



Stephen Milner

Excitations

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My thesis work revolves around the tension between frustration and desire, through trying to connect the seemingly disparate activities of surfing and gay men cruising for sex. I am interested in the latent eroticism of the hyper-masculine surf culture. One of the most compelling aspects of surfing is the formation of inclusive, spiritually-aware, temporary communities. Surfing and anonymous gay sex are similar in that they are performed in the conditions of the pursuit of chance and vertigo with psychological undertones of fear, desire and bodily thrills. This space of confusion is where I like to place my art practice. Sculpture, video, installation and photography are the vehicles I use to merge subjective speculation with my investigations into the history of gay identity and to force a dialogue between surfing communities and gay culture.

Surfing in America became widely accessible in the 1920's, however the surfing revolution and its rise as a status sport was due, in part, to the explosion of 1960's California surf rock. Dick Dale and his middle-eastern influenced guitar scales and explorations in reverberation became free advertising for surfing. The iconic surf rock bands from this period of music shaped and conditioned the dominant style of surfing, and the image of masculinity embedded within the sport. With the recognition of surfing and its identity quickly solidified within mainstream culture, reactionary counterculture movements within surfing were soon established. But, "The subculture as an observable entity is now virtually non-existent. The process of editorial selection in surf magazines is not the distortion of 'reality' but the creation of it (Stranger 47)". However, once a subculture is accepted and adopted by dominant culture, there will always be groups in opposition, rejection and to blur the boundaries of the dominant mainstream culture. As surfing became commodified and less underground, masculine identity within the sport was diminished within pop-culture and the everyday American beach goer. Localism in surf culture is one example of how a threatened masculine identity/individualism can

surface. The image of hyper-masculine aggression can paradoxically be perceived as simultaneously both repulsive and erotic. Localism is a game played in the arena of masculinity and male identity. It is an aggressive attempt to protect something sacred, like a local surf break that is becoming too crowded with pedestrian surfers. However, if surfing were to eliminate the machismo embedded in the sport, it would likely undermine its attraction to the public. Ironically, it would also diffuse the homoerotic attraction men have for each other in this context. I am interested in exploring these contradictory forces in my art practice.



Stephen Milner, "Burned", 2017

In the 1970's the identity politics of what it meant to be a gay man living in the United States was at its peak, and the attempt to establish legitimacy and viability of the ordinary homosexual in the eyes of the public and the eyes of gay men was turbulent and hard to predict. The timing is significant in that it illustrates the attempt for a legitimate and viable search for subverting the effeminate homosexual stereotype, and that gay men are just as 'masculine' as straight men. The pre-1990's gay magazines I use in my practice like *Drummer*, *In Uniform*, *Physique Pictorial* all investigate the intimate relationships between orthodox and paradoxical masculinity through the competitive and macho sub-cultures like motorcycle riding and team sports. The ability throughout history for gay men to effectively appropriate and steal signifiers from these mostly male activities and blur the homosocial and the homosexual is why I chose surfing as my focus in my work. "Paradoxical masculinity takes the traditional signs of patriarchal masculinity and filters them through an ironic gay lens. Signs such as muscles, which in heterosexual culture highlight masculine gender by pointing out the power men have over women and the power they have to resist other men, through gay irony emerge enticements to homoerotic desire-- a desire that is anathema to orthodox masculinity. Paradoxical masculinity invites both reverence for the traditional signs of masculinity and the violation of those signs (Pronger 145)." My interest in surfing stems from the convincing nature of the ruse of pure masculinity found in this sport. It is an activity that encourages the homosocial. The allure of men who behave in hyper-masculine ways only create a confusing tension between liberation and oppression in sexuality and identity. Through the deconstruction of American surfing and beach culture history, I am attempting to tease out similarities in the surfaces and substructures of the parallel history of gay liberation magazines.



To tightly, small-wave moves and graft them onto Sunset's expansive peaks and walls. Through the years, this has been a prized goal of progressive-thinking North Shore surfers. Martin Potter did his bit this season, as he consistently broke away from obvious and well-worn lines in favor of beachbreak-influenced cuts and angles. He had two phenomenal rides in his Hard Rock quarterfinal heat — including the wave shown here — couldn't find a third, and didn't advance. A strong statement, nonetheless. Photo: Craig Freeman

Money Shot #4, Stephen Milner, 2018

The tension between these competing models of masculinity is put into play in the *Money Shot Collage* series. For this series I collected images of the most popular repeating action sports shot from Surfing Magazines: the moment when the surfer smacks the lip of the wave, throwing a massive splash in the air. This moment is when the surfer can show his confidence through style, and maneuver using the board as if it were an erotic instrument. The photograph freezes and emphasizes the most potent moment in surfing, which can be found at numerous times in every issue. I tear these pages out and delicately remove the profile of the men, leaving negative space that is then layered over pages from homoerotic fetish magazines. The popularity of these surfing spray moments is the focus of every new issue of a surfing magazine because it identifies top competitors currently leading the sport in power, control and most importantly, style. The proclamation of an elite superior style is subjective and elusive, but for a money making lifestyle sport like surfing, it is essential to sell a product that provides ideas of masculinity to young men who are searching for it. Peter Middleton writes "Masculinity is... hard to grasp. Is it a discourse, a power structure, a psychic economy, a history, an ideology, an identity, a behaviour, a value system, an aesthetic even?" (Hopkins 5). In the series *So Pitted*, I appropriate photographs from surfing magazines that capture the iconic surfer barrel shots. Unlike the images from *Money Shot Collages*, the focus is more on the size, power, and cleanliness of the wave itself, as the notion of finding and riding the perfect wave as the core of the sport. The perpetual pursuit of pleasure and its blending of fear and desire is investigated in this series. The base panel photograph is appropriated from printed surfing magazines, scanned and printed at a much larger scale. The second panel is a zoomed-in print of the surfer who is riding the wave, focusing so close on his face that it becomes obscured by the low resolution, offset printing process dots. The size of the surfer's face is printed just large enough to cover the actual surfer riding the wave, as if it could possibly give us a psychological insight to

risk-taking and the surfer's sense of self. Much like the coded references to homosexuality throughout art history, the zoomed, cropped faces of men during a peak wave riding experience confuses forged "libidinal identification" with the pleasures sought in extreme sports. For example, appropriating photographs to re-contextualize and play with the sexualized identification of other men, male types and the psychology of men has been investigated in works like "Thirteen Most Wanted" where Andy Warhol uses "Most Wanted" poster formulations to openly play on the correlation between lawlessness and homosexuality (Hopkins 138)." A frequent ham-handed comparison male surfers make to the experience of wave riding tends to be sexualized, often linking riding the wave to having intercourse and the finishing the wave or getting "tubed" as orgasmic. The gesture of collecting the moment of getting "tubed" or "pitted" and of zooming into and isolating the surfer's intense facial expressions is an attempt to locate the libido at this peak moment .

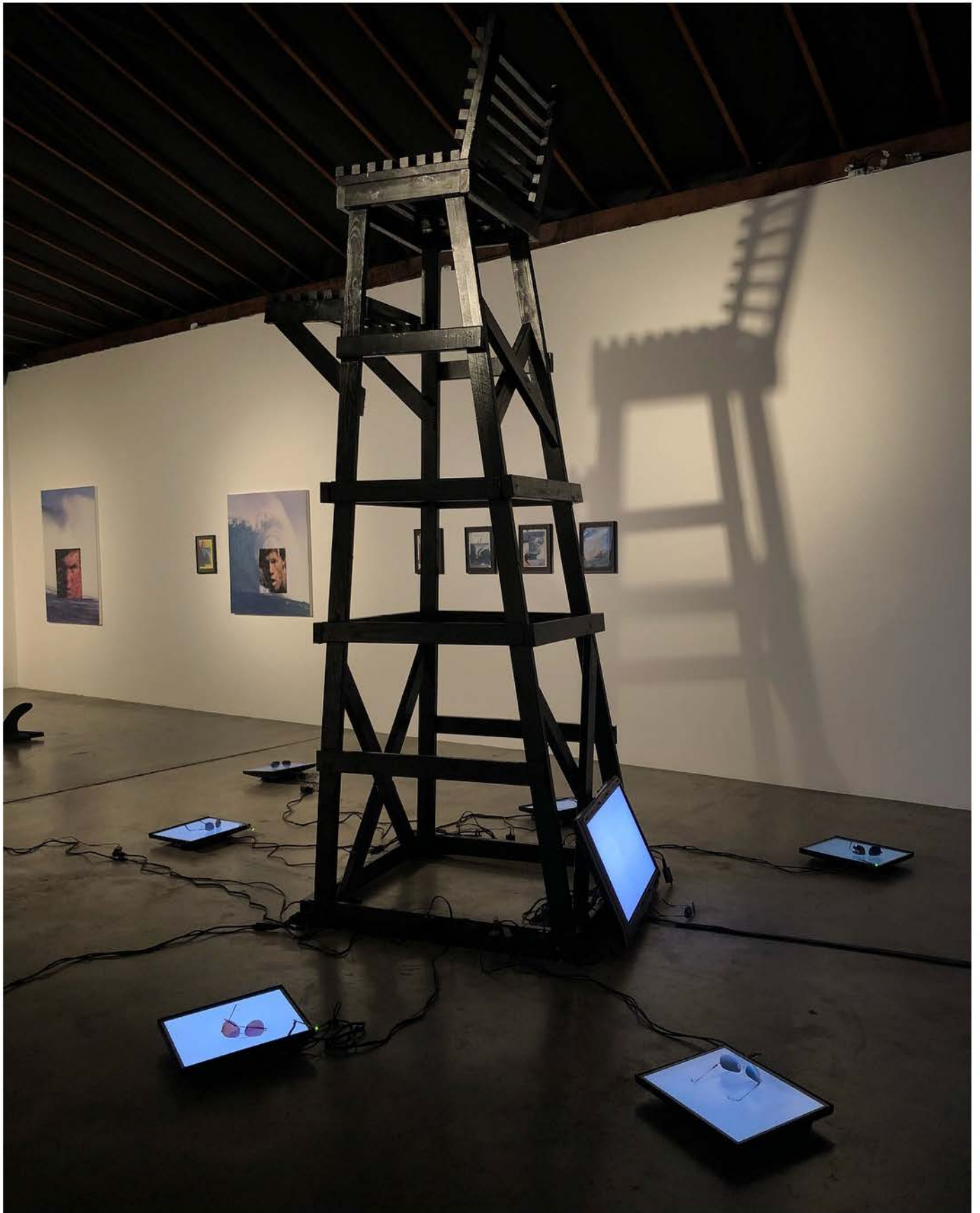


Andy Warhol, Thirteen Most Wanted, 1964



(Left) Money Shot #2, Stephen Milner, 2018

(Right) So Pitted #1, Stephen Milner, 2018



Lifeguard Tower, Stephen Milner, 2018

The lifeguard tower is a familiar structure on the beach that contains an aura of authority even if a lifeguard is not present. It's design institutes a hierarchy of the gaze. The power of the gaze is held by the lifeguard that then becomes an object of sexual desire by those who are on ground level. This structure has confusing psychological undertones that blur fear and safety. *Lifeguard Tower #1* takes the basic iconography of towers found at the beach, but abstracts its function and purpose in the gallery context. Painted black instead of white, and made subtly taller than normal, the sculptural tower emphasizes and amplifies the psychological undertones and nuances of the imagined gaze outside of its original context. Situated on the hard concrete floor, the lifeguard's seat becomes even more unattainable and distant. The hierarchy of perception is suddenly overwhelming when the original design and color of the lifeguard tower is altered. It is no longer recognized and trusted as a structure that represents the power of those in charge of safety on the beach.

In the early 1970's, Blacks Beach, California was designated as the first and only nude beach in the entire United States. Today, it remains partially clothing optional and is still one of the largest nude beaches in the country. Parallel to its fame for naturists and nudists, it was also known for one of the most powerful surfing breaks in Southern California. The beach still holds its fame because of the long hike down the dangerous and unstable canyon "goat trail" to the beach at the bottom. The hike feels like a pilgrimage to a remote and sacred site, far from the real world and society. This difficulty of access has also made it popular for men cruising for anonymous gay sex, and the trail is literally shared between men cruising for sex and surfers hiking to a famous break. The participants of each involve pursuits of risk taking, fear, desire and bodily thrills. The two share the same environment but choose to use it for seemingly

disparate activities. The tension in the two and my desire to make them fit together meaningfully is an obvious illusion, made convincing through the medium of photography.

On the edges of the beach near the canyon walls, “desire paths” can be found snaking through the landscape. Over the years, unclothed men have developed rituals in walking these paths, wandering in and out of areas covered by dense brush, into open canyons marked by a single, almost mythical looking, untamed palm tree. Though these trails seem effortless, they are much considered in navigation. Each trail will lead to a specific site and then loop back around and connect to another series of trails. Within Blacks Beach, the human altered landscape has been interpreted and created from the natural environment to increase positive sexual performances during the pursuit of anonymous sex. A boulder that fell years ago to the bottom of the canyon is now a platform used for initiating sex. A small area of bamboo has a carved out interior of rooms and is known as the “Garden of Eden”. The driftwood structure that can be found on any other beach is ‘occupied’ if a shirt hangs from the exterior. Anything close to the cruising trails is re-contextualized into an object of pleasure and performance. This demystification of the boulder embeds a different history into every rock on the beach, a typology that once felt innocent and natural. The seemingly simple landscape is incredibly complex, the natural monument is no longer what it seems once you are introduced to the history and the use of the sites at play .



More Mesa Beach, Stephen Milner, 2018



Blacks Beach, Stephen Milner, 2018



Marshalls Beach, Stephen Milner, 2018

By photographing these structures and objects, their purpose is further blurred because the sexual context, physical experience of the location, and the overall narrative is no longer recognizable. The act of photographing these locations where men have sex is more of a documentation of a landmark, all of its history may be stripped but the nuances of sexual tension can still exist without human presence in the photographs. Each cruising location is unique to its geography and the natural materials found nearby. When the summer season ends, the sex condos will most likely not survive the winter storms and the shifting of the tides and beach. The intricate and well-tended condos will never last forever.

Through my work, I make the argument that the latent eroticism and image of masculinity in the male-dominated sport of surfing echoes the historical arc of gay identity in the United States over the past fifty years. Both groups sought visibility, while attempting to preserve their own distinct, and somewhat sacred notions of masculinity. Whether toxic or spiritual, they both inhabit environments of transcendent experiences and bodily practices that in the end create stable, protected and localized social formations. The psychological inquiries into fear, desire, and the hyper-masculine pursuits within the each of these subcultures, creates complexities and depth that allow my research and art practice to echo my own interior desires and motives.

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