

**BETA CUCK**

By

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## **Abstract**

The following is a written thesis of the concepts and visual elements that dictated Spencer Dickerson's MFA thesis exhibition, BETA CUCK. The show was installed at the University of Kansas Art and Design Gallery from March 11th- 16th, 2018. It was composed of four handmade metal wearables, a sound piece with headphones in which the artist told stories of his childhood and life, and two 4'x8' panels of frosted Plexiglas suspended from the ceiling on which the artist was projected wearing the handmade wearables. The artist mimicked poses of bodybuilders in one projection and classical greek sculptures in the other.

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## **BETA CUCK**

I am concerned with what it means to be a man in today's society, and how that meaning can be shaped differently. Sudden changes in my life – graduate school, marriage, becoming a homeowner, my brother having a child, my parents selling our childhood home – have led me into a space of rapid mental and emotional development. After years of perpetual arrested development I have vaulted into manhood without ever visualizing what that might entail, and it has left me wondering how my Identity will be constructed. What will it look like to me, and what will it look like to others.

I grew up in a family of men who were dominated by invisible notions of masculinity. They have difficulty expressing themselves and their emotions genuinely, which is at odds with how I view myself. I see this mirrored in the larger scope of the societal expectations for masculinity. This leaves me as a “black sheep” not only in my immediate family, but also in the dominant understandings of American maleness. The objects presented are an attempt to reimagine and redefine my own personal identity by calling attention to my physical insecurities while simultaneously cultivating a bravado and sense of pride in order to cull said insecurities. This culminates in a golem of self-doubt disguised by a “machismo braggadocio.”

## Identity

The first section of this thesis has to do with my identity. The big question of the work is, “How will I construct my identity?” This is in relation to the constructed identities of the men in my family. In her book *Gender and Emotion: Social Psychological Perspectives*, Agneta Fischer lists the traits of western maleness as such,

*Autonomy:* A man stands alone, bears the tribulations of life with a stiff upper lip, and does not admit his dependences on others.

*Achievement:* A man is achieving in work and play in order to be able to provide bread for his loved one and family.

*Aggression:* A man is tough, and acts aggressively if the circumstances require so.

*Stoicism:* A man does not share his pain, does not grieve openly, and avoids strong, dependent and warm feelings.

Taken together, the attributes characterize the dominant cultural model of masculinity in the Western world. It is not coincidence that these attributes overlap with the features that have been attributed to personhood (Harre, 1983; Jansz, 1991): Western personhood is largely, though not exclusively, woven out of male fabric, which is a reflection of the power structures under patriarchy (Fischer & Jansz, 1995).”(1)

My own experience of forming a masculine identity is mirrored in this. When I say that I grew up with men dominated by invisible notions of masculinity, I say that they have their own masculine identities wrapped around the core principles laid out before by Fischer. Their “personhoods” have been characterized by the “dominant cultural model of masculinity in the Western

world.” My recognition of this is, and the work produced for this thesis, is a way for me to challenge those conventions and form my own identity outside of them.

## **Wearables**

The exhibition was composed of two components; the physical work, and the video and audio performances. The physical work is four individual pieces that are to be worn together to create a costume or persona. The pieces are a helmet, a love-handle belt, a breastplate, and a codpiece. Each of these pieces has their own meanings and reasons for belonging to the whole.

The love-handle belt and the breastplate are the most similar in nature. Both of these pieces were specifically made to accentuate insecurities I have about my own body. The breastplate is formed to sag and swoop in the way my own breast does when I am out of shape. When worn without clothes the piece both conceals and reveals the insecurity it is made to mask. It is made to call attention to it. It extracts the insecurity from my own psyche and projects it to the viewer. The love-handle belt works in a similar fashion. It is formed around my love-handles, so it takes their shape. This piece, however, does not conceal, but accentuates. The piece is made from expanded steel, and the perforations allow the fatty areas to protrude through them. The piece was made to emulate the way fishnets stockings are worn on the body, linking the work to existing images of sexuality by mimicking fetish clothing.

The codpiece is designed to accentuate the bravado of masculine pride, while also leaving the wearer vulnerable. There is a mane of peacock feathers, with the front of the piece being a rooster’s face. This transforms the wearer’s penis into a literal cock. The wear-

er's testicles hang from the bottom of the piece to resemble the rooster's wattle. The overall piece is worn like a jock strap, with one band going around the wearer's waste and two others attaching around the buttocks and under the groin. The piece leaves the wearer's most vulnerable area, the testicles, exposed.

The helmet is ultimately the part of the costume that strips my body of my legible identity. The form of the helmet is much like a baseball helmet. It is a close fit with sections that fall down over the ears. It has retractable slotted sunglasses in front, and a spring antenna pointing back from the top. Even though these works are about me, I wanted the finished persona to be absent of my visible personality. For me, this costume is about masculinity in general with the individual pieces marking my place in it. The helmet separates my identity and allows the video to function without becoming merely autobiographical. To accomplish this, I made sure my eyes were covered. I believe we generally understand each other as individuals through seeing their eyes, and by taking away that ability I took away access to my identity.

## **Performance**

The performance aspect of the exhibition was composed of two components; there are video projections of myself wearing only the physical costume. and an audio component of stories of my childhood and life. Both are meant to reflect upon how I as an individual relate to the larger construct of masculinity in American society.

The videos were projected onto frosted Plexiglas that was suspended from the ceiling. They were translucent images that faded into and out of being depending of the viewer's angle. The projections were placed in the space but at either side of the gallery facing each other so that the center of the space would allow for viewers to be stuck in the middle of both. In the projections, I am wearing the physical objects and posturing, changing my pose every thirty seconds. In one projection I am posing as a professional bodybuilder, and in the other I am emulating poses of Greek and Roman classical sculpture. In the videos, the viewer is able to see me quivering as I struggle to keep my poses. They are able to see the strain in my posture as I flex for extended periods and start to lose my balance. Both of the visual performances are to resemble ways in which we idealize the image of masculinity. This idealization is at odds with my very ordinarily imperfect body.

The audio component was a pedestal with headphones in which one single listener could hear me tell them stories of my life, childhood, and memories that shaped me. The stories range from moments that formed my physical insecurities, to thoughts on friendship at odds with family, to embarrassing revealings. The headphones were in the front of the space and meant as a way to introduce the viewer to my true self before confronting my projected self.

## **Style**

The visual aesthetic of the show was pop culture/youth culture, and the way I fit inside and outside of it. The show was filled with bright pastel colors as a way of emasculating the space, while also reflecting the visual nature of toys. The emasculation of the space was largely done by painting the gallery pink, a color associated with femininity as it is the announcement

color at birth for a girl. The rest of the show was colored to match the pastel of the gallery while letting the pieces and pedestals shift away.

The emasculation of the space was important to me because I am dealing with notions of the performance of masculinity, and to make the space at odds with American hegemonic understandings of masculinity brings a conflict to the subject matter being presented. The videos are projecting myself posing in very iconic masculine gestures, while the surroundings suggest otherwise. The aim in altering the space was to complicate gendered tropes that we generally take for granted.

The other thought in bringing such vivid color to the work is to create a sensibility of pop culture. I see pop culture and youth culture and synonymous, and I see myself as an aging vessel traveling away from these cultures each year. Part of this work is a cathartic way for me to feel a part of the youth culture that I have vanished from. The creation of a persona is a way for me to make a part of myself that is still the age in which I understand myself; A youth instead of a young adult.

## **Gaze**

One of the things I have been considering with the work is how relationships of power are active in my life. I have represented this through the use of the gaze. The helmet conceals the identity of the wearer, but it also conceals the eyes. With the eyes concealed, there is a voyeuristic essence to interacting with the projection. The projected me has eyes that the viewer cannot trace, and therefore can never know if they are being watched while knowing that they can be. This experience was further pronounced by the nature of the projection. Because the videos were



projected on a translucent surface, they would fade in and out of visibility depending on the viewers location. The experience could be described as somewhat “holographic.” This inconsistency of image created a space in which my body was always present, but not always visible. The gallery, on the other hand, was clearly visible in every area from the figures in the projections.

The overall experience is a space in which you can always be watched, but never know you’re being watched. The helmet mask obstructs the viewers’ ability to see the figure’s eyes. This leaves them unable to know whether or not the figure is looking at them. The inconsistency of the projected surfaces makes the figures appear and disappear. This leaves the viewer knowing there is a figure even when they can’t see it.

Images







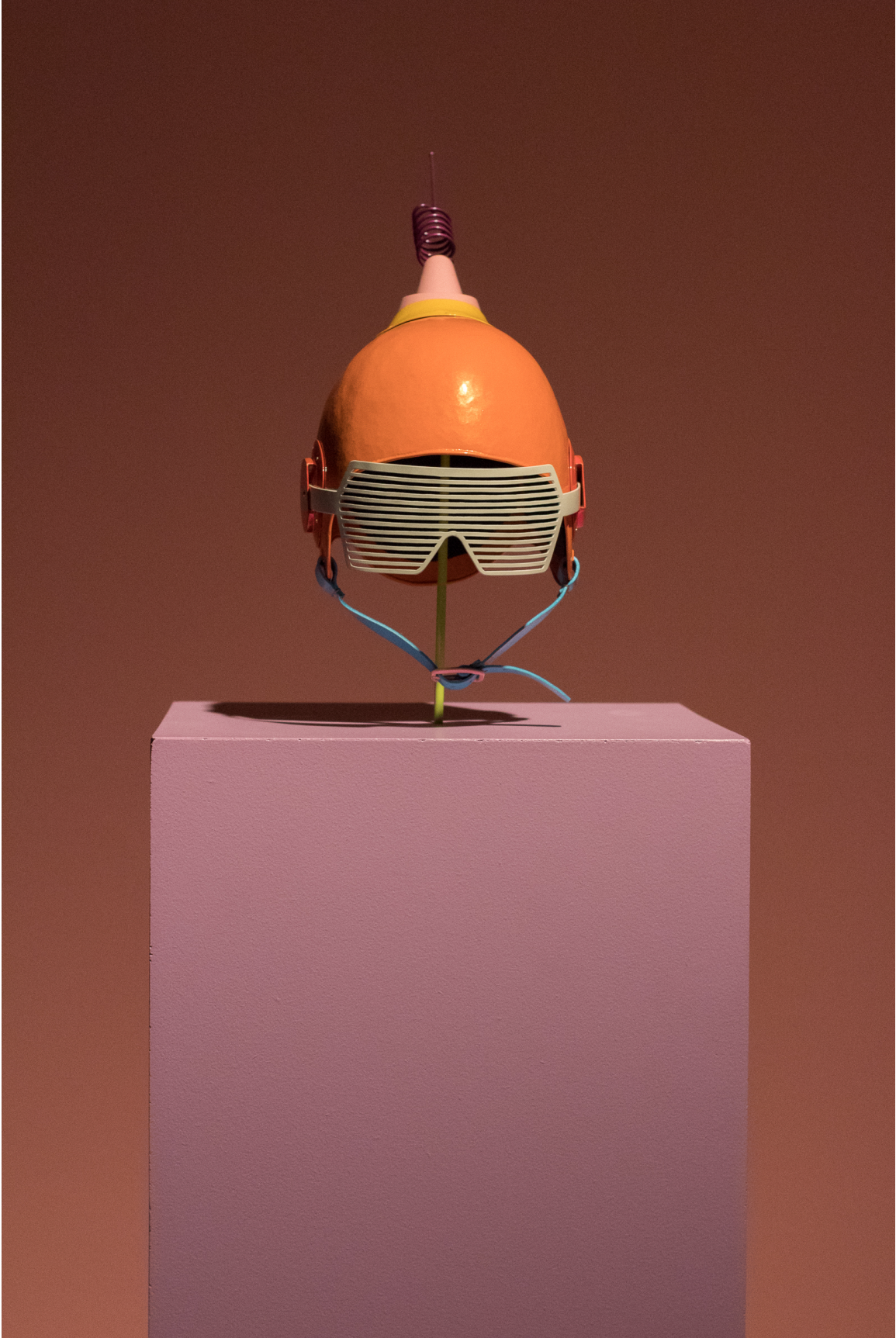




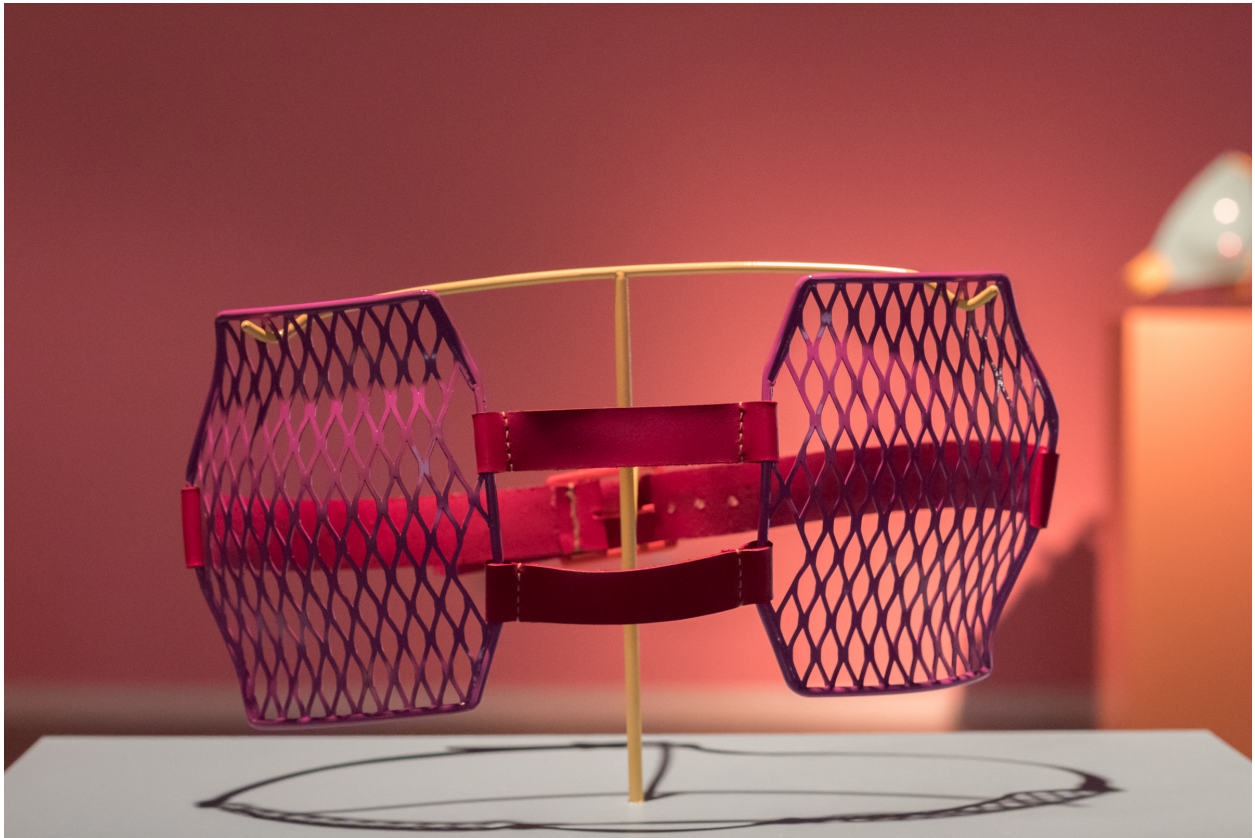
















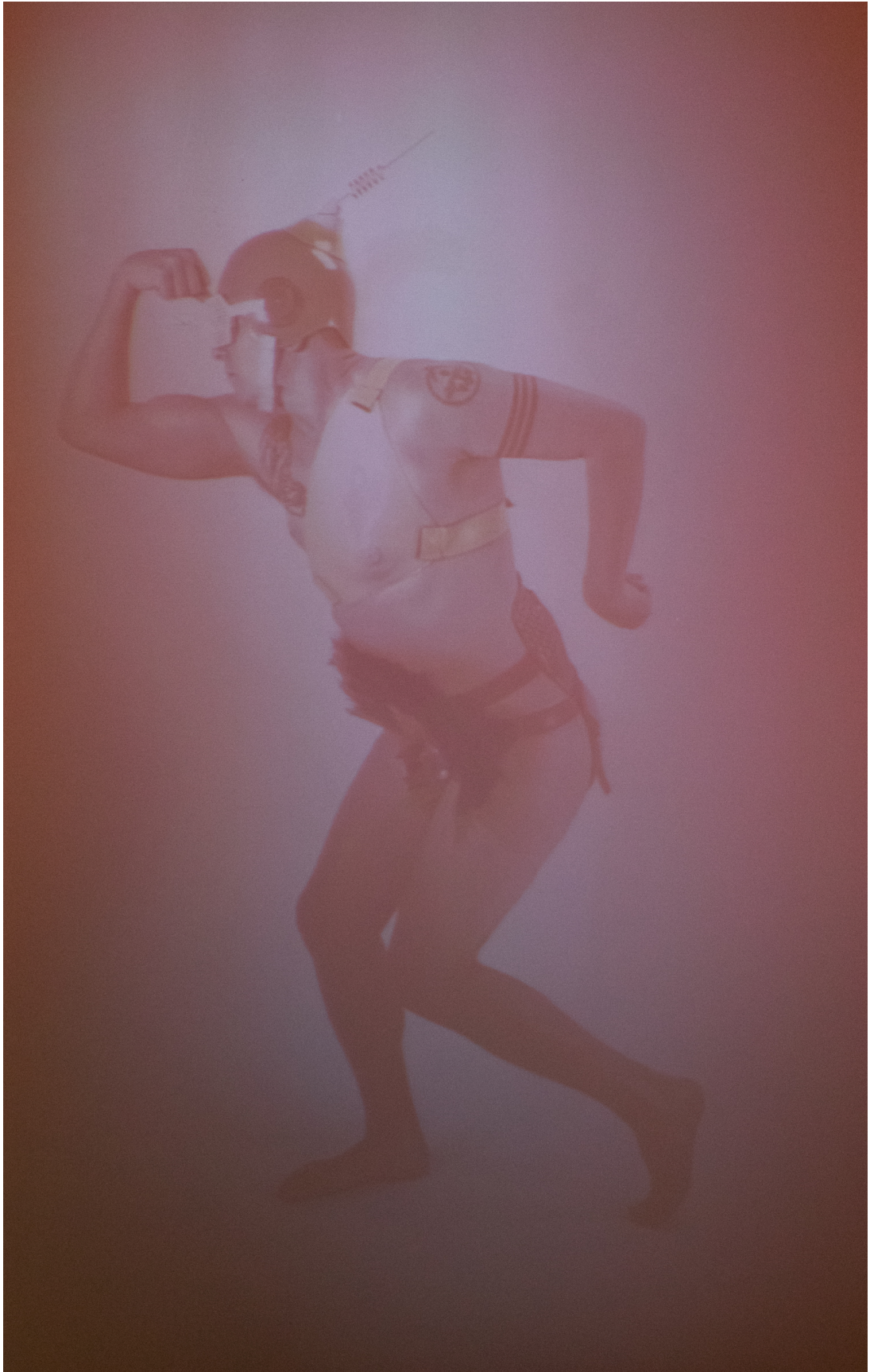












## **Works Cited**

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