

INTRODUCTION

Male Bodies Unmade welcomes incoherence. It celebrates the productivity of incomprehension in matters of corporeality. It examines homoerotic fantasies of white, cisgendered manhood coming apart to make strange artworks.¹ Forming a case study, each chapter explores what it means to become disoriented by selfhood and its desire—particularly when the body defies everyday logic of naturalness, wholeness, and reproduction. But *pay (no) attention to that man behind the curtain*.² I write as a Korean American queer—to trouble, with relish, hegemonically Western representations of somatic instability and horny self-extinction.³

My approach is informed by my own status as an immigrant—a polyglot queen, drawn to extravagant fantasies of misbehaving bodies that are in truth foreign territories, colonies of misbelief. I explore white men’s disunified physicality in art and attend to erotic polysemy that questions the visual ethos of Occidental patriarchy. I am particularly invested in analyzing the fraught states of un-seeing, disempowerment, and corruption of knowledge, as evident in images and objects that misremember, distort, and even erase the gendered and sexualized body. By focusing on configurations of irrational anatomy, *Male Bodies Unmade* revels in rhizomatic “variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots” that disrupt art history’s dominant narratives.⁴

Recent studies of Duchampian modernism proposed somatic alienation and migration as a principal rhetoric of avant-garde art.⁵ Such discussions of a “mobile body,” “shifting things,” “fluidity of becoming,” and “emigration from the self” inform my reading of artworks in which bodies migrate into the territories unknown to normative maps

of gender and sexuality in the West.⁶ “Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist,” and “feet which dance by themselves,” Freud says, “have something particularly uncanny about them.”⁷ These unnatural synecdoches of the body wander. Subjectivity thus appears transplanted (Aubrey Beardsley), always elsewhere (Jean Cocteau), or merged (Francis Bacon); such bodily loss and reconfiguration cause temporal disturbance (David Hockney and Robert Gober); and, as discussed in the postscript on Asian American queering, the body becomes breathless and wet with immigrant anxiety of belonging (Andrew Ahn). Admitting that the body is never whole—comprising ill-fitting parts incommensurate with our nameless, disjointed desire—is difficult. Yet the artists this book addresses, rather than repressing this notion, thrive in its shock that allows the unbinding of structures of selfhood and knowledge. Dismantling the sovereignty of male power in white imagination, they revel in its exhaustion and expiration.

WHY SHOULD I BE WRITING THIS BOOK?

Pictures of white men, dirty or not, promised much. In my college years, their painted, photographed, and filmed bodies in art offered me an escape from the daily horror of Korean patriarchy that constantly threatened my homosexual self. Pleasures of those foreign pictures coincided with my study of English literature, which vaunted a wholly different knowledge structure belonging to another world. Reading E. M. Forster’s *Maurice* for the first time and watching its film adaptation offered me a powerful delusion that I could free myself from the violence of Korean jocks and, across the continents and oceans, I would be accepted as I was. Having studied in California and Oregon for three summers and spent a semester in Holland, I came out to my parents in 1997: pictures by Aubrey Beardsley, David Hockney, and Andy Warhol—interspersed with centerfolds in *Playgirl*, *Stroke*, and *XY Magazine*—studded fantasies of a better life in my head. Later that year I immigrated to the United States. It took me another two decades to realize that those pictures of posing men I admired were not meant for me—not really. Yes, I saw my homosexual desire articulated, studied, and even vicariously fulfilled in sensual choreography of white men’s body parts, but such spectacles entertained and sustained the white gaze—I was not an authorized participant of this narrative of visual pleasure.

Unauthorized viewership defines one of the scenes in Jean Cocteau’s 1930 film *Le Sang d’un poète* (The Blood of a Poet), in which a white man visits a hotel hallway to peer through the keyholes of guest rooms. Although he never gains entrance to any of the rooms, Cocteau’s Peeping Tom enjoys the plotless, obstructed sights that door-lock openings permit. Only once does a guest stare back through the keyhole: it happens in the room that Cocteau’s voiceover names the Celestial Ceiling, in which shadow theatrics of opium and China are offered.⁸ Startling in close-up, that disembodied, lone eye on the other side of the door belongs to an Asian man (figure 1).⁹ It contrasts with the on-screen absence of Peeping Tom’s eye framed by the keyhole. If oppositional, the Eastern stare should provide an inkling of what the white poet’s eye would look like in his



FIGURE 1

Screenshot from Jean Cocteau, dir., *The Blood of a Poet*, 1930. New York: The Criterion Collection, 2000. DVD.

comportment of sneaking.¹⁰ Yet the slanted eye is an antithesis, even a nemesis, for the poet's unwelcome peering: the opium-smoker's unblinking orb ruptures the assumption that the cinematic gaze in the diegesis is controlled by the white man: the Other may look back and turn the gazer into the gazed-at.

In this book, I take up the role of Cocteau's exotic Other, now roaming the hallway of the "Hôtel des folies dramatiques" that is Western civilization—specifically, the modern and contemporary canon of GWM (Gay White Man, an identity designation common in Grindr, Scruff, etc.). Each chapter is an equivalent of one room in Cocteau's fantasy architecture. Chapter by chapter, I offer vignettes, deliberately connecting and un-connecting with one another. My body or its likeness seldom features in these parlor tricks. Icons of GWM romance engender a culture to which I am not integral: their Asian fetishes and sidekicks do not interpellate me, nor am I untired of accepting the GWM body as a stand-in for me. I remain in the hallway as an observer—the West's Other. But I read their spectacles, cracks, blemishes, and blind spots, in a way that they themselves cannot: I watch many shades of white virility smudge to betray its fear, confusion, and lies. My sight is limited, however—I peep from the hallway. Yet what I see matters because it expresses semiotics of Other-knowledge that would benefit any dissidents of Western self-history, be they white or BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color).

Am I ashamed of the fact I still write about pictures of white cisgender male bodies? No. This book is to settle the bill for the show; with this book, I am a paying customer—not an interloper. I am exacting what I owe to the white economy of visual pleasure that

is homoerotic—in the hopes that my twopence would afford the tradesmen an analytic diagnostic that explains the misperceptions, incoherence, fractures, and self-delusion in their storytelling. So, stakeholders in Western modernism and its disorganized aftermath, read on. Should you find yourself unable to endure queer Asian American inflections here, shame on you—but no matter, at least I know I did not leave without putting down some cash. So, thanks but no thanks. Yes, the burlesque of white men gave me useful mirages: they were many pictures to look at while I plucked up courage—to leave my native country where bourgeois privileges protected me despite my sissy flair; to enter a land where I must constantly resist the absurd rhetoric of “less-than” as a non-white, English-as-a-second-language immigrant. Much of this happened because white men strutted their stuff on the picture plane with uncommon skills—it was a feast for the eye. Like all good patrons of the demimonde, I confused representations and reality for a spell. So, I congratulate GWM for his history of picture-making. But, boy, am I glad that show is over for me now.

There is a photograph of Pipo (Nguyen-duy) posing as a ventriloquist (figure 2). The Filipino American artist holds a wooden dummy miniaturizing white masculinity. Seated and cropped around the thighs, Pipo looks directly toward the camera and viewers. Clean shaven, Pipo dons a gallant accoutrement entailing a fedora, an ascot, a winged-collar dress shirt, a paisley-brocade waistcoat, and a pair of dark trousers. Despite a seeming incongruity with his Asian features (white imagination remembers John Wayne, not John Chinaman),¹¹ Pipo presents a flawless picture of a Hollywood Western gentleman who would frequent saloons in the Wild West, counting gunslingers and painted ladies among his friends. But he is not white. When the doll exhibits the uncanny power of speech, whose semiotics is put to use? Who possesses the language? I would like to think that Pipo controls this *théâtre des folies-dramatiques*.

Pipo's elocutionary tactics mirror my own writing. In different passages of this book, readers may hear me sound like a genuine white art historian—the diction of my analysis was perfected at the best institutions in North America. But beware of the ventriloquist that I am. You may think my book is part of a self-awakening in the history of Western art and its canon of male homoeroticism, but strictly speaking, it is a project of Other-awakening. Precisely in that sense, my scholarship is an extension of Pipo's “AnOther Western” that must “question” and “challenge the legitimacy and authority of the Western myth.”¹²

I taught in Kentucky for seven years, and I cannot forget one senior review during which a Black student shared what her father told her: when you go work with white people, he said, you need to speak like them, dress like them—and don't you bring attention to yourself. It was upsetting to hear those words: I thought to myself, what paranoid century did they think we lived in? Only a few months later, I learned that she knew—lived—American history better than I. A Tea Party governor (a cisgender, white, straight man) was instated in Frankfort, and I started having firsthand experiences of racism: once at a grocery store, then at a post office, then in a hotel elevator, and so it went on.



FIGURE 2

Pipo Nguyen-duy, *Untitled (AnOther Western)*, 1998. Toned gelatin silver print (edition of thirty), 10 × 8 in. (25.4 × 20.3 cm). Courtesy of ClampArt, New York.

Soon after that, a failed businessman (another cisgender, white, straight man) became the president of the United States, and I began carrying pepper spray. I had been too naive: any conviction in how diversity, equality, and inclusion are successfully achieved in the Land of the Free indicates critical failure in historical knowledge as well as racial consciousness. Looking back at my scholarly career, this book maps out a trajectory of

my struggle to make sense of my ambivalent (non-)participation in the Western narrativization of art and its history.

Let me be clear: the primary aim of my art history is not to recover how things might have been seen in the past by white people who benefited from their ideology of supremacy. The world is not their book to write. My art history is about how things are seen today by queer rebels against white hegemony. No recovery of the past is devoid of speculation parading as objectivity no matter how much documentation is amassed to verify assertions as facts. Such documentation—as well as its assumed objectivity—often reflects the dominant worldview, which is never unbiased. Recalibration is urgent: my art history does not concern the past itself but our divergent relationship to the past. Contextual analysis of materials dating back to the time of artworks' production can be useful. But the goal of such analysis is to nuance and texture our oppositionally conscious connection, disconnection, and reconnection to the past, the exact authenticity and authority of which never stop vacillating. The goal here is not to restore the past itself, which must be—and should be acknowledged as—always irrevocably lost, opaque, and polysemic.

Much of white homoerotic visuality in the recent past may be—and should be—shared across many queer communities of color.¹³ But such sharing is not about universality: whatever experiences of coming together that transpire through images and objects are accidental, episodic, and beautifully unreliable—and we need to let them be so. There may be overlaps between BIPOC gender-noncompliance in art and its white variances, but we need to take care not to assume what they are or what they become. We walk in and out of these intersections as ourselves, not to eclipse but to witness and aid each other—to form a “commons of incommensurability.”¹⁴ As I reassert my identity as a BIPOC polyglot immigrant, this too must be clear: my ambivalence toward the rhetoric of white male bodies and my opposition to Western patriarchy are proportional to my difficulty with Asian male chauvinism—you should not mistake my decolonial position to coincide with the macho ideology of Asia or the politics of Korean nationalism prioritizing paternal lineage between men. “Torn between ways,” I do not belong there, either.¹⁵ Interstitial places like hallways, the kind of elsewhere in which I now stand to write this book, are queer spaces I call home.

GWM

GWM un-constructs WM (White Man).¹⁶ The GWM marginalization in tandem with his inextricable imbrication within white patriarchy produces a tactical position to implode and dismantle the hierarchy of toxic masculinity in the West. Even when implosion fails or is incomplete, and the existing structures of male aggression are merely mutated and replicated in GWM communities (for example, producing the dating-app ethos of “straight-acting muscular white men seek the same; no Asians”), the inner WM dysfunctions and vulnerabilities are glimpsed by people outside the visual economy of white privileges. These instances of unauthorized viewership help devise another futurity

against Western heteronormativity. Although GWM structures of visual pleasure are overtly and covertly exclusionary for me, his strategies of opposition to WM are instructive. *Male Bodies Unmade* traces art history's GWM campaign against sexual and gender oppression, locating fractures within Western normalcy.

More specifically, this potential for un-construction is why I write about artists like Aubrey Beardsley, Jean Cocteau, Francis Bacon, David Hockney, and Robert Gober: their image-making and object-making produce the borderlands between GWM and WM. As constituents of the borderlands where cultural tearings take place, the artworks this book considers embody illogic that is productive.¹⁷ For instance, Beardsley's drawings and prints never stop categorizing the artist as a minor master. Recently the director of Tate Britain speculated on the cause of the consumptive dandy's never-important-enoughness: "No Visual artist so epitomized the *fin de siècle* in England, and his imagery and style remain extraordinarily well known, yet Beardsley tends to be marginal in accounts of British art, as well as in the Tate collection, probably because he fell within the traditionally 'lesser' categories of graphic art and illustration as opposed to oil painting. . . . He was perhaps also marginalised because he belongs as much to the literary world as he did to the art world."¹⁸ Without once mentioning Beardsley's sexual dissidence as another factor in his minor-ness, Alex Farquharson then self-congratulates his museum's reassertion of the artist's importance in sending their retrospective to the Musée d'Orsay in 2020 and 2021.¹⁹ But as a BIPOC, queer, and naturalized US scholar chipping away at the "overarching metaphor" or the historical conceit that is Western civilization, I find it imperative that Beardsley should never fully enter the WM canon (his resurgence in the 1960s was a close call):²⁰ he enacts "a relation of displacement within a hegemonic frame, a non-position of internal exteriority to ideal collective norms."²¹ Diminished yet wreaking havoc from within, Beardsley illustrates the unreason of imbrication in the white economy of visual pleasure.

The afterlife of Cocteau's legacy is not dissimilar. Bruno Racine, former president of Centre Pompidou, regretted in 2003 that "Cocteau has never been accorded the recognition merited by the diversity of his work and the turbulence of his life: he is too well-known, and as a result not properly known, as he himself often lamented. For all that his name remains so familiar, or even popular, public institutions seem to have neglected him since his death, or at least have ceased to pay tribute to him. His reputation—and one could say he suffered from being too famous in his lifetime—actually obscured the boldest aspects of his inventiveness."²² Despite the adulatory tone, much of this analysis feels true. This book, however, harbors no intention of restoring Cocteau to the pantheon of great whites. Like Beardsley, Cocteau too should remain famously minor, disrupting the common discourse of the European avant-garde and its outer reach, such that "the sensual locations of political marginality might provide an unpredicted energy for reconfiguring power, identity, and collective knowledge."²³

In contrast with the celebrated triviality of Beardsley and Cocteau, Bacon and Hockney have become too important: easily co-opted, their pictures generate and satiate the

mainstream appetite for visual consumption. Serge Lasvignes, current president of Centre Pompidou, states: “It was in Paris, in the late 1920s, and via his discovery of the work of Picasso and of Luis Buñuel’s *Un Chien andalou* that Bacon’s artist vocation was sealed. . . . Paris remained, in Bacon’s eyes, the city of Baudelaire and Apollinaire and Breton, a place where literature and painting, intellectual thought and the visual arts, had never ceased to flourish. It would appear, moreover, that Bacon selected his female friends for their ‘French connections.’”²⁴ Reading just these words that seem to place him shoulder to shoulder with toxic patriarchs such as Picasso and Breton—even in the company of Baudelaire and others—we are cut off from understanding how Bacon’s art opposed heteronormativity and troubled the surrealists (and might I ask what exactly is insinuated by female liaisons here?). The recent embrace of Bacon by major museums prevaricates the artist’s doggedly subversive difficulty—one that disintegrates not just WM banality but even GWM sensuality.

“David Hockney,” Farquharson claimed in 2017, “is one of the towering figures in the current art scene and of the last half century and more. Since his celebrated debut on the public stage at the *Young Contemporaries* exhibition in 1961 he has commanded both critical and popular attention to a degree unlike any of his contemporaries and matched, you might say, only by an artist like his beloved Picasso. . . . Viewing again and again the span of Picasso’s career from his teenage years through to the latest series of variations on Velásquez’s *Las Meninas*, Hockney realised that he need not adhere to the established idea of an artist’s singular style.”²⁵ Invoking Picasso and Velásquez is an old WM-narrative maneuver of patrilineal assimilation: the 1961 debutant is almost as good as the Big Daddies P. and V. but could never be one of them as an emulator: nice try, lad (or is it poof). Yet, fortunately, Bacon and Hockney continue to be a burr under Big Daddies’ saddle. Although the two queers might have become the darlings of the “traditional, core, white art audience,” their barely suppressed visual dialect drawn on the buggery of filth and hilarity betrays itself to mock heteronormative precepts.²⁶ Bacon and Hockney are double agents. Particularly in the segments of their oeuvre that I consider in this book, the two artists come close to configuring a “nonplace that must be thought outside to be sensed inside”:²⁷ those who roam the hallways can spot their effort.

Attempts to claim Gober for a consensus narrative of contemporary art have proven more patently challenging than in the cases of Bacon and Hockney. Glenn D. Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 2014, suggests, for instance: “Upon their emergence, Gober’s works almost instantly declared themselves an indispensable part of the landscape of late-twentieth-century art.”²⁸ This seductively positive rhetoric notwithstanding, the very idea that for artists like Gober there is a “landscape”—a stretch of survey-able topography—is contestable. Even just in the United States, the notion that art under the governments of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton is *landscapable* in historical consciousness is an act of hegemonic abuse. Like many BIPOC queers, I do not experience art of those American decades in line with what the term *landscape* may possibly encom-

pass. Whose rhetoric of supposed indispensability do Gober's objects articulate? They only disarticulate the late twentieth century. Any assumption that Gober's waxy creation manifests the vital integrity of GWM's subsumption in WM's soil is misleading. This is why MoMA curator Ann Temkin's words following Lowry's unexamined declamation are equally troubling: "No matter how startling the imagery, Gober's universe is always clearly legible and makes itself readily available to understanding."²⁹ Gober's objecthood works in illegibility, recalcitrance, and aporia. Yes, it can be funny, but that is because it mocks WM—and all those who accept WM as the method of explaining and righting things.

Works by these artists configure the kinds of GWM spectacles in the *Hôtel des folies-dramatiques* that shape the following five chapters, exemplifying in a picaresque manner "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically."³⁰ Beware, though: despite their subversion against "Man," "Science," and "Reason," the imagery and objecthood populating the Western narratives of Beardsley, Cocteau, Bacon, Hockney, and Gober are still part of the purported hypostasis of whiteness in the Occident that is semiotic legerdemain—exceptionally crafted but insubstantial all the same.³¹ In *Critique of Black Reason*, Achille Mbembe writes, "European discourse, both scholarly and popular, had a way of thinking, of classifying and imagining distant worlds, that was often based on modes of fantasizing."³² I would add that *European and US-centric discourse, scholarly and popular, had a way of thinking, of classifying and imagining their own worlds, that was often based on modes of preposterous, ruptured fantasizing.*

IN WHOSE COMPANY?

In the intersections of art history and critical theories in queer studies, *Male Bodies Unmade* enriches the discussions productively framed by two books in preceding decades: non-normative artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Richard Fung, and Vaginal Creme Davis were recontextualized against "mainstream North American gay culture" in José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999); and the historical arc of white erotic deviancy was rerouted and extended from Thomas Eakins to Andy Warhol in Jennifer Doyle's *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (2006).³³ More specifically, characterizing Eakins as a "near-perfect case study for how messy the sex politics of art history can get," Doyle foregrounds "the pleasures and anxieties that animate the drive to 'know' the sex of the body" as one of the central topics of her inquiry.³⁴ My book complicates the traditional paths this drive takes: it recognizes the futility of such "knowing," and questions the fixity of the noun form of *sex* when no such stability is reasonable in any matters of the libidinal body. In *Disidentifications*, Muñoz writes, "Can a self or a personality be crafted without proper identifications? A disidentifying subject is unable to fully identify or to form what Sigmund Freud called that 'just-as-if' relationship."³⁵ Muñoz's