the grid is the freedom implied by its 'originary' status. This freedom is, however, a deception because the grid form "is a representation of the surface, mapped...onto the same surface it represents... The grid thus does not reveal the surface, laying it bare at last; rather it veils it through a repetition" (Krauss, 1035). The grid implies the power to organize, but its form is only a manifestation of the system of organization. The grid cannot

affect this system, but merely repeat it. The irony “of the grid is that while it is most effective as a badge of freedom, it is extremely restrictive in the actual exercise of freedom” (Krauss, 1034). Patriarchy demonstrates a similar irony. When subjected to the absolute reduction of the grid, the origin of patriarchal design is revealed to be the inherent superiority of masculinity. This idea of inherent superiority bestows upon men the freedom to shape and govern their environment, to form a system of cultural organization. This freedom, like the originary freedom of the grid, is a deception. Far from being freed, masculinity is bound to, and limited by, the constant reaffirmation of superiority; it comes to represent only its own superiority. The inescapable repetition of this representation is both the purpose of patriarchy and the mode of its perpetuity. It is the veil that conceals the essential experience of masculine identity. The grid is an effective working allegory for reality. It is implied in all of my work.

Castration is also of symbolic importance for me. Castration is the death fear of the masculine, the source of male rage, and the progenitor of shame. Physical castration is the injury of the testicles or the phallos, which together comprise the biological system of masculine agency. Psychological castration is a metaphor for the loss or damage of a man’s fundamental self-identification as a male. The implications of castration fear are as numerous as the potential sources of this fear. I am interested in the affects of castration generally on the male psyche, but especially by the feminine as a source of castration anxiety for men. Females obviously lack phallos, thus “the implication of subjective femininity suggests castration. For men, the specter of being feminine is based on the perception that femininity emerges when the annihilation of masculinity takes place by means of castration” (Monick, “Castration” 14). This perception is a remnant of Freud’s

phallogocentric approach to psychoanalysis, but is still deeply felt in modern male culture. Castration is one of the terrors against which patriarchy promises to defend, and as such castration fear is central to patriarchal design. Castration does not generally appear as a symbol in my work, but it is an important theme in the conception of the work.

Phallos, castration, and the grid are prominent in my work, both symbolically and thematically. They are a means of entry, an initial framework with which to consider the work. The physical composition of the pieces, their materiality, points to various complimentary interests that further inform the work. I often use steel to create the body, the trunk, of my pieces. I like this trunk to be geometric and rectilinear, unexpressive except for the evidence of process, the weld scars that anchor the pieces in the reality of their construction. I prefer to limit the forms of raw steel I use; thin, solid, lengths of square-tube for the armature, and flats for emphasis. Strength and rigidity are inherent to the material, but the thinner square-tube lets me deploy these qualities gracefully. I like the ability of the flat to be both broad and narrow. It allows the visual weight of the piece to shift when observed from different viewpoints. Cloth, the shroud of the body, I also like. It has the potential to both mitigate and accentuate the biological presence of gender. It is a mechanism for the contrivance of identity, but also for the expression of it. I am also attracted to resins and polyurethanes; materials that begin as soft and pliable, but whose end form results from a stiffening or hardening. I like the ability of the hardened state to suggest the fluidity that preceded it. Color in my work is generally dictated by the color of the composite materials. The exception to this is flesh tone, which is sometimes present. I am interested in the ability to reproduce the effect of my own skin and introduce it into the work. Skin is not a product of gender, but it is a representation of the self, or rather a



contrivance of self-representation since the skin is necessarily fake. It is not important for this color to be understood as physical skin, only that it suggest fleshiness. These are the materials that are most prevalent in my work, but they do not represent the limit of my material usage. Other materials appear, but they are generally contextual rather than fundamental.

The symbolic language that informs my work, and the materials that compose it, are predicated upon the art, thought, and literature of a variety of individuals. Of these, three have been particularly inspiring and thought provoking: Eugene Monick, Louise Bourgeois, and Robert Morris. Eugene Monick, M.Div., Ph.D., is Jungian Analyst and philosopher and a graduate of the C.G. Jung Institute in Zurich, Switzerland. His thinking about the condition of modern masculine identity within the system of patriarchy inspired the fundamental question that drives my work. His books, which are cited above, introduced me to the practice of masculine psychoanalysis and helped me understand the link between male psychology and philosophy. Louise Bourgeois, the French artist and sculptor, helped me understand the essential link between art and psychoanalysis. She created a framework for the manipulation and study of psychologically derived symbols through the medium of art. My work is not primarily a manifestation of my own psychoanalytic self-identity, as Bourgeois's work was for her, but the work is still demonstrative of my own psychological awareness of self. Materially, her work has also been informative in the translation of psychological symbols into visual form. With regard to aesthetics, Robert Morris has been my principal influence. He was not the progenitor of the minimalist movement, but he was a central figure in it. The aesthetic treatment of patriarchy as symbol in my work is drawn largely from minimalist constructions, notably the grid, as mentioned previously. Morris's

work emphasizes the unexpressive and masculine tendencies inherent in minimalism. This has also to do with his character and the nature of his self-presentation. The idea of minimalism as inherently masculine, and the possibility of subverting that masculinity by subverting the structures of minimalist art were an important early focus for me.

I feel that this thesis will mark an important point of transition for my work. It has provided a more specific and contextual focus for the types of pieces I am attracted to producing. The texts that support my thesis research are of personal interest to me and, separate from the production of my work, have helped inform aspects of my life. What most excites me about addressing the issue of masculine gender identity in this period where cultural systems of organization are in flux is the breadth of potential investigation. There is the possibility to elaborate on almost every aspect of this field. Entire series may be produced that elucidate ideas I have hardly discussed herein. In the immediate future I hope to produce a series of hanging works composed of steel frames of welded flats with stretched linen and wire. I want to build the frames in such a way so that they may be compressed to hold a warped position, thus altering the tautness of the stretched fabric. I plan to apply resin to this fabric to illustrate its drape. There is also the opportunity for textual elements in these new works. This description hardly does the idea justice, but the pieces will comment on the multiplicity of masculine states and the reality that these states are both contextual and often contradictory. I believe that there is also the potential to apply the aesthetic and conceptual underpinning of these pieces to fully sculptural objects. This series is an initial inroad into the subject matter. In the intermediate term, at least, I feel that much of my work will be centered on the ideas discussed herein.

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