





Kenneth Tam: Precarious Work and Masculinities

Kenneth Tam turns candid moments between men into art. By fixing his camera on a group of strangers, he calls attention to the sincerity and discomfort in the ways men socialize with one another. In the videos on view at the Visual Arts Center, Tam challenges his participants to negotiate their masculine identities in precarious situations. What unfolds unsettles the everyday masquerades of masculinity so often accepted as natural, from the casual fist bump to the friendly exchange of “bro.” Tam’s work shows us both the unwitting ways men perform their masculinities as well as the concerted effort and thought behind such gestures. Almost ethnographically, the artist documents the psyche of the “American Man” and his particular social cues, unwritten rules, and rituals.

Today’s social and political climate certainly warrants a deeper investigation into the lives of men and the construction of masculinity. Events such as the 2016 presidential election, #MeToo, and the push towards abortion bans across the country have sparked heated discussions around gender and the patriarchy. American society is grappling with how masculinity, when wielded to maintain patriarchal order, is oppressive to people of all genders, encouraging men to suppress their emotions and engage in misogynistic and homophobic behaviors. Furthermore, gender is now increasingly understood as performed rather than fixed, as exemplified by the rise of queer representation and different masculinities portrayed in mainstream media. Tam’s work acknowledges that certain masculinities are often fraught with unhealthy behaviors and is ultimately interested in exploring alternative expressions.

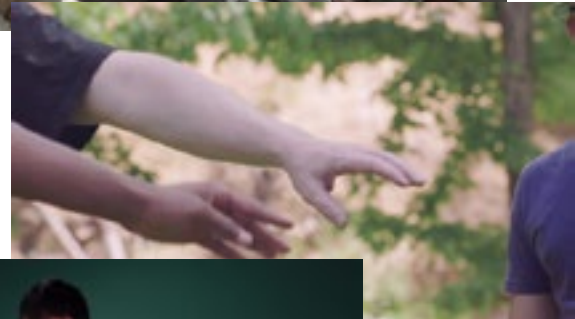
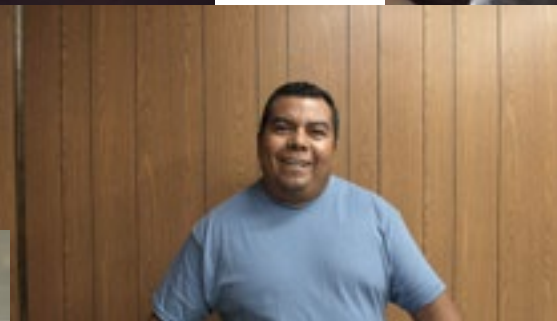


Tam creates works that relish in the uncharted gray areas where what it means to be a man cannot be neatly answered.

Tam's three videos on view in the Visual Arts Center explore themes of masculinity against the backdrop of childhood, adulthood, and the transitional stage of pubescent boyhood between them. In *Griffith Park Boys Camp* (2018), child's play becomes a means to loosen men's ties to the trappings of masculinity. *All of M* (2018) enlists high-school seniors and adult men to reflect on or imagine their experiences of prom and to perform some of the rituals associated with it, calling attention to how the men either rehearse or deviate from heteronormative behavior. In *Breakfast in Bed* (2016), Tam asks a group of grown men to participate in disparate activities that involve varying degrees of physical intimacy and emotional vulnerability in close quarters.

While the conceit of each video differs, a shared characteristic is Tam's source of labor. For these works, Tam enlisted his participants from posts on sites such as Reddit and Craigslist with the promise of compensation for their work. In addition to being men, they were also often young, straight, and without steady employment. Most analyses of Tam's video work have focused on the productive and even cathartic potential of his projects as spaces for men to gain the agency needed to step outside of conventional masculinity's bounds. However, I would like to interrogate how Tam's work captures a very distinct kind of masculinity—masculinity that has been abandoned by the logics of late capitalism.





Our society fundamentally values waged work as the only proper way to organize one's life—the means by which one participates in this country and is recognized as a citizen. We see this in racist and xenophobic stereotypes against immigrants and other people of color who are characterized as lazy and therefore undeserving of basic rights. Our culture has cultivated a deep shame around the inability to secure this kind of work, hiding the nefarious structures that have left mass amounts of people to fall by the wayside for the benefit of a select privileged few. The attachment of personal value to waged work and productivity affects men specifically, as traditional notions of masculinity are deeply intertwined with the idea that men must be self-sufficient breadwinners. Tam's participants, then, unable to find steady careers, are the kinds of men who by this logic have fallen short of fulfilling their expected roles as patriarchs and productive members of our society.

Only a few generations ago, a working-class man's income was conceivably enough to provide for an entire household. Today, that same man occupies a progressively more uncertain economic position as heteropatriarchal social order, welfare, and job security are increasingly threatened. Tam's earliest work in the exhibition, *Breakfast in Bed*, introduces audiences to the kind of man whose historically gendered role as provider has been displaced. One of the participants, Phillip, reflexively performs his heterosexuality as he explains what drew him to get involved in Tam's project: "There's also this pretty hot chick I've been interested in who's been urging me to do something creative for a pretty long time. Um, and then being offered money to do it—it seemed, uh, seemed like a win-win." Later, another participant reveals that he met his





girlfriend at their shared job as waiters. It is more than pure coincidence that these men choose to share their employment status and discuss compensation at the same time that they assert their relationships with women.

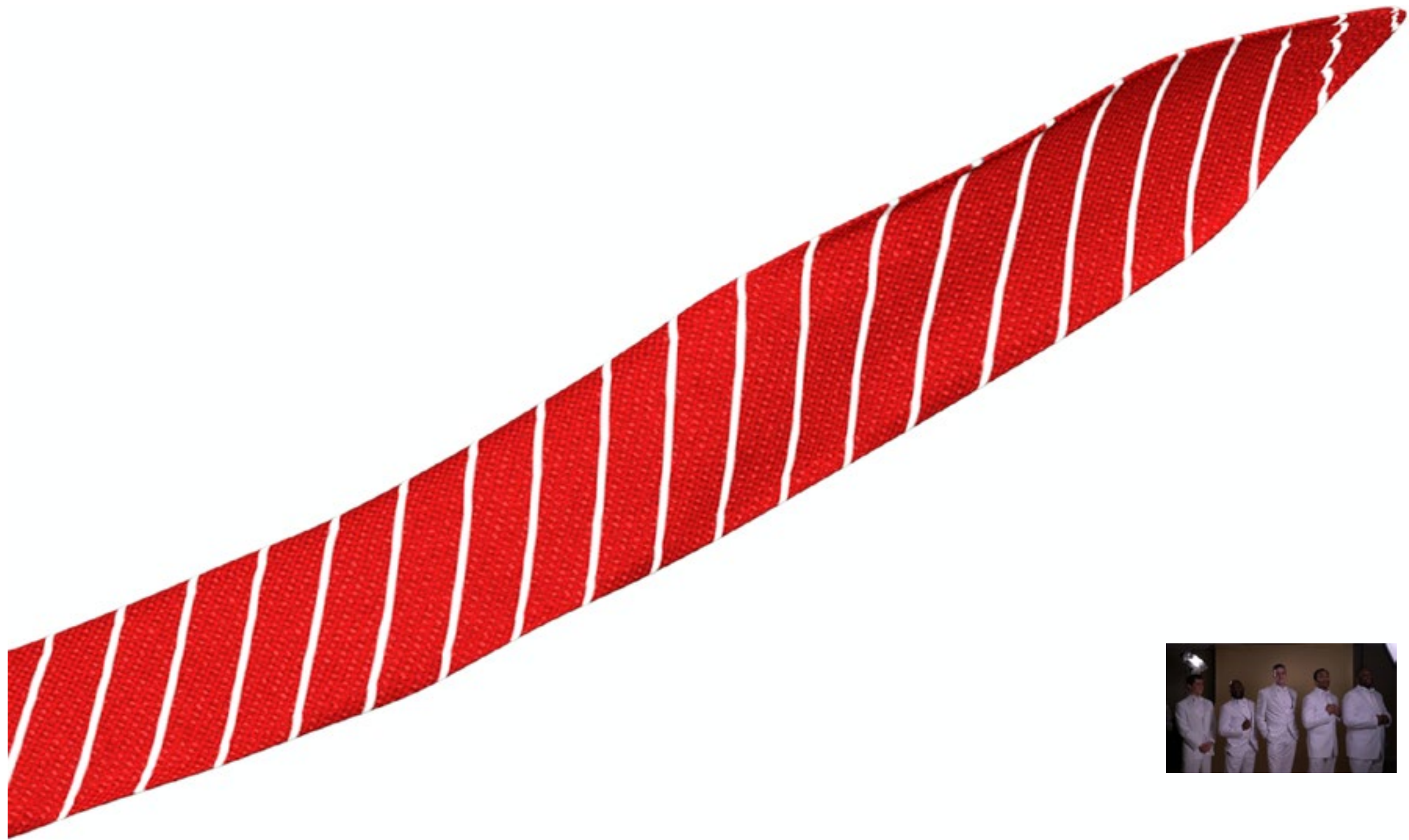
While *Breakfast in Bed* touches on the topic of work, Griffith Park Boys Camp directly engages with this theme. Tam has explained that, with this video, he wanted viewers “to question how they see themselves, their lives as structures around labor.” The video opens on a shot of men sitting together wearing hats and other types of headgear denoting different careers—chef, captain, fireman, baseball player. Throughout the video, Tam asks participants what jobs they have had. The men write haikus about the kinds of careers they wanted growing up. It becomes evident that they were all able to commit to taking part



in the project’s three-day schedule because of the unstructured and precarious nature of their work as graphic designers, door-to-door salesmen, and grocery clerks. Adopting the structure of a summer camp, Tam’s project attempts to transport its participants into the realm of leisure and to consider what form masculinity might take removed from associations with work.

Tam’s most recent video works suggest that despite the current vulnerability of the patriarchy and job market, our society is still deeply invested in maintaining traditional gender structures. All of *M* calls attention to and challenges the ways

Carren Jao, “Kenneth Tam’s Boys Camp Asks What It Means to be a Man Today,” KCET, March 19, 2019.



in which prom, as a coming-of-age ritual, re-inscribes gender and gender hierarchy. In one series of activities, the men are asked to hold inner tubes filled with sand across their shoulders as stand-ins for “the prom date”—a crucial component in this symbolic transition into manhood. When the boy finds a partner to take to prom, puts on a bow tie and wears a tuxedo, he steps into a normative masculinity. By swapping out an actual body for a makeshift workout item (the inner tubes are popular as DIY gym equipment in online fitness communities), Tam complicates the image of the male body and its expected means of expressing physical affection. This exercise stands in contrast to prom’s traditional function as a stage to rehearse proper heteronormative interactions and prompts viewers to reimagine expressions of masculinity.

Kenneth Tam’s videos are often uncomfortable to watch because they operate beyond the strict confines of traditional masculinity. These works envision new ways in which men might interact with each other, themselves, and the rest of the world. In so doing, the works reveal how contemporary performances of masculinity signal deep contradictions in our country’s power structures. Imagining what our society can look like beyond what already exists is not easy.

However, as many Americans displace their growing frustration with current conditions of capitalism onto women and other vulnerable groups, we must strive to do so. Kenneth Tam’s investigations into masculinity, then, are not merely uncomfortable but absolutely necessary.







Front	<i>Tutorial, 2019</i>
2	<i>Breakfast in Bed, 2016</i>
4	<i>All of M, 2019</i>
5	<i>Tutorial, 2019</i>
9	<i>Griffith Park Boys Camp, 2018</i>
10	<i>All of M, 2019</i>
11	<i>Breakfast in Bed, 2016</i>
12	<i>Tutorial, 2019</i>
13	<i>All of M, 2019</i>
14	<i>Griffith Park Boys Camp, 2019</i>
15	<i>Breakfast in Bed, 2016</i>
16	<i>All of M, 2019</i>
18	<i>Griffith Park Boys Camp, 2018</i>
19	<i>Tutorial, 2019</i>
Back	<i>Breakfast in Bed, 2016</i>



