

Critical Review of Practice

PHO702 Informing Contexts

By Chris Matthews

The following critical review will function as a critical review of my practice undertaken during the Informing Context's module. I will be highlighting and discussing my influences and motivations that led to the production of my final outcomes.

I have for the past ten months been exploring aspects of modern masculinity. Focusing in particular on some of the harmful effects of the expectations of men, which led on from my initial proposal entitled *Masculinity: The Leaning Tower of Power*. The starting point for this investigation was triggered by the reading of Grayson Perry's *The Decent of Man* that was supported by his documentary television series *All Man*.

My research has split into two distinctive pathways at this stage. The first has been to explore my relationship with my father and the ways in which this has shaped my own masculinity. In response to this research I produced living monuments to my father, which I have continued during this module, with two outcomes produced as well as some pieces in the set *Abandoned*, also linked to my relationship with my father that were produced during the lockdown. The other pathway has explored the behaviour of men, which at this stage has focused on professional boxing shows. I boxed myself for twenty years as well as photographing events, so I have been fortunate enough to get very close access.

Work in Progress Portfolio

Section I



Fig1 Matthews, Monument (2020)

The concept of this piece drew inspiration from tombs and in particular a visit I made to Cristobal Cemetery in Havana Cuba in 2000, as such I was able to revisit photographs I had taken as reference material.



Fig 2 Matthews, Havana (2000)

Death Masks were also an inspiration, these casts taken from a deceased person's face as a memento of them or as enduring symbol of their power, perhaps through translation to portraits or sculptures. In the case of *Monument*, a mask of silver gelatin created from two 35mm frames was used, one a portrait of my father and one an image of the grandfather clock he wound as he staggered to bed before he suffered a stroke resulting in paralysis. The photograph of the plaster will endure even though the print has sunken into the porous material as can be seen in its aged counterpart to the right of figure 1.



Fig 3 Undeveloped, Chris Matthews (2020)

In 2000 I photographed my father whilst he was under the influence of alcohol. He was helpless and pathetic. I felt that seeing the images might be a useful intervention and might be powerful in aiding him to get treatment. I never developed the film; I could not bring myself to do so. I kept the film for close to 20years. It's now a symbol of the pain caused by his addiction and the film can has taken on greater meaning because of it. I may never develop the film, it's been so long I'm not even certain which roll is the correct one, perhaps I want to forget it. It's locked away in deep dark storage both physically and metaphorically. I intended to incorporate this object in

some way in the work that I produce as I believe it was a symbolically strong object to appropriate in my work.



Fig 4 Billingham, Ray's a Laugh (1996)

This was all quite sad (on his parents) and I wanted to make paintings about it that were very moving: that would express the tragedy of it all. Billingham (2019)

Viewing Richard Billingham's photographs of his parents, particularly his alcoholic father did make me consider developing the film and using the images in some way, but ultimately, I feel the undeveloped film can itself has more power. After much consideration I chose to encase the film can in clay drawing influence from conceptual artist pieces produced by Damien Hurst and the installations of Bill Viola. It seemed fitting considering my father's former pursuit of pottery, something his paralysis no longer allows. The shape of the brick was chosen much like the plaster (Monument Fig 1) as a form of a tomb with the texture and colour of the clay almost

like soil. The framing of the image was chosen to give the film can prominence, the viewer unable to avoid it. In creating this piece, I aimed to draw a line under this aspect of my life at the close of this module and perhaps never opening this pandora's box. Despite the symbolic indications of death and being trapped, to me it represents freedom and an exorcism of sorts.

Section 2

The War (1985) poster that promoted a fight between Hagler and Hearns was the initial design inspiration for The War (2020) featured in my portfolio. I researched boxing posters, publication covers and also a range of propaganda posters as I wanted to use this approach as a subversive or subliminal method of transmitting information.

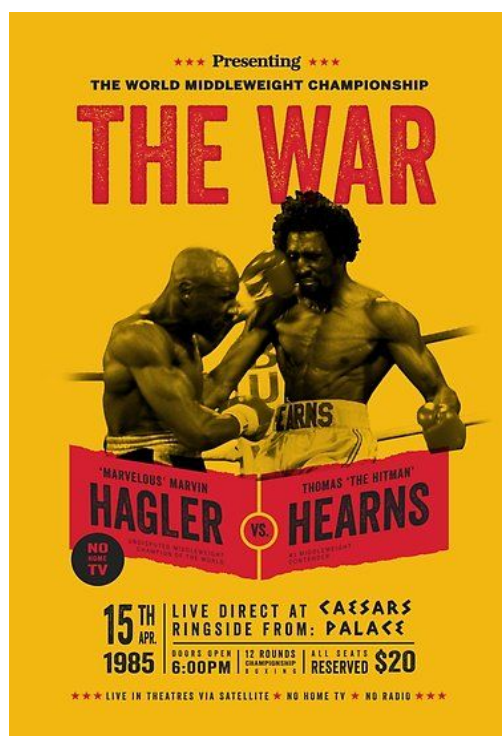


Fig 5 The War (1985)

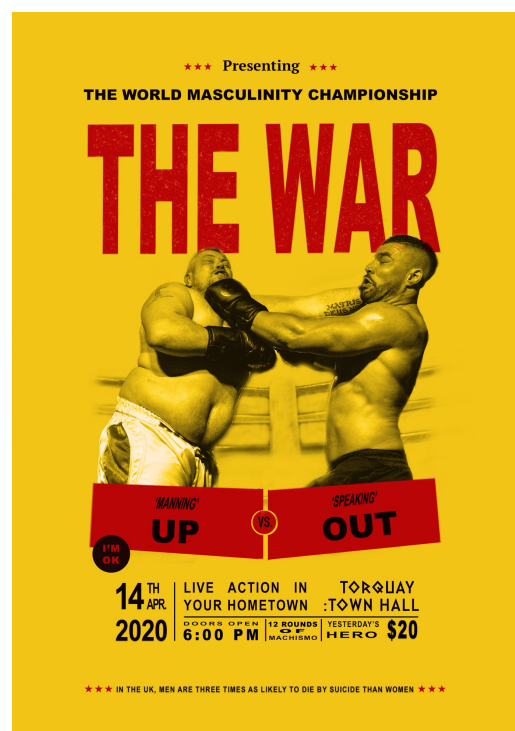


Fig 6 Matthews, The War (2020)

The gorilla girls posters were also an influence. I found the intertextual nature of the poster and its intention to be a useful form to work in as I could manipulate the usage of it for means other than the traditional purpose of the promotion of an event.



Fig 7 The Guerrilla Girls, Do you have to be naked to get into the Met Museum (1989)

Not being a skilled graphic designer, I knew the production of this would be out of my comfort zone and would take me considerable time to create an outcome that I felt was useable as a final piece. With considerable fine tuning, I was reasonably satisfied with the end product. However, the finished result is visually not as balanced in terms of placement of the elements. This was dictated by the image used of the fighters, that I felt very strongly should be something real as opposed to a staged image, this led to a degree of unpredictability. I was familiar with Barbara Kruger's work such as *I Shop Therefore, I Am* which uses a subversion of Rene Descartes often cited philosophical statement to; as in many of her works, address specific issues of concern to her. I took a similar approach in the way in which I used text on the poster. In Grayson Perry's *Decent of Man* he talks about the ministry of masculinity as though it some kind of dictatorship that defines the expectations of men. I wanted to play with this concept in the poster as well including a stark statistic about male suicide. Men struggle to be open and talk about their problems. They can hide behind bravado, but this can often hide a myriad of problems.

Where this strange combination of hardness and vulnerability comes from. And whether something as extreme as cage fighting could really be helping men deal with it. Was what I had to find out next. Perry, All Man. (2018)

Is Machismo holding men back Perry asks? There is something of a paradox about this brutal pursuit, it is not so simple as to suggest all men that fight in this way are neanderthals or brutes. It's more complex than that. During my research I was interested to see so many posts in my social networks by those involved in boxing about male suicide and the need to speak out. In many ways during my research I have found those involved in the sport are rather more open about their feelings than those outside of the boxing fraternity and this is in contrast to what the stereotypical perception would lead us to believe.

Standing out against the tribe, all of us hold some kind of mythical narrative that we need to play out in some way. We all have to express it somehow, it's normal. 'The cage fighters are working out their aggression and their feelings in what they do.'
Perry (2018)

The red banners just below the centre form an almost phallic shape that further strengthens this sense of hypermasculinity and competition between men, the need to stand out in the tribe as Perry puts it. He refers to Masculinity as a callous that protects men. Something that is rigid and inflexible that leads to men being unable to adapt or to speak out for assistance. All too often this bottling up of emotion can lead to suicide. In the UK men are 3 times more likely to take their own life than women, as indicated by recent data from 2019 there were nearly 4000 male suicides compared to approximately 1300 female suicides.

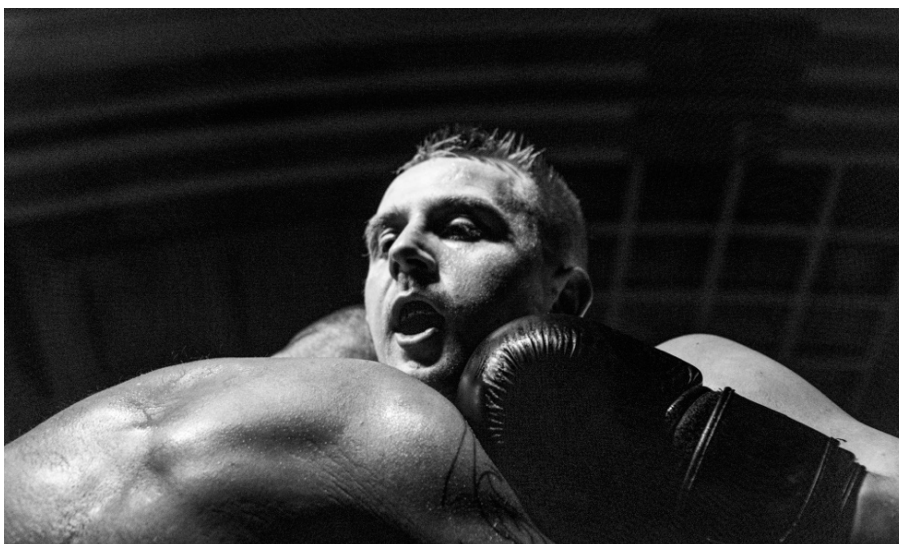


Fig 8 Matthews, Man Mountain (2020)



Fig 9 Matthews, Baptism (2020)

As well as providing source material for The War poster, the images captured from the boxing show provided me with the opportunity to get very close to the fighters in this male dominated environment. It is somewhat of a 'pressure cooker' of raw emotion and machismo laced with moments of real vulnerability.

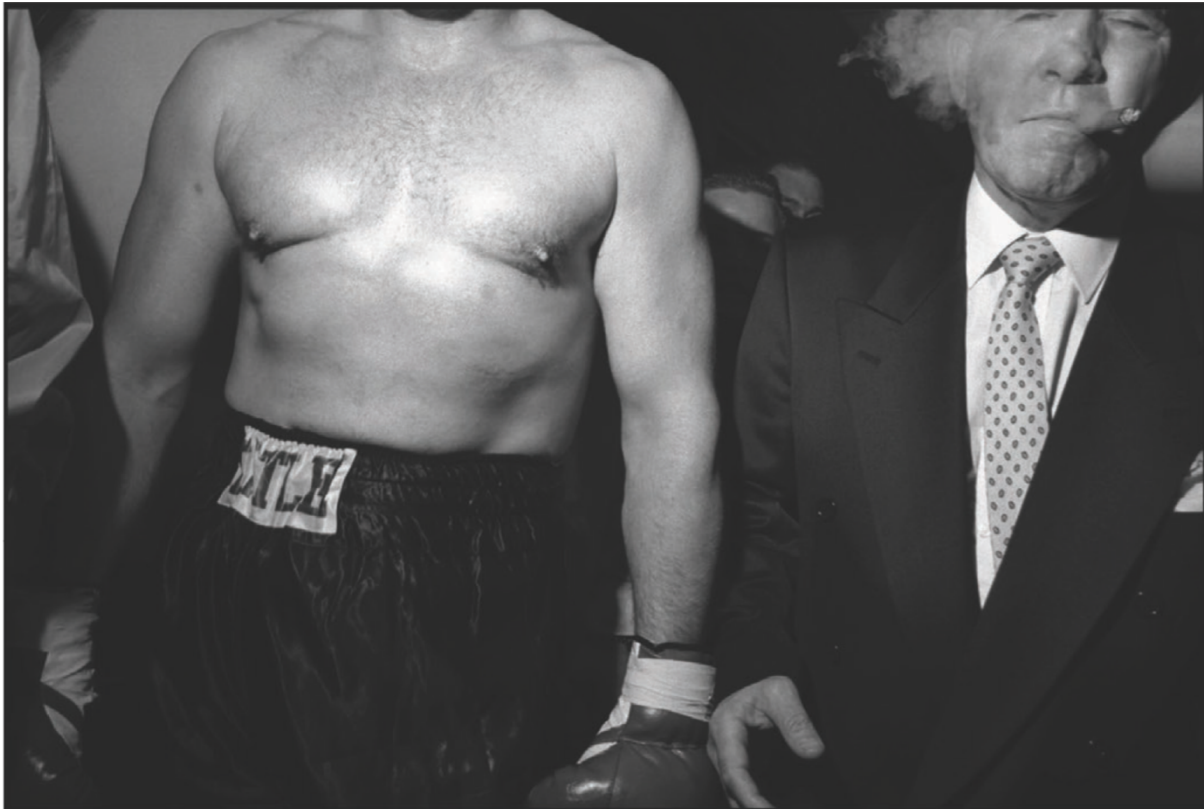


Fig10 Gilden (1994)

I chose to photograph white collar boxing as much like Bruce Gilden's photographs of unlicensed boxing (the precursor to White Collar Boxing) this inhabits a space that even today is still under regulated and the events are still reminiscent of an 'underworld' environment. There is a heightened sense of danger here, both for the participants and the spectators there to witness something often too brutal for the sanitised nature of television.

Clearly, boxing's very image is repulsive to many people because it cannot be assimilated into what we wish to know about civilized man. Oates (1987)

Oates highlights the seemingly repulsive nature of boxing, but the question I have sought to answer is, Can the civilised man be found in this tribal environment? I wanted to look beyond this brutality in the set presented, by finding revealing moments about men.



Fig 11 Matthews, Man Check (2020)

In 'Man Check' this image was captured during a heated battle between two young men. The bruising nature of the fight of the fight seemed to physically age the young men. Their features were contorted by the blows that were being landed. This moment was captured between rounds as a distressed and exhausted fighter was being pleaded with to follow his cornermen's instruction. One of the cornermen opens the fighters shorts as though he is checking for something. In this case with the name of the image I am suggesting playfully, he is checking that he is still a man. The reason the shorts are pulled out is to allow the diaphragm space to allow the boxer to take deep breaths during the 60 second break. To me it almost had the

appearance of how an actor might be prepared in a make-up chair as though they were preparing him to be this hyper masculine figure to go out and perform for the next round.

Section 3

In the final section of my WIP portfolio I have included three images in a set called *Abandoned*, that were captured during the lockdown. Much like the piece *Undeveloped* (2020) they were inspired by my relationship with my father during my childhood. I felt a sense of abandonment as child and in response to this I felt the lockdown period might provide me with some interesting objects that have also been abandoned. I should clarify my sense of abandonment was not from my father having left permanently, but from him abandoning his role as a father due to his battle with alcoholism.

William Eggleston's work that captured personal possessions and things left behind, interested me in the way he elevates the mundane, it creates narrative. They have a 'movie' quality to them that reinforces this narrative aspect.



Fig 12 William Eggleston
Memphis C.1969



Fig 13 William Eggleston, Louisiana, C.1971

The objects featured resonated with many of these unresolved memories from my past. For example, the toy car signified childhood to me, the abandoned bottle brought back memories of finding hidden empty bottles tucked under sheds or car seats and finally the image of the coat hanging on the post reminded me of a family unit looking longingly at a home that was unreachable. A square format was chosen

as I felt this gave them a more personal almost polaroid feel as though the photographs themselves were a possession.



Fig 14 Matthews, Abandonment 1#2#3#. (2020)

Conclusion

Having a draft WIP portfolio a significant time before the submission date I was able to gain peer and tutor feedback, that was useful in reviewing the images included and providing a forum in which to discuss the work as well as its influences. This process was valuable in reviewing my intentions, identifying any additions needed, fine tuning outcomes and supporting the redrafting of my critical review.

In conclusion, as far as next steps, I intend to continue to explore male dominated environments to document the behaviours of men in the hope that there will be evidence of growth and positive change that will benefit their lives and those they impact.

Figures

Fig1 Matthews C, Monument (2020)

Fig 2 Matthews C, Havana (2000)

Fig 3 Matthews C Undeveloped, (2020)

Fig 4 Billingham, R, Ray's a Laugh (1996)

Fig 5 Caesars Palace, The War (1985)

Fig 6 Matthews C, The War (2020)

Fig 7 The Guerrilla Girls, Do you have to be naked to get into the Met Museum (1989)

Fig 8 Matthews C, Man Mountain (2020)

Fig 9 Matthews C , Baptism (2020)

Fig10 Gilden, B (1994)

Fig 11 Matthews C, Man Check (2020)

Fig 12 Eggleston, W Memphis C.1969

Fig 13 Eggleston, W, Louisiana, C.1971

Fig 14 Matthews, C, Abandonment 1#2#3#. (2020)

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Caesars Palace, (1985)War poster Fig 5

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Fig 12 William Eggleston (1969)<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/51630> date accessed 23/4/20

Figure 13 William Eggleston, Louisiana (1971)https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/mbvjnp/lessons-from-william-eggleston-about-william-eggleston date accessed 24/4/20

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