

The Machismo Project

21/06/13 at 08:51 AM



Male stereotypes have long been seen as being harmful to men, pressuring them to conform and leaving many unable to face challenges of modern society. A new exhibition is hoping to break down the walls of silence relating to the issue; ahead of the launch of The Machismo Project tonight, Friday, Play's Maria Tracey talks to one of the artists behind the project, Conall Cary, about the "crisis of masculinity".

Masculinity. It's a word that defines a set of qualities, characteristics or roles generally considered typical of, or appropriate to, a man. From being fiercely independent to non-emotional; aggressive to self-confident, there is much expected of the male half of society. However, men, and indeed boys, often feel lost and powerless, and are further afflicted by the silence surrounding these issues.

It's an area that two Cork-based artists are exploring, as they confront the shortage of contemporary artwork exploring masculinity as its subject matter. The Machismo Project opens this evening, Friday at the TACTIC Visual Arts Project Space at the Sample-Studios in the former FAS/ Revenue Government Buildings on Sullivan's Quay.

Curated by Visual Arts programmer at TACTIC, Gerald Heffernan and featuring the work of Gary Dempsey and Conall Cary, the exhibition will see the complicated demands of what's seen as "traditional" gender ideas unpacked and discussed.

Cary, who is originally from the USA and is now a member of Cork Printmakers and Backwater Artists' Group, hopes the project challenges the definition of "manliness" and its interpretation in society.

"We are hoping to get people talking about the issue," he says. "We are not trying to find answers but more ask questions and start a conversation."

In the past, Cary's work has revolved around issues of modern male identity, however, in his recent bodies of work there has been a focus on the high suicide rates attributed to men living in rural parts of Ireland and Scotland. The pieces draw on isolation, loneliness and seclusion.

In fact, Cary's work ties into a recent study by University College Dublin and Teagasc, which aimed to identify aspects of rural living and male practices relating to health and well-being that could impact on decisions to attempt suicide. It found that rural factors, such as lack of employment opportunities, the stigma attached to mental illness, men's attitudes to health and a narrow range of treatment options greatly reduced the possibility of solving their mental health problems.

"Gendered attitudes to mental distress and help seeking were apparent in terms of participants' denial of problems and negative attitudes to help seeking." read the report. "The men generally adhered to a traditional view of masculinity which included the projection of strength and stoicism in the face of distress. When they were unable to meet these expectations they felt emotionally vulnerable and frequently used alcohol in an attempt to cope and to conceal their distress."

However, in *The Machismo Project*, Cary doesn't deal directly with suicide, and instead focuses on how men address the societal images and stereotypes of what a 'man' is supposed to be. The pieces draw on a melancholic and "slightly humorous" look at childlike aspirations of masculinity, presenting costumed figures isolated in a desolate landscape.

Dempsey's artwork deals with male identity and male stereotypes surrounding sex and relationships. His men generally boast an absurd physical supremacy and are lulled into the false reassurance by this; they are "oblivious to being dominated by their own urges", which limit them incredibly. "Their mental weakness appears in stark contrast to their physical presence." says Dempsey.

The theme will be explored through printed imagery and innovative construction methods. The work consists of large-scale prints on cast concrete and cut steel, utilising the inherent masculinity of the materials size, strength and toughness juxtaposed against the surface imagery. Dempsey will be

casting the massive concrete slabs, building large sculptural forms and screen-printing onto the surface; while Cary is working on large-scale industrial steel sheets etched, rusted and screen-printed.

Along with artwork on the subject matter, The Machismo Project is also set to use various other means to further spark conversation on the topic of masculinity. A panel discussion and a series of film screenings will further open up the dialogue in the coming weeks. A broad spectrum of speakers- Cary himself; professor of Applied Social Studies in UCC, Alastair Christie; and senior lecturer in Geography at University College Cork and co-curator Lost Boys: The Territories of Youth at the Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Denis Linehan- will take part in the discussions. The aim of the symposium will be to constructively develop the conversation about machismo within a social context, providing the framework with which to view the exhibition.

Flying Knee Productions has also filmed a documentary revolving around The Machismo Project. The film will include the process of making the work along with interviews with the guest speakers, exploring a more personal approach to the issues involved. Films such as the 2007 movie Garage, which stars Pat Shortt, and tells the story of a lonely petrol station attendant and how he slowly begins to come out of his shell and The Wrestler featuring Mickey Rourke, about an aging professional wrestler who continues to compete in an attempt to cling on to his 80s heyday despite his failing health, will also be screened.

The Project will be brought to Galway in August, with plans to tour it in other cities across Ireland and further afield. In each city, local academics, artists and community workers will be invited to take part.

“This is not just for Cork, the Project addresses an issue that spans the globe.” says Cary.

For more information on the exhibition and for dates relating to the panel discussion and film screenings see machismo.ie or facebook.com/TheMachismoProject.