

Kenneth Tam 's Basement

Bob: We're still men.

Narrator: Yes, we're men.
Men is what we are.

Fight Club, dir. David Fincher

It's the video's most tender, too-elegant inversion: artist Kenneth Tam's aging father rides his son like a horse. Both are shirtless. The potbellied and hunched Tam Senior rocks somberly, his hands on Junior's toned shoulders, his bare feet hopping along the tile. The artist's arms ripple as he arcs across the corner of a basement, from a fluorescent glow near a radiator into the shadow by a washer and dryer. The eight-minute video is called *sump* (2015), after a pit or depression where runoff collects, as in a basement. In the corners of this basement of his father's house, the pair engage in silly intimacy—Tam rubs shoe polish on his father's torso, while dad stares down the camera; they sit facing in a bathtub, blowing up balloons; they stand together under a plastic sheet with the shower head on, avoiding each other's gaze. The lighting throughout is cool and uneven, damp-looking; the settings are cluttered hallways and racks of linens or toilet paper, disorderly storage, unsightly. Unlike, one imagines, the rooms above, the basement is raw, primordial, even animal—sub-aesthetic, and subconscious. Here in this allegorical architecture, here in the psychic puddle, Tam

upends and submits to the childhood game—patriarch as horsey, weak riding the strong—and in doing so faces that most foundational of male relations: the psychoanalytic runoff of the *father*.

sump is a pivot. In earlier pieces the artist inserted himself into awkward and intimate situations with a variety of individuals. The pieces that follow *sump* feature groups of men. In the dank silence of *sump* germinated the “plots” of two subsequent videos: *Breakfast in Bed* (2016) and *The Loving Cup* (2016). Icebreaker-type games, aesthetic and laughable breaches of personal space seemingly improvised with or for his father, are applied to groups of middle-aged male strangers.

The basement, too, finds a revised expression: For *Breakfast in Bed*, Tam constructed a simple square room inside his studio, cheaply wood-paneled, beige-carpeted. The room was set, stage, man-cave, and club; the scrutiny of larger society was suspended there—that, perhaps, the participants' inhibitions might loosen. In *BiB* a group of seven men (eight, if you include Tam, although he stays behind the camera), of unknown age and background but all roughly aged 29-49 and living in Houston, held regular meetings for a total of nine weeks. Here too the men perform ridiculous, asexual yet intimate actions with or on one another's bodies. In one scene in *sump* Tam's father appears with his face and collar covered in cheerios. In *BiB* we see how this is done: six of the men glue cereal to the seventh's naked torso, while talking about their girlfriends and wives, and drinking Miller Lite. The intimation of primeval scarification and ritual is no accident. Other activities include hopping in a circle, wearing bells, in

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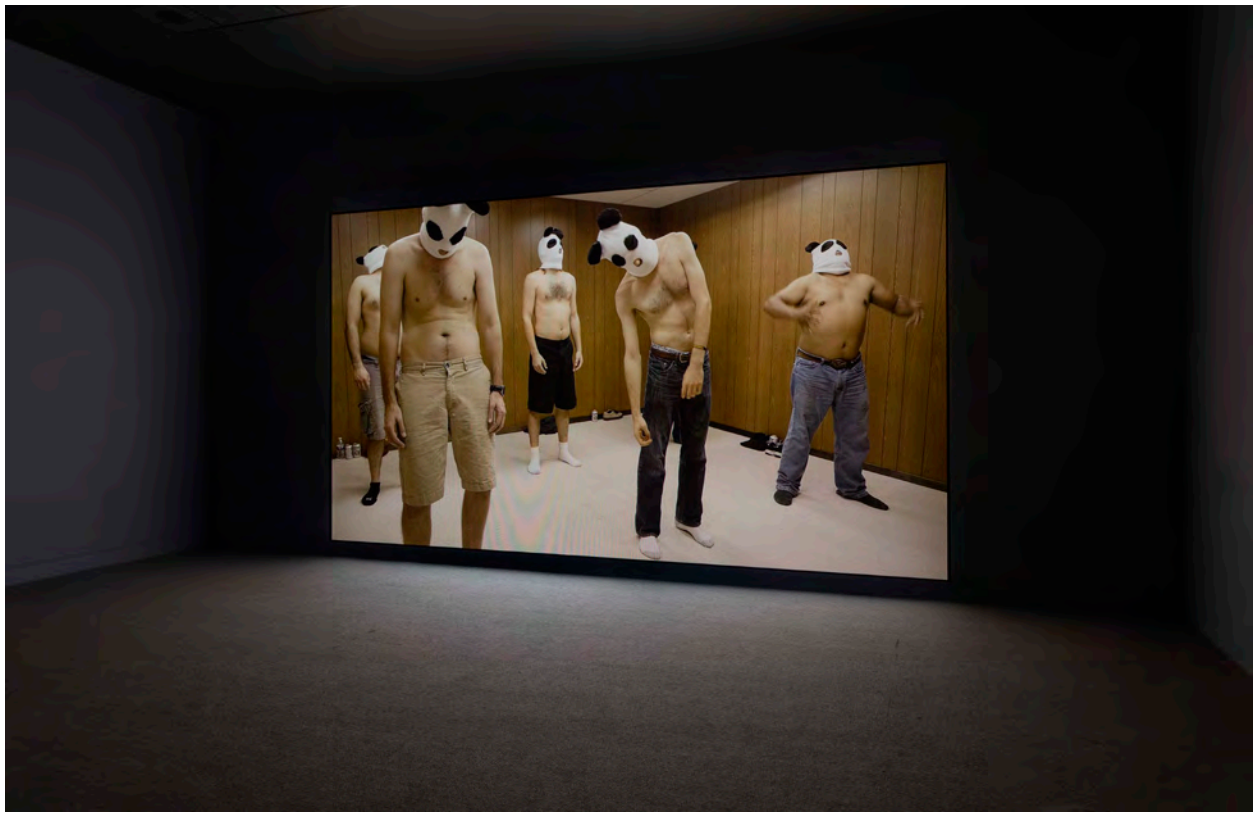
a parody of tribal rite. Another has them wearing panda-colored balaclavas and lolling around like slow animals mocking yoga. In the man cave, bonding takes stereotypical forms of mutual regression.

Where other clubs or hangouts channel a common purpose—a task or interest, not to say enemy—with *Breakfast in Bed* and *The Loving Cup* it's Tam's art and Tam's camera that provide this focus. Art is the pretext within which men might, for example, describe each other's bodies aloud. Tam creates a safe space for the men to express sincere feelings (whether or not they do); the basement of art allows activities more or less abstracted from real life, with no other guiding principle—except that major caveat of their (presumed hetero) (cis-)manhood. They've brought all that baggage. Asked to make tinfoil costumes for themselves, one man fashions three phallic protrusions—one for the stomach, one for each shoulder. When another man pretends to jerk the shoulders off, the group chuckles. Here is a petri dish of a volatile masculinist culture. Homoeroticism here is an awkward joke. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's rallies are described as "safe spaces" for racists.

This is the dangerous game of Tam's trio of "masculinist" works. *The Loving Cup*, a three channel video which premiered at Commonwealth & Council, spatializes a descent into subterranean rec-room psychology. Three flat screens, set on the floor, lead back into the gallery so that the first, the closest, is the most lighthearted: four men, Tam included, tickle each other, slow dance, and blow up balloons in a brightly-lit (living) room. In the middle channel the motions are closer to Judson school movement studies, undertaken with clear performativity in front of a black curtain. The third, furthest back,

displays more naked id. The setting is perhaps a darkened and flashlit basement, possibly the enclosure used for *Breakfast in Bed*, now a bit soiled. Four men, including Tam, execute somersaults on a dirty carpet; take turns wrapping the same gifts, with Frankensteinian results; hold hands in close-ups lit like hard-core porn or snuff films. In this third, deepest level of male encounter is the intimation of violence, if not violation. Their activities resemble the icebreaker-ish tasks of the other videos; yet the tone peels back and suggests that just *being* there, together, just strange men in a heteronormative culture, is a trust fall.

The tension between the homosexual and the homoerotic provoked in these three works presents in the feedback of the participants. "How much bonding is involved?" asked a man responding to Tam's job post on Reddit. "No weird stuff right?" asked another. Weird stuff being nudity, or sexual touching. "Everything was cool except for the male to male stuff that we did like dancing," said one respondent of *TLC*—never mind that everything they did was male to male. "The absurd was an interesting facet," says a participant in *BiB*, explaining why he signed up. "There's also this pretty hot little chick I'm interested in who's been urging me to do something creative..." Subsumed here is the nuance between intimacy, sexuality, and sex. When the men in *BiB* take turns paying one another compliments, they look pained. Compliments become "controlled observations," in Tam's off-camera phrase. "You're pretty hairy, man," says one. "That's good, means you've got a lotta testosterone." The men introduce jokes, or deprecate themselves, as if deflecting the vulnerability of a sincere expression—as if vulnerability, as passed down from father to son like hairlines, is a threat to manhood.



Watching these men squirm at Tam's directions can only confirm a pop version of masculinity, wherein the words, "Hey, I love you, man," are a barely remembered beer commercial.

Tam used the message board Reddit to cast for *Breakfast in Bed*, which may have skewed for a particular sort of participant: tech-savvy, tipping towards nerdy, perhaps reclusive, and with possible trolls among them. Elsewhere, outside of these art games, a masculinist discourse often defines itself *against*; women, homosexuals, minorities, foreigners, or simply "the weak." Masculinism at large can be leaderless and hateful, like Gamergate—or demagoguery, like Trump rallies. No longer are such "views" confined to the "safe spaces" of men's clubs and man caves.

In the film *Fight Club*, a gigantically manly survivor of testicular cancer presses the narrator to his sweating, sac-like breasts—a side effect of his treatment. "We're still men," he says, weeping. The setting is a sickly green gymnasium. The fights, of course, take place in basements. But if society's masochistic ills have emerged into daylight, Tam's program pushes the touchy-feely activities of group therapy underground. Here between a coddling liberalism and a meatheaded fascism is a masculinism not stripped of its social anxieties, yet tempered in its misogyny. These men aren't hateful, but they're beyond being carefree. It's a kind of reverse parenting. In the third channel of *Loving Cup*, two strange men ride each other like a horse—father and son both. In the first channel, a group of strange men stuff inflated balloons under their shirts like six-packs of estrogen-heavy pecs, and bounce, one into the other. It looks like healing. It looks like fun.

1

Kenneth Tam, Video still from *sump* (2015). HD video, 7:40 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist.

2

Kenneth Tam, Video still from *sump* (2015). HD video, 7:40 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist.

3

Kenneth Tam, *The Loving Cup* (2016) (installation view). Three Single-channel HD videos, color, sound, 6 minutes; 6 minutes; 5:30 minutes. Image courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles. Photo: Ruben Diaz.

4

Kenneth Tam, video still of *The Loving Cup* (2016). Three Single-channel HD videos, color, sound, 6 minutes; 6 minutes; 5:30 minutes. Image courtesy the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles.

5

Kenneth Tam, *Breakfast in Bed* (2016) (installation view). *Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, though, only*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest.

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Kenneth Tam, video still of *Breakfast in Bed* (2016). Single-channel HD video, color, sound, 60 minutes. *Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, though, only*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.