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Machismo

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Machismo

by Magnus Rena • 18.07.2019

There is little in the fluorescent-lit, brutalist exhibition space of Villa Lontana, Rome, to suggest its location. Windowless, subterranean, the car park has been repurposed as a gallery space. Its white painted lines no longer separate vehicles but link and juxtapose works of art. The atmosphere is determined by coarse, exposed concrete, which frames the exhibition in architecture of unrefined strength; one ancient marble statue is set on a plinth of interlocking iron girders [FIG.1](#). This is machismo made manifest. A bust of the Emperor Trajan signals virility in its political extreme. He was the emperor under which Rome reached its maximum dominion. And yet *Machismo*, an exhibition of just over thirty works curated by Jo Melvin and Vittoria Bonifati, is attentive to the complexity of masculinity in all its manifestations. It refuses to simplify the topic, to reduce it to the manly, muscular heroism of mythology and folklore.

Raised on a plinth at the front of the main space is *Cockere/s* [FIG.2](#), an absurdly hyper-aggressive sculpture from eighteenth-century Italy. Its dichotomy between rampant testosterone and technical finesse serves as an effective prologue to the exhibition's sense of balance. Just as pharaohs and emperors would commission work from porphyry marble, a stone so hard that it came to signify power and resilience in its very materiality, here, the mottled pink stone exudes strength. The vigour of the cockerels' combat reflects the implicit ache of the artist's muscles, hammer and chisel in hand, while the sculpture's detail also infers delicacy and composure. Its surface is polished and textured, not rugged. The forms are poised theatrically; potential energy invigorates the scene with an element of violent suspense. Such a considered work could not have been produced through strength alone. The sculpture offers a lens through which to view the rest of the show. Power and aggression may be hallmarks of machismo, but so is a certain stoicism, which gives way to subtler forms of expression, in this case craftsmanship, and the care and delicacy required for refined execution.

The exhibition draws attention to the vulnerable as much as the virile. Emasculation is presented as an important antithesis of masculinity. At the end of the main hall plays Bas Jan Ader's silent film, *I'm too sad to tell you* [FIG.3](#), a single, three-minute shot of the artist crying. Positioned in a recessed corner of the main hall, the film feels at first like a visceral display of emotion, but is soon complicated by its performative nature. A lack of eye contact

leaves the viewer feeling self-conscious: is this a transparent portrayal of melancholy or something more pointed? In the context of *Machismo*, it draws attention to a level of emotional exposure typically concealed among men, a poignant expression almost fifty years before the articulation of 'toxic masculinity'. Ader's silent, tear-soaked face draws you into a contemplative state, but it also inflects the work around it. Nearby, the headless torso from the second century, its subtly flexed muscles and contrapposto stance appearing timeless and immovable, is threatened as the film subverts its ancient, invincible masculinity. Ader's work is effective here because it undermines the classical ideal; the masculine individual no longer inspires awe, but empathy.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Machismo* at Villa Lontana, Rome, 2019 (photograph Simon d'Exéa).

Like Ader, a white marble sculpture of Prometheus also embodies anguish. The Titan trickster who stole fire from the gods was chained to a cliff-face, condemned by Zeus to have his liver devoured by an eagle every three days. However, unlike Ader's solitude, Prometheus' oppression is implicated into a network of male brutality; he is the victim of aggression, not the perpetrator. The myth of theft and vengeance has a sharp, gendered edge. Hierarchy, punishment and retaliation make up the fabric of mythology, and those vicious masculine traits determine Prometheus' fate too.

Machismo is the third exhibition in a series at Villa Lontana that aims to intertwine the classical and the contemporary. The exhibition, which comprises works by thirteen male contemporary artists and a selection from the Fondazione Dino ed Ernesta Santarelli, presents a disparate assortment of seemingly incongruous styles and anachronisms. However, the combination is grounded in abstract as well as tangible reference points. Take

Franco Troiani's sculpture *San Sebastiano* (1985), a work that lies flat, diagonally across the centre of the space **FIG.4**. It repurposes a column of elm, salvaged from an ancient Church and pierced with five arrows, to make a contemporary, architectural representation of the martyred saint. On one level its Doric virility, the sturdiest, most masculine of the orders, integrates it with the classical sculptures encircling it. Yet on another, less traditional level, it is unusually submissive, supine. St Sebastian's stoicism, his 'grace in suffering',¹ as Thomas Mann put it, is accentuated here by the complete removal of all bodily expression. For a persecuted figure whose iconography has been viewed so often through a homoerotic lens, *San Sebastiano* inflects the show with a subtle consideration of male sensuality. The smooth musculature of the idealised male nude behind suddenly seems invigorated by the work in front of it. Because the exhibition is curated in a suggestive, tentative manner, these points of encounter between old and new are not embedded within strict interpretational frameworks. Melvin and Bonifati's rich choice of works foster original interpretations without being didactic.

Nevertheless, if a discussion of masculinity is inseparable from gender, then it is not surprising that *Machismo* feels charged with themes of ambiguity and the erotic. On an aesthetic level, Prometheus treads a delicate line between agony and ecstasy. Mouth ajar, neck arched backwards, his expression of suffering evokes a paroxysm of pleasure as much as of pain. Across the hall, Rajaram Sharma's hand-painted miniatures celebrate a harmonised blurring of the sexes. Krishna is typically portrayed alongside Gopis, his female counterpart, but in *Swaroop* **FIG.5** he dances alone. In that one figure, the feminine and masculine essences converge into a single, unified rhythm. 'We are looking at a masculinity that may deal with its feminine as well as its masculine nature', writes Melvin in the press release. Harmony eclipses aggression in *Swaroop*. But, ironically, the distracting scale of *Cockere/s* eclipses Sharma's work in turn. It seems ironic that such grotesque competition should sit opposite these tranquil, exquisite miniatures.

This is the troublesome dichotomy at the heart of *Machismo*: a crisis of identity within masculinity itself. If the exhibition has one overriding preoccupation, it is that so-called macho characteristics of self-control have become obscured by more boisterous traits. Stoicism, courage and composure are no longer hallmarks of masculinity. 'In some discourses', warns Melvin, 'the negative connotations of "machismo" have eclipsed the definition, so that it becomes difficult to speak of without a disclaimer'. It remains to be seen whether *Machismo* will influence a wider discourse on macho. But that would only be extraneous to the exhibition's success: it provides a considered, balanced approach to a topic that is all too often viewed with expediency or caught up in ideological dispute. For all its concrete bravado, *Machismo* is an

open and unpretentious celebration of a range work by artists who are men, made possible by two curators who are women.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Machismo* at Villa Lontana, Rome, 2019, showing *Cockere/s*, Eighteenth century. Marble (Fondazione Dino ed Ernesta Santarelli; photograph Simon d'Exéa).

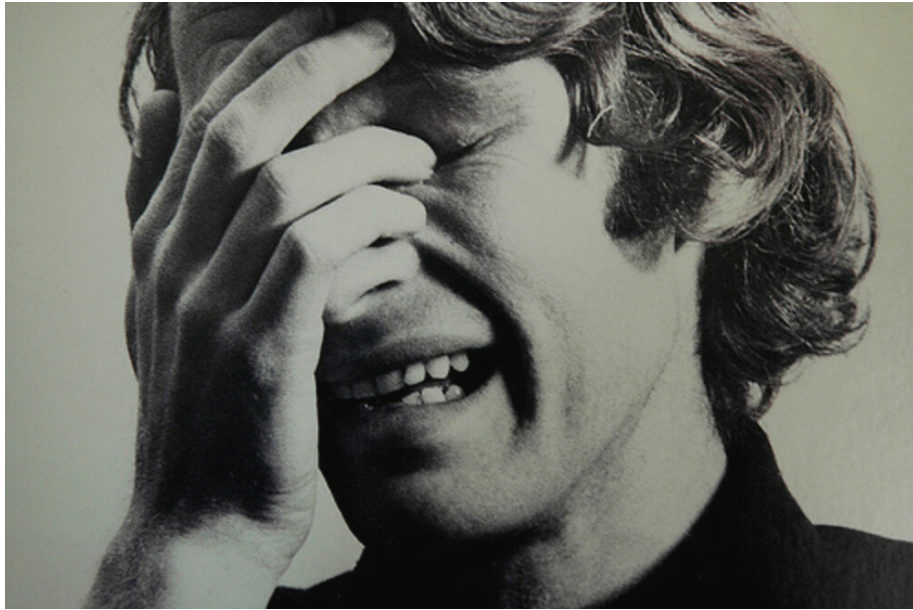


Fig. 3 Still from *I'm too sad to tell you*, Bas Jan Ader. 1971. Film transferred to digital media, 3 min. (Courtesy Meliksetian | Briggs, Los Angeles; exh. Villa Lontana, Rome).



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Machismo* at Villa Lontana, Rome, showing *San Sebastiano*, by Franco Troiani. 1985. Wood, metal and paint (photograph Simon d'Exéa).



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Machismo* at Villa Lontana, Rome, 2019 (photograph Simon d'Exéa).

Exhibition details Machismo
 Villa Lontana, Rome
 25th May–20th July

Footnotes

- 1** T. Mann: 'Banquet speech', available at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1929/mann/speech/>, accessed 15th July 2019.

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