

BEN JACKEL

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(L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice) A video of Ben Jackel wielding an axe to carefully chip, then tenderly hand polish a hunk of wood into a massive medieval weapon prepares us for his current and impressive replicas of drones (“Fury”), armor, assorted pipes and masculine accoutrements of aggression and protection.

It all invokes an oddly equivocal but poignant reference to male heroics. Jackel’s “Large Headed Hydrants” look like the tips of jousting sticks or chess bishops writ large. A replica of wall plumbing, “Sea Strainer” is weirdly rife with allusions to courage, imminent disaster and to a controlled, imposing, “fix-everything” mentality of ordered production that promises to keep calamity at bay. It’s a vocabulary of medieval face guards, metal arm protection, a reassuring bust of Roosevelt and planes that will get them before they get us.

These objects can look nostalgic, like historical artifacts from “simpler times — when men were men and ladies were damsels ...” But they are so delicately crafted as to conflate beauty and danger in immediately visceral ways. Had he stopped at the seduction of horror, Jackel would be less provocative. Nor can we say these sculptures are in any way ironic, nor a case of a boy and his toys. Their is no polemic of political dissent (as, for example, in Chris Burden’s hanging submarines). Jackel smartly loads the objects he painstakingly makes with something that’s neither objection or celebration. I will term it presence.

Using limited, almost monkishly pure tools — axe, hardwoods, beeswax, stoneware, powered graphite for color — a work such as “Coiled Navy Hose” underscores the directness of his touch, the perfection of personally invested craft (he employs no studio assistants, thank you). The work looks like the thing-in-itself — a neatly mounted hose — but even at a glance we know it doesn’t pertain to the world where utilitarian objects actually do anything. The feeling is like a sincere call to action that no one hears anymore. This stunning copy of a common thing isn’t immediately associable with aesthetics either. Not quite here or there is the precise and strange place where Arthur Danto tells us art takes place.

What we get is this experience-accurate, very complex and oxymoronic “map” of the male persona: a messy mashup of power, paternalistic protection, control, uncompromising claims to clarity, absence of dissonance, courage, resilience, buried sentimentality, physicality, loss, pride and trauma.



Ben Jackel, “Coiled Navy Hose,” 2014, stoneware, beeswax, 13 x 27 x 6 1/2”

Sniper and every other actual and imagined enactment of maleness that both inspires and burdens men. And by extension the rest of us. Throughout history, masculinist objects like those Jackel makes, and the actions/thoughts they intone have been put to exploitive, even fascist ends — the subtext being strength leads and the rest of us follow. Or else. Jackel witnessed (if from the safe distance of graduate school) incongruities of male ‘heroics’ played out in our numerous military actions. Make no mistake, the works question this brutality. But more intriguing is the lens of inquiry he brings to bear. The artist is a black belt martial arts master, an archery expert, and war and its trappings fascinate him. Yet he is a pacifist, and as an artist he complicates already tough subjects in formal and conceptual ways that render male heroics and their constant bedfellow — violence — open for intelligent and nuanced consideration.

In a most clever way, Jackel problematizes maleness by deploying two distinctly feminine properties: touch and visual delight. These human dimensions and the unique way Jackel calls them forth in his art connect us to feelings of and reflections on power, destruction, pleasure, of being alternately predator and prey. In “Grandpa’s Knuckle Dusters,” a replica of metal rings worn to optimize the damage of a punch, simple, clear, hand fashioned ovals invite fingers and clenched fist to try the thing on. Addressing this content in such a graceful way is no small feat.

The world is now abundantly pickled with coarse digital substitutes for aggressive masculine energy, ranging from gaming to Instagram. In text and images folks like Jacques Lacan, TJ Clark, Catherine Opie and many others have been unwrapping femaleness for years to scrutinize its cultural absurdities. It’s past time for a similarly broadened discourse on maleness. In his current work Jackel — a wonderfully original combination of Shaolin warrior and Pre-Raphaelite — offers a timely and intriguing portal.