

Kit Messham-Muir

Sex Differential: Negotiating masculinities in *what's mothertrucker*

what is a man, the son of a trucker and an artist of Sydney's southwest, all of which bear upon his work in *mothertrucker*. For the artist, trucks are a particularly rich semiotic seem, signifying on a number of levels. At one level, trucks are part of the 'petrolhead' culture of Sydney's southwest, in which horsepower equates with masculinity. Issues of sexuality, gender and their political dimensions permeate this culture, from the fuck-truck to the drag strip. It is on this level that *mothertrucker* draws heavily on the artist's region and community. In particular, trucks are the apex of this motor masculinity. They are a powerful, and threatening presence. Their imposing scale demands a kind of a bodily relation – one is always aware of their power and size, and how diminutive one is in relation to them.

On another level, trucking invokes *what's* family history and the domestic dynamics of his upbringing. This is clear in the artist's last major work preceding this exhibition, *Truck Rest*, which involved the burial of a 1967 Kenworth truck in a roadside truck rest at Razorback. *Truck Rest* commemorates the Truck Blockade of 1979. The '79 Blockade was a time of crisis, but also represented a moment of class and occupational solidarity and mateship that consolidated the identity of truckers, for themselves as well as in the consciousness of the nation. It is an event embedded in the memory of the artist as a seven-year-old, and also in his familial memory through the central role of his father, Spencer Watling, in the Blockade, and the collective memory of the wider community. While *Truck Rest* celebrated a public event in his family life, the absence of the truck (by burying it) has meaning on a more personal level. The time of the Blockade was also a time when *what's* father, his immediate male role-model, was driving trucks interstate to provide for his family and was often away from the home for days at a time. So, while trucks may signify masculinity for the community in general, for *what* their meaning is paradoxically layered with the absence of masculine authority.

what regarded *Truck Rest* as a 'realignment' of community with his artistic practice. *mothertrucker*, on the other hand, expands the gap between the two. The body of work in this present exhibition negotiates *what's* own sensibilities as a man and an

artist with the ideas and expectations of masculinity circulating within his community. There is a tension between different definitions and modes of masculinity throughout this exhibition. In the context of a working class community, the pursuit of art may seem trivial, bourgeois and even a little effeminate. Yet in the context of the gallery, the scale, aesthetic and subject matter of *what*'s work draws on a particular working class 'masculine' strain of art.

In the title work of this exhibition, *mothertrucker*, the truck is only registered through its absence. On entering the gallery space, we are confronted by the headlights of a truck and its imposing exterior traced-out in lights. However, this quickly gives way to its absence of its body. Unlike the presence of a complete truck, the bodily relation between the audience and this truck is never fully realised: its lights trace its volume but its powerful presence is dissolved. This masculine space becomes a void.

It is tempting to impose Freudian readings on *mothertrucker*, particularly given its Oedipal title. The voided truck is open to readings as a castration of the phallic machine, or perhaps as a denial of the authority of the father, represented by the truck. Certainly, *mothertrucker*, like *Truck Rest*, does suggest an absent father. That notwithstanding, it is not a symbolic father displaced by the artist, but a real father absent out of economic necessity. The artist is not attempting to reinforce universalistic assumptions about gender. He is more concerned with the differing contingent personal and local understandings of masculinity. In a practical sense, by removing the truck body from the gallery space, *what* effectively defies the petrolhead fetishism of the machine by removing the object and leaving only light. If the truck is to have any power or presence it is to be on the conditions of the artist: on visual rather than mechanical terms.

Exhibited alongside *mothertrucker*, *In between the clouds and the sky*, consists 20 ciba-transparency images of cloudscapes mounted on Tasmanian Oak light boxes. Here, *what* formulates a metaphor with the blue of the sky as the masculine and the clouds as the feminine. As with the masculinity of the truck, the sky is a void. For the artist, the blue of the sky reaches over everything, but is as insubstantial as the cloud forms that cut into it. The artist considers occupying a space 'in between the clouds and the sky', yet cloud and sky are the same thing: 'white-cloud' and 'blue-sky' are only visual distinctions. Within the bounds of *what*'s metaphor, to occupy

the space between the clouds and the sky is to blur these realms. As with *mothertrucker*, the definition (in both senses of the word) of masculinity becomes more indistinct.

The third element of *what*'s new work brings the exhibition from the ethereal to the base. *The man and his art* presents an enlarged image of *what*'s erect penis. The image is printed onto a rectangular 14-metre-long truck tarpaulin. On the gallery wall, *The man and his art* resonates with the monolithic Modernist canvas.¹ Despite Clement Greenberg's claims for Western Modernism's transcendence of the contingencies of culture, much Modernist art was fueled by an assertion of a particular heterosexual masculinity grounded in mid-century European and American gender expectations. Consider, for example, the hot and heavy expressionism of De Kooning, or the rugged masculine individualism of Pollock's abstract expressionism, or Picasso's figurative aggressively heterosexual images (notably assembled at this year's *Picasso Erotique* at the Musée du Jeu de Paum in Paris). The 'male artist hero' mythology of the mid-twentieth century was as much a product of its time as McCarthyism and formica, not the result of creative Gods in our midst² or, on the other hand, the result of some primal rush of testosterone. *The man and his art* cuts through the transcendental and monumental pretensions of Modernism (particularly formalism) to its underlying overcompensations. *what* takes Pollock's museum-scale horizontal pissing-space and turns it erect, distilling the 'pink pole' from *Blue Poles*.

It might be contended that this blown-up image of a penis merely perpetuates the overcompensations of the male artist hero, but such a simplistic reading of the artist's literalism would entirely miss its point. Importantly, *The man and his art* intersects both the male artist hero mythology and the masculinity of trucking. Large expressionist canvases, with their painterly ejaculations, are masculine spaces through and through. At the same time, truck tarps are spaces usually occupied by the equally coded (and sublimated, if you like) masculinity of beer bottles or hard corporate logos. Ironically, by occupying this doubly coded space with the *penile*, *what* actually undermines the *phallic* in both instances. He presents to us an image of his penis, erect but stripped of its metonymic power by virtue of its sheer literalism. The artist strips away phallic symbolism and offers his own body is its place.

In conjunction with this idea, *what* has been lifting weights and working out in the

months leading up to the exhibition, and performs his iron-pumping during the opening event. He takes his own body, individual and idiosyncratic, and attempts to mold it into our culture's ideal template of masculinity. This template is rooted in the classical Apollonian ideal: a body with clear and defined boundaries, contained and homogeneous, considered in terms of its utmost capacity for action and competition, "as a war body."³ Given the historical and discursive constitution of this ideal, this 'masculinisation' of artist's own body is no less embedded in symbolic conventionality than the 'masculinity' of a truck. By pumping iron, the artist effectively takes the discursive history of 'the male body' and inscribes it on his very being. In return, he takes his own personal history and literally inscribes it on the masculine body of his 1976 Saab, which is engraved with a 10,000 word short novel about *what's* childhood. Here we see that the raw materiality of a human body is no more or less a body of cultural ideas and a space of politics than the more obviously constructed masculinity of a car body.

Across this exhibition *what* slides between irony, metaphor, history, rhetoric, art and wider culture. However, *mothertrucker* never simply lampoons, outright dismisses nor fully subscribes to the received masculine sensibilities, be they familial, local or cultural. Throughout, there is always a sense that the artist genuinely enjoys that which these masculinities demand of him, but also likes to fiddle with them. He realises their slipperiness and instability and takes them for a ride.

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¹ *what's* deep excavation site for *Truck Rest* also evokes the figure of the heroic male artist, particularly in relation to the earthwork art of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when art was taken out of the gallery and gouged out of the earth with industrial diggers and tippers. The earthwork of artists like Robert Smithson was undoubtedly a masculine movement, riding high on the heroic pioneering sensibility which underwrote much Modernist art in the mid-twentieth century.

² Clement Greenberg's arguments for the transcendence of Modernist art above 'low' culture go as far as claiming that artists producing abstract and non-objective art in effect "imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape — not its picture — is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings, similar or originals." Greenberg, Clement, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', in *Art in theory 1900 – 1990*, ed. Harrison, Charles and Wood, Paul, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 531

³ Waldby, Catherine, "Destruction: Boundary erotics and Refigurations of the Heterosexual male body", *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, p. 268