

Below: Kenneth Tam, *shelf with toiletries*, 2010, glass, metal, contact-lens solution, shaving cream, men's razor, Old Spice deodorant, foot powder, hand cream, clock, hair gel, Jo Malone perfume, box of matches, facial scrub, 9 × 20 × 6".



Kenneth Tam, *Breakfast in Bed*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 32 minutes. Gilberto Arriaga, Ben Corley, Phillip Dickey, Bruce Dolen, Niko Flores, Spencer Freeman, and Trevor Meek.

OPENINGS

KENNETH TAM

BRUCE HAINLEY

“CHILLING DISPLAY OF MASCULINITY”: The phrase is Jacqueline Rose’s, describing political posturing in the run-up to the Brexit referendum. Is there really any fathoming of Benjamin’s assessment “no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” without also feeling the brunt of such displays? Vengeful braggadocio has never been absent from world affairs, but the testosterone has been rank and rampant lately and shows no sign of abating.

I mention to B. a sculpture by Kenneth Tam that I remember as a shelf of used men’s deodorants and soaps—Old Spice, Mennen Speed Stick, Axe body spray, Irish Spring. And he brings up (instead of sweat) *fougères*, the backbone of strong masculine colognes (Canoe, Polo), of which he’s inordinately fond, even in their “mutated bro-barbershop eye-burner” varieties. Tam’s shelf was displayed in alluring proximity to Abercrombie & Fitch shopping bags

into which he’d cast cement, almost more than the bag, with its Bruce Weber-ish images of jacked torsos, could bear. Consider the cement loaded into the fancy sacks not only some allegory of the anonymous toil belied by the branded packaging or that labor’s dialectical dream-logic exertion, the weight-lifting to achieve an attention-harvesting physique—but also of *class striving* in relation to *body bags*.

An older man stands, barefoot, on the tiled floor of a basement. Surrounded by common household appliances and stuff, he’s shirtless, mostly hairless, wearing comfortably worn khakis. His body framed so that we see it only from the neck down, the man has a pleasing tummy, his skin softly picking up the dim electric light, lunar, around him.

Cut to: At the end of a basement corridor, from a dark, open doorway, slowly, something trundles into view from the gloaming; it takes a moment to construe

what’s going on, some kind of trance inversion of playing horsey, and it’s only at this point that any faces can be seen. It becomes clear from a strong resemblance and a certain unmistakable paternal demeanor that the older man is the artist’s father. He’s straddling the back of his shirtless, barefoot artist son, who’s on all fours. Whatever other questions the opening sequence of Tam’s film *sump*, 2015, might provoke, it fosters reflection on how and why bodies weigh on one another, about the metaphoric potential of having your father on your back, about cultural differences in the not-uncomplicated matter of beholdenness to the paternal.

Emphasizing the potential, brute heaviness of things, bodies in relation to and as things, the father and son push a large stack of furniture wrapped in plastic, moving in a synchronized fashion, pads of their feet hitting the tile in pleasant harmony; they



Kenneth Tam, *Hunks*, 2010, concrete, Abercrombie & Fitch paper shopping bags, 11 × 38 × 38".

each lift tall rolls of pile-woven carpet. Bodies are as heavy as the feelings about them. Sometimes a body’s a hard, heavy lump (that A&F shopping bag), at other times a revolutionary force, banding and banded with others, then soft as care. Tam returns to the body, his own body, others’ bodies, as a basic but particular form, as disciplined instrument, and as a fundamental problem *of/for* sculpture—while repeatedly gauging whether any of the gravitational gusto of corporeality adheres in a picture, still or moving.

In *sump*, the artist in his role as director returns three times—roughly in the beginning, middle, and end—to his father riding on his back. In between these sequences of placid, almost contemplative, horsing around, Tam uses an electric desk fan to cool Dad as they stand in a crowded closet; he paints black curlicues on Dad’s torso, as it later turns out he has already done to himself; the two blow up heavy-

duty balloons; they stand, almost as if hugging, in a bathtub, wrapped in a shower curtain, as water pelts them. During all of these activities, no words are spoken; in fact, throughout *sump*, there’s mostly silence except for the sound of breath and of the pitter-patter of one surface or element hitting another. While the men’s expressions defy easy affective naming, quizzicality sometimes flickers across the father’s face, while his son shows a quiet, bemused contentment. Portrait of the artist as a young man, portrait of paternal indulgence, at once love letter and complicated expression of gratitude, *sump* is heavy, alive to the bearable or unbearable weight of being, despite its gentle, deadpan humor and play. With such awkwardly forthright tenderness, the artist risks familial propriety. Tam has stated that while he’d hoped the give-and-take of making the work might bring his father and him closer, that’s not quite

what happened. Family negotiations continue mostly as before.

BASED IN HOUSTON, Tam activates a range of procedures to engage the anthropological as it brushes against the grain of the aesthetic. He’s invoked both Adrian Piper and Mierle Laderman Ukeles as inspirations, and in sculptures, photographs, and a series of engrossing videos featuring people—mostly strangers, often male—he’s pursued what his body is in relation to others, human and animal, when recruited into a variety of unlikely behaviors, not always at the artist’s behest, all involving various kinds of negotiation and testing of affinity. His endeavors are also heir to the rowdy incorrigibility of *Jackass* and its blunt knockoffs, like *Impractical Jokers*. In the 1980s, Bruce Weber proposed as a new aspirational ideal a strapping athletic muscularity that was, in part, an



Four stills from Kenneth Tam's *sump*, 2015, HD video, color, sound, 7 minutes 40 seconds. Kenneth Tam and Kalvin Tam.

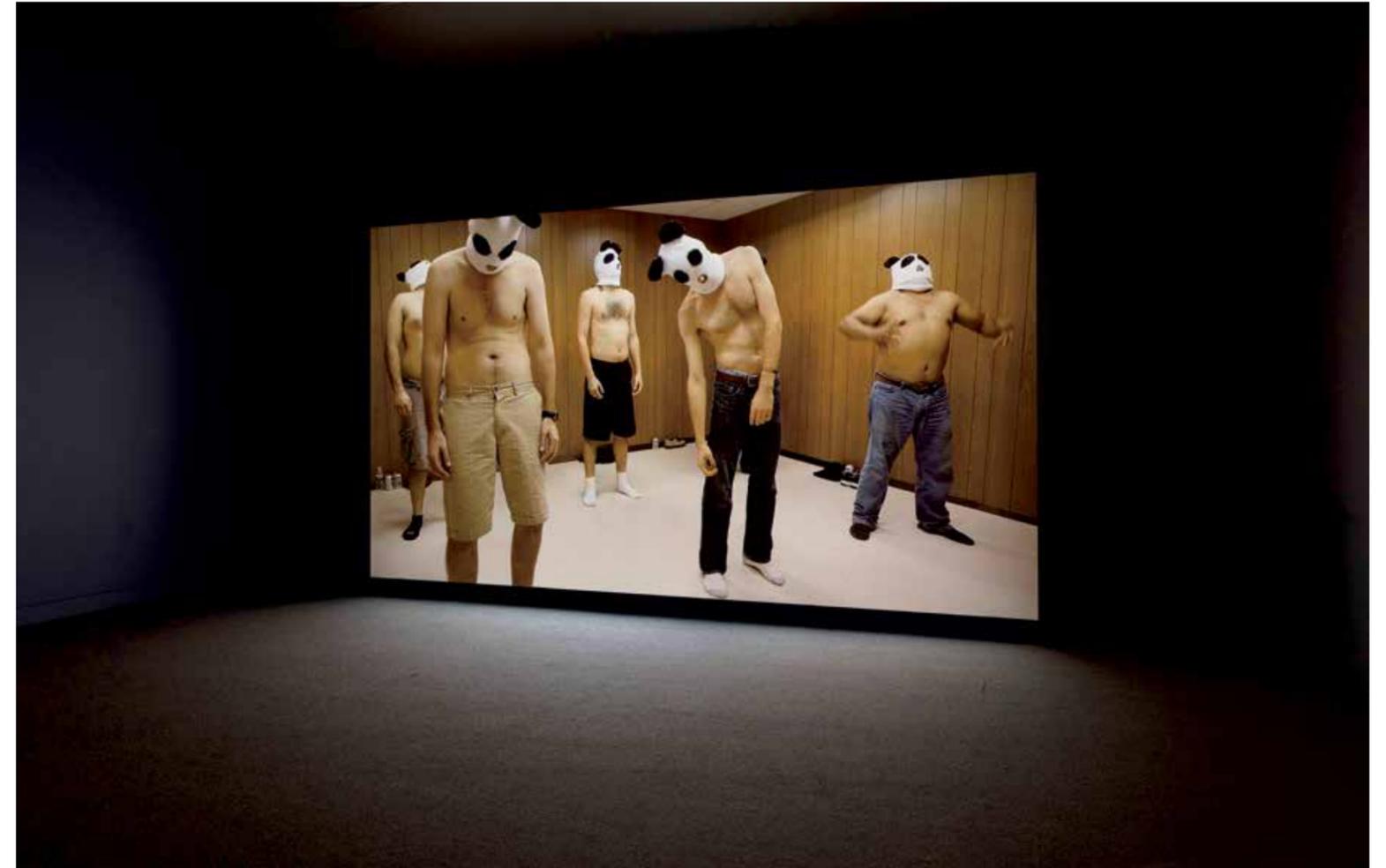
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apotropaic response to the wasting AIDS body, almost always figured as white and male. With *Jackass*, Johnny Knoxville (along with Spike Jonze and Jeff Tremaine), pre-YouTube, pre-social media, rerouted that iconography via comic group dares, skater-boy bravado, and bro-ish hazing. Men had butts as much as they had dicks; the alimentary canal connected mouth to anus. *Jackass's* limit testing and analization of (white) masculinity (and straightness) primed the internet for fuckery to come but also found a way to broadcast the gauntlet for male intimacy. Tam took elements of this dudism as a vernacular to work with and against.

Breakfast in Bed, 2016, although exhibited as a loop, opens with seven guys playing a DIY, demilitarized version of paintball: Each dude carries a dish of a particular color paint and tries to mark all the other contenders' bodies with his color as many times as possible. At first glance it looks like it could be shirts against skins, but only one guy wears his shirt, and it's quickly apparent that there isn't any way to win the game, that the point is some camaraderie or just to play. The men's bodies sprout various amounts of hair (hirsuteness is a favorite topic: "Jealous of your beard, dude. I know mine's pretty thick, but yours is thicker. . . . Jelly"). Five of the guys are white, two Latino. They

wear jeans or cargo shorts and sneakers or, in a couple of cases, cowboy boots. In subsequent brief scenes, the men participate in other directed or planned activities, ranging from the goofy to the almost heartbreaking: Bare torsos shielded in self-made tinfoil armor, strings of bells belted around their waists, they try to keep away from a blindfolded peer who's trying to grasp them; they don panda masks and strut their dance moves; they chat, brag here and there, about their girlfriends, wives, kids, divorces, while gluing Cheerios to a comrade who lies stretched out, shirtless, on a table.

Tam intercuts these activities with footage of initial interviews he conducted with three of his participants.



Kenneth Tam, *Breakfast in Bed*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 32 minutes. Installation view, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest.

When the artist asks a rangy guy named Phillip what drew him to the project, the response is: "Um . . . the absurd was . . . was an interesting facet. Um, there's also this pretty hot little chick I'm interested in that's been urging me to do something creative for some time. . . . And then being offered money"—Tam always disburses a small honorarium to his cohort—"to do it. It seemed like a win, win, win." Another allows the stakes to be put even more open-endedly and yet pointedly: "I'm here to enjoy this . . ." [laughing]. Tam [offscreen]: "Thing."

Given what's gone down in the past year or so alone, I am more ambivalent than ever about art's efficacy to accomplish anything, so I want to tread carefully in making any claims for Tam's or anyone else's "thing." That said: Whereas for previous videos the artist had found his collaborators, if that's the word, on Craigslist, he convened the men for what ended

up as *Breakfast* from Reddit, with its "very different demographic"—roughly two-thirds male, predominantly white, threaded with misogyny. Tam was, "until well after the project began," unaware of the varying nature of these online talent pools. As he explained in an interview: "I don't necessarily think [misogyny] is apparent with the men I ended up working with, but those sorts of things are embedded within the backdrop of the project as a whole." So often what dwells within the backdrop remains recalcitrant or imperceptible. With this "thing"—art still operating as lure, permission, and optic—Tam hails gestures and affective orders that abrade the edges of what is too often isolated as "class" and "race" and "gender." Intramural, intergenerational intimacy vocalized between men in the form of solemn compliments or even basic, friendly assessment of mutual presence is rare and strangely disarming to watch in action—

becoming even stranger when it's revealed that it requires rehearsal, reshoots, stagecraft. The question of how much alterity could be accommodated before something menacing might erupt remains floating.

"Before being a plumber or a writer or a taxi-driver or a man out of work or a journalist, men are above all men, whether heterosexual or homosexual," Marguerite Duras wrote in her extraordinary *Material Life*. "The difference is that some remind you of it as soon as they meet you and others a bit later. It takes a lot to love men. A lot, a lot. A lot of loving just to love them. Without that, it isn't possible, you can't stand them." Tam's contact-improvisation with sexual difference takes on everything he or any other claimant to masculinity inherits, consciously or not; with his art he exchanges mansplaining for a rendezvous with mutuality, which isn't the same thing as rapprochement. □

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