

Guy / Not Guy: Guarino's Collaged Masculinities

By Karen Gonzalez Rice

Animated male figures crowd Brad Guarino's recent paintings. These men are almost recognizable—a brother-in-law, perhaps, or that guy who walks his dog in the neighborhood—but they position their limbs in unfamiliar ways. Their gestures are big, yet awkward and experimental: elbows clasp a knee; a torso twists, huddles toward a thigh; a head cocks to the side; a hand, palm-up, reaches outward; legs tightly cross.

Guarino's process generates these precarious poses. Rather than live models, his figures begin as digital collages, male paper dolls constructed from newspaper photographs. With this raw material—the twisted-hip stance of a golfer, a set of outstretched arms, an over-the-shoulder glance—Guarino constructs a new kind of portrait, a likeness both specific yet oddly disjunctive. His aim here is not to abstract the figure: "They are all portraits. Specificity is important, that it look like somebody, not just a general guy. The collage gave me a chance to get away from stereotypes."¹ Echoing feminist artists of the 1970s (like Cooney Fanni Tutti, Cindy Sherman, and Barbara Kruger), media images of gendered bodies drive his imagery. By compiling the gestures of diverse real men, Guarino forestalls generalizing or objectifying the male body.

Guarino's specific, collaged male figures materialize his ideas about the construction of gender, which have been deeply influenced by the feminist psychiatrist Nancy Chodorow and by critical theorist Judith Butler. Guarino explains, "Chodorow posited that boys form their ideas of what it is to be a man more abstractly than girls. The father is less present in the home, so boys form their concept of masculinity by piecing together different characteristics of older boys and men in their lives. I like this idea of piecing together

alternate model of masculinity: "As a young boy, you're constantly pounded on about how [homosexuality] is unmanly, the exact opposite of what you should be. My father was flamboyantly gay. It was traumatic for me when my friends met him." Through these early experiences, Guarino learned firsthand that the boundaries of masculinity are policed by other boys, and later, by other men: "John Berger talked about a woman walking across the room, watching herself watch other people watch her. The same thing exists for boys, and it's still other men we're concerned about." The real or imagined male observer ensures strict adherence to traditional masculine behaviors, preventing, for example, a bent wrist: "I remember hearing kids on the playground talk about the behaviors of gay kids, how they were limp-wristed, and kids would parody that behavior. I remember thinking, in a self-conscious way, 'I need to be careful not to do that with my wrists.' That kind of dissimulation is part of trying to get rid of behaviors that might associate you with 'not guy'"

For Guarino, the playground is a foundational site of gender construction, a zone of a boy's painful suppression of "not guy" thoughts and actions: "The playground was a proving ground. When I was a kid, I was little and I got bullied a lot. The playground



Real and Present Dangers, 57" x 58", oil on canvas, 2012

"My work has only men in it, but masculinity isn't just a guy thing. Rather than seeing them as opposites, we all exist somewhere on a spectrum of masculine or feminine traits."

and creating this awkward figure." Guarino's composite portraits visualize men's patchwork process of imitating and composing their masculine identities.

He remembers his first reading of Butler's *Gender Trouble*, in which Butler described traditional masculinity as the dual rejection of femininity and of homosexuality: "I was blown away by the idea that masculinity is defined by this double negative dissociation. To be 30-something and not have this basic understanding of who I was... it just speaks to how little men think about themselves." In response to this insight, Guarino's paintings deliberately and self-consciously reflect on men's public and private performances of masculinity.

As the son of a gay father, Guarino grew up particularly attentive to the construction of masculinity, "the way boys simulate and dissimulate certain behaviors so they seem more like men." Psychologist and gender theorist David Lisak has noted that hetero-normative ideologies of the late 20th-century valorized "the essential features of masculinity [as] toughness, fearlessness, and the denial of vulnerability."² In this context, Guarino's father enacted an

was a place where I had to worry about whether or not I was going to get beat up. The things that happen on the playground, when you're not under the supervision of adults, influence your ideas for the rest of your life." This site of self-consciously performed masculinity has become the setting for Guarino's collaged figures. In early paintings, jungle gyms surround and contain figures; more recently, two men clamber onto swings in *Real and Present Dangers* (2012). *The Illusion of Nothing Real* (2012) and other recent works extend the playground, creating an expansive, park-like geography that recalls Boy Scout hiking trips and summer camps.

Guarino's work revisits this terrain of male identity formation in order to re-figure male behaviors and re-think male interactions: "These are very personal. They're very much about me, my relationship with other men, experiences I've had." His images set the male body free, documenting a physical unburdening, a loosening of limbs. His male figures experiment with movements not usually considered masculine, for example, the kinds of wrist movements that might have been off limits as a boy. At the same time, the awkward, intensely physical gestures of these figures reference his classical realist education at the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts: "My training was about elegant, graceful figures. I was steeped in this tradition, so I tend to come back to that academic kind of drawing. [The digital collage] is a way out of that. I like the awkwardness of the figures." Yet his figures do recall Old Master explorations of distorted poses: the pivoting toe of Michelangelo's *Sibyl*, the angled torso of David's *Brutus*, the taut elbow of Rembrandt's bathing woman, Giorgione's splayed knees. Like these contorted bodies, Guarino's collaged men explore—awkwardly, tentatively—the emotional and physical possibilities of gesture.

While these male figures test their bodies beyond the strictures of conventional masculinity, Guarino's work does not suggest a superficial escape from gender constructions. The recent paintings include areas of white static. His figures reach and strain and spin, but scattered constellations of over-painting dematerialize calves, shoulders, feet, disappearing or eliminating the body in the midst of its precarious movement. Larger, flat areas of white, as in *A Fitting Context* (2011), simulate blank canvas, but in fact "are painted over something. It's a presence pretending to be an absence, like

the dissimulation that goes on in the male ego as a boy. It draws attention to the fact that it's a painting, that it's illusionistic space; there's a lot of illusion going on in gender." The consequences of this illusion—the constriction and traumatic repression foundational to masculine identity formation—are most clearly registered in Guarino's drawings, which hold the marks of repeated, ongoing erasure: "I'll rework the drawings again and again and again. I like that the history of the process is there. Once you make a change, it's never going to look pristine." In layers of just-visible lines, drawings like *One Man's Ceiling* (2010) carry the evidence of gestures sketched and rejected, the paper itself documenting the erasure of that which is "not guy."

These drawings and paintings are rewarding for the careful viewer. In addition to the interesting poses, layers of erasure, and over-painting, his works incorporate multiple forms of *trompe l'oeil*. In this way, Guarino's concern with simulation and dissimulation extend to the forms of his work: "More and more I'm seeing the painting process as a metaphor for the idea of illusion, or trying to create the idea of something that isn't there as a simulation of something." Responding to the hyper-masculine bravura of Abstract Expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock, Guarino's paintings include obvious drips, expressionistic marks of the artist's gesture. However, "if you look closely, you'll see that some of the drips aren't drips at all. They're stencils. It's this idea of simulating a certain machismo that exists among painters, referring to the whole Pollock thing. With me, it's always very self-conscious, because I don't work that way. My process is not expressionistic, I am more of a renderer." After a pause, he reflects, "There is a certain bravura about rendering well, too. I don't know. Is that due to masculinity?" In *The Illusion of Nothing Real* (2012), figures escape the confines of the picture plane: a foot, an elbow, the tail of a bird interfere with the rectangular edge. Guarino asks, "Is this the difficulty of stepping outside of gender constraints? Or is it that you have to step out of those constraints to see the paradigm more objectively? And is this about the gender paradigm or the masculine paradigm? I don't know."

The persistently illusionistic qualities of Guarino's work reflect the uncertainty of gender perceptions, the instability of conventional masculinities. His art plots the far-ranging impacts of patriarchy, which "restricts what you do, what you can be, who you can hang out with; it limits your possibilities." In this way, his work is broadly relevant: "My work has only men in it, but masculinity isn't just a guy thing. Rather than seeing them as opposites, we all exist somewhere on a spectrum of masculine or feminine traits." From the emancipatory possibilities of the "not guy" to the permanent impact of playground politics, his visual explorations chart the multiplicity and complexity of contemporary masculinities.



Victious Cycles, oil on canvas, 46", 2011

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from Brad Guarino and Karen Gonzalez Rice, "Interview," May 23, 2012.

² David Lisak, "Male Survivors of Trauma," in *New Handbook of Psychotherapy and Counseling with Men*, ed. Glenn E. Good and Gary R. Brooks (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 147.