

New Work: Tim Gardner, Marcelino Gonçalves, Zak Smith



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The order so often heard—“Be a man”—implies that it does not go without saying and that manliness may not be as natural as one would like to think . . . [as does] the phrase a real man, so commonly used in ordinary speech to designate a virile man. Does it imply that certain human beings only appear to be men, are false men?
—Elisabeth Badinter¹

As Badinter and other scholars have argued, masculinity is not a natural attribute of the male body, but rather a set of characteristics and behaviors that men are compelled to enact. Furthermore, if manhood has traditionally been defined against what it is not—a “real” man is not a woman, not a child, not a homosexual—then it stands to reason that the cultural shifts of the past few decades would disturb that oppositional construction, leaving men adrift with “a lack of mooring, a lack of context.”² This is the environment in which Marcelino Gonçalves, Zak Smith, and Tim Gardner find themselves making art. Though they work independently of one another and with different styles and techniques, they share a number of concerns, such as an interrogation of the contemporary status of realism, and an emphasis on beauty through references to early modernists usually seen as occupying the fringes of the canon. This exhibition focuses on another common interest: the ways in which masculinity is imaged and imagined.

Marcelino Gonçalves examines the troubling, and pleasurable, problem of male artists making pictures of men, and the freight of eroticism that comes with the act of depiction. His series *Twelve Inches* (2002) shows manliness as both archetype and stereotype. The paintings are small in scale, almost like leaves of a book—or, perhaps, a peek behind closed doors. Their voyeuristic charge is unavoidable, but as a culture we are still unaccustomed to

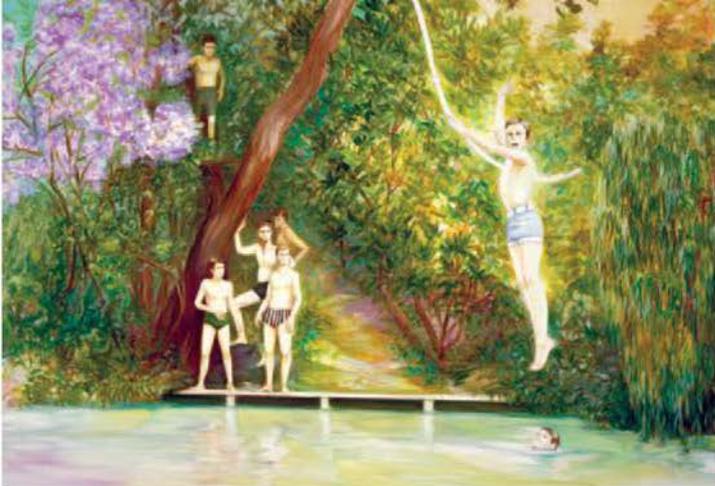
seeing male bodies as the objects of a desiring gaze—a tension increased by Gonçalves’s overlapping of wholesome masculinity (jocks, hunters) and punitive authority (guards, cops). These and subsequent works question what it is about a certain image that makes it read as erotic. What codes one picture of a male body “gay” and another “straight”? Is it even possible to apply these terms to images rather than behaviors? Gonçalves explicitly evokes historical precedents such as Thomas Eakins and Frédéric Bazille to suggest the disavowal of eroticism that is necessary in the representation of masculinity.

The paintings of those earlier artists serve as counterpoints to his 2005 series based on a 1971 brochure for a boys’ summer camp. Here, Gonçalves engages narrative painting’s convention of singling out the “second act” of a given story—the event that sets the conclusion in motion and implies the unseen first and third acts, which the viewer must extrapolate from what is shown. The story Gonçalves describes is all too familiar: the assimilation of adolescence into manhood. The conclusion of that narrative should be preordained, but Gonçalves demonstrates that the homoerotic, though forbidden, is paradoxically required in a system of masculine education based on boy bonding and the emulation of father figures. His extraction of narrative slivers unravels the expected outcome and lets the story wander off in dangerous directions. The artist advances these digressive possibilities formally, alternately modeling the figures as full fleshed or marionettelike. And though the paintings are

based on photographs, their thin surfaces eschew that medium’s exacting detail; by allowing his tenuous underdrawing to show through and to trail off into white space, Gonçalves suggests that masculinity is open-ended, a gauzy thing that is ever present but easily torn.



Marcelino Gonçalves, *Boots*, 2002



Marcelino Gonçalves, *Swimming Hole*, 2005

and even the tattooed bodies of the sitters themselves. There is a transparent resemblance between this ornamentation and Smith's abstract works, which he conceives as highly controlled documents of the artistic thought process as it unfolds. Smith's self-portraits, whether abstract or figural, are as unrevealing of inner self as his portraits of girls. This similar treatment of different subjectivities foregrounds his willingness to assume the position of both surveyor and surveyed, and thus to disrupt that dynamic as it is usually understood—a willingness made abundantly clear in his most recent ongoing project, *Drawings Made Around the Time I Became a Porn Star* (begun 2006), a sort of travelogue detailing his experiences moonlighting as a professional porn actor.

Tim Gardner's work elaborates a sort of coming-of-age, but unlike the traditional bildungsroman, it does not resolve with the main character happily integrated into manhood. Gardner became known around 2000 for his watercolors of young white guys horsing around, getting drunk, and pissing off balconies. Based on snapshots of the artist's brother and his friends, the paintings examine their boorish leisure from a neutral distance. By 2002 Gardner's works had begun to show his protagonists moving out of that transitional adolescent phase, yet not easily adopting their new roles as grown men. They are humbled by the vastness of the natural world, in spite of their

Though Zak Smith often delves into the concept of narrative, he also devotes significant time to portraiture. *Girls in the Naked Girl Business*, a series begun in 2004, nods to the history of the nude as sexual object and the equally hoary association of artists' models with prostitutes. In this case, the sitters *are* strippers or sex workers, but their portraits diverge from the Venuses and Olympias painted by nineteenth-century artists, who assumed that prostitution could be read on a woman's body. Smith presents them instead as individuals and as mistresses of their own domains, with their sexual availability, no less than their poses and dress (or lack thereof), a matter of personal choice. He depicts—and honors—the fact that for the first time in history women may choose to participate actively in their own sexuality. Some three decades after feminism, neither pornography nor straight men's desire to look at women has gone away. Smith's work embodies the complexities of a contemporary male heterosexuality that seeks a mode of (female) showing and (male) looking that does not caricature either side of the equation.

Smith's portraits of himself and his then-girlfriend, Varrick, comprise a more intimate aspect of his practice. A characteristic, Klimt-like excess of geometric decoration spills across entire categories of things, from the irregular grid of drawings taped on the wall to the stacks of milk crates and cassettes



Zak Smith, *Girls in the Naked Girl Business: Amber*, 2004 (left);
Varrick in a Shirt I Made That Has a Monkey, 2003 (right)



Tim Gardner, *Untitled (In the Morning Light)*, 2003

intrusions into it. Many of Gardner's landscapes filter the Romantic sublime through the vocabulary of the tourist snapshot. But unlike the hero of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), these men do not survey the landscape from a pinnacle of visual mastery. Their isolated, unexpressive bodies are firmly rooted to the ground, small and sometimes obscured beneath the grandeur of mountains, lakes, and canyons. They seem to be searching for something, perhaps a sense of self in the face of an impossibly large and conflicted ideal.

The same discomfort pervades Gardner's recent series of pastels drawn from youthful studio photographs of himself and his family. Their soft-focus, hand-tinted appearance places these pictures in the past, as does his mercilessly faithful reportage of then-current clothing and hairstyles. That frankness thwarts the nostalgic impulse to view the "good old days" through rose-colored glasses. Gardner's family portraits would be Norman Rockwell material if not for his subjects' sheer awkwardness, the rictus of their happy smiles, and the photographic embalming of their dated appearances. Nostalgia, Gardner suggests, is particularly problematic for men: Can anyone live up to the ideals of masculinity when confronted with the goofy little boy he once was? The artist has described this series as a way of freeing himself from mining his past for subject matter by enacting it in an extreme way. Consequently, his recent landscapes often omit the figure altogether, though they are still very much about the artist. The difference lies in the closeness of

Tim Gardner, *Untitled (Family Portrait 1)*, 2004–5

the image to Gardner himself. Whereas the earlier watercolors were vicarious in some way, the current body of work records the artist's own subjective impressions. Even as the figure recedes, the *person* becomes metaphorically all the more present.

The diverse ways in which these artists represent masculinity provide more questions than answers. Smith, for his part, has expressed skepticism about, or even dismissed, art's capacity to convey meaning. In his formulation, art fails as a communicative medium because of its inability to articulate concepts clearly. Language may be viewed as art's complement, transmitting ideas but failing to produce pleasure or emotion. Yet, as all three artists demonstrate, the inarticulacy of art can be a strength, not a limitation. If the very ideas they seek to elaborate are themselves multiple, ambiguous, and contradictory—as our tangled, eroding notions of masculinity surely are—then perhaps art's inarticulacy can do something that language's rationality cannot. It is this ambiguity that makes the work of these artists so relevant to a moment that is ever more uncertain.

Joshua Shirkey

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Notes

- 1 Elisabeth Badinter, *XY: On Masculine Identity*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 1–2.
- 2 Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: William Morrow, 1999), 13.



Works in the Exhibition

Tim Gardner

Born 1973, Iowa City, Iowa

Self-Portrait: Moraine Lake, 2002

Watercolor on paper. 7 x 10 in.

Collection of Jennifer and David Stockman

Untitled (Brothers), 2002

Watercolor on paper. 5 ³/₄ x 5 ³/₄ in.

Collection of Blair and Frank Aldridge

Untitled (Red Sky), 2002

Watercolor on paper. 8 x 11 in.

Collection of Ann and Steven Ames

Untitled (Soldiers), 2002

Watercolor on paper. 10 x 10 ¹/₂ in.

Collection of Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz, New York

Untitled (Bald Guy Looking at Lake Louise), 2003

Watercolor on paper. 13 ³/₄ x 19 in.

Private collection, Boston

Untitled (In the Morning Light), 2003

Watercolor on paper. 12 ¹/₂ x 11 ¹/₂ in.

Private collection

Untitled (Nike Town), 2003

Watercolor on paper. 7 x 10 ¹/₄ in.

Collection of Mary and Andrew Pilara

Untitled (Family Portrait 1), 2004–5

Pastel on gessoed paper mounted on canvas

37 ¹/₂ x 44 ⁵/₈ in.

The Rachofsky Collection, Dallas

Marcelino Gonçalves

Born 1969, San Diego

Boots, 2002

Oil and graphite on wood. 12 x 12 in.

Collection of Rick Pirro, Los Angeles

Trio, 2002

Oil on wood. 12 x 12 in.

Courtesy the artist and the Artist Pension Trust:

Los Angeles

Untitled, 2002

Oil on wood. 12 x 12 in.

Collection of Marcia Goldenfeld Maiten and Barry David Maiten, Los Angeles

Untitled, 2002

Oil on wood. 12 x 12 in.

Courtesy the artist and Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles

Untitled, 2004

Oil on wood. 24 x 33 in.

Collection of Michael and Mary Reafsnnyder

Untitled, 2004

Oil and graphite on wood. 33 x 24 in.

Collection of Osmundo Raul Saguil, Palm Springs, California

Rifle Lessons, 2005

Oil and graphite on wood. 48 x 33 in.

Collection of Shari and John Behnke

Smalltown Boy, 2005

Oil and graphite on wood. 33 x 24 in.

Collection of Nowell J. Karten, Los Angeles

Swimming Hole, 2005

Oil and graphite on wood. 33 x 48 in.

Courtesy the artist and Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles

Untitled, 2006

Oil and graphite on wood. 48 x 33 in.

Courtesy the artist and Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles

Zak Smith

Born 1976, Syracuse, New York

Life Will Not Break Your Heart It'll Crush It, 2002

Contact-printed drawing. 36 ¹/₂ x 25 in.

Courtesy the artist and Fredericks & Freiser, New York

Varrick in a Shirt I Made That Has a Monkey, 2003

Acrylic and ink on paper. 35 ¹/₂ x 27 in.

The Progressive Art Collection

Girls in the Naked Girl Business: Amber, 2004

Acrylic and ink on paper. 36 ¹/₂ x 25 ¹/₂ in.

Collection of Miriam and Erwin Kelen, Minneapolis

Girls in the Naked Girl Business: Voltaire, 2004

Acrylic and ink on paper. 38 ¹/₂ x 28 in.

Collection of Craig Robins

Most Accurate Self-Portrait to Date, 2004

Acrylic and ink on paper. 38 ¹/₂ x 27 ¹/₂ in.

Collection of Ninah and Michael Lynne

Welcome Back to Fucked, 2005

Acrylic and ink on paper. 31 x 24 ¹/₄ in.

Collection of Craig Robins

Drawings Made Around the Time I Became a

Porn Star, 2006–

Ink on paper. Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist and Fredericks & Freiser, New York

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Reverse, left to right: Tim Gardner, *Untitled (Nike Town)* (detail), 2003; Zak Smith, *Most Accurate Self-Portrait to Date* (detail), 2004; Marcelino Gonçalves, *Rifle Lessons* (detail), 2005.

Gardner images courtesy 303 Gallery, New York; Gonçalves images courtesy Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles; Smith images courtesy Fredericks & Freiser, New York.

new work

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