

From the catalogue:

Making It Like a Man
By
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FRANCIS B. SIM GALLERY

WALTER MAY

Walter May's *Knockout* is a row of 105 hammers hung by their claws on 2 x 4 rails set high on the wall. The steel heads face forward in a uniform row. The wooden handles have more variety; a few are longer and several are broken and short. The variances create a rhythm as you pass your eyes along the composition. Flames have blackened all the handles. Some are scorched charcoal black, some are distorted from the heat; others are charred into fragility. It is hard to determine the depth of damage by sight alone. If you were to test by touch you would get dirty.

May's sculpture is heir to Duchampian readymades, to some aspects of Dada and Surrealism, to Arte Provera and other Junk Art movements that sought to give new life to abject materials. Is this a masculine quality? I don't know. But I sure know a lot of men who compulsively rescue derelict tools and restore them. My grandfathers were both legendary for their basement and garage 'workshops' stuffed with machine parts and things becoming themselves once again, or becoming some useful other things. It seems to me that repair, however, was less important to them than hunting, gathering, organizing, developing novel storage schemes and sharing.

An uncle, who showed no such proclivity before retirement, recently found himself launched on the same enterprise. I was amazed, last summer, to see the range and depth of his collection and 'projects'. He knows it's obsessive and may cost more than he saves. And who is going to use the renewed tools anyway? Not him, his main industry is using tools to fix tools! But collect and fix he must. Continuing to be useful seems to be part of the driving force.

I would not say that my work is about issues of masculinity, but it would be difficult to deny that the work appears masculine. And in most cases that would be because of what the work is made from objects and materials that are generally associated with men. If I thought that the studio process didn't change that to any great degree, or rather if in the final analysis the parts remained the most defining quality of the work, then I would be pretty disappointed.

To be uncritical of stereotypical masculinity would be foolish, or at the very least one would be missing an opportunity.

To make work that is unapologetically masculine needs no apology, but it seems that in the best work, masculinity (or femininity) is not the defining issue.
(from his artist statement)

It is possible, I suppose, to see *Knockout* as non-gendered. But I can't. Though it is among the least didactic pieces in *Making it Like a Man*, it resonates with male experience. Hammers are extensions of the human body, and the body most associated with this particular extension is male. The rigidity and shape of the handle also make this tool an apt metonymy for the male appendage. The hammer line-up might enact a familiar masculine nightmare of being measured and compared. These hammers are humiliated and appear to have endured a 'trial by fire'. The title, *Knockout*, describes a violent contest (esp. boxing) in which, one by one, combatants are eliminated.

It is difficult not to anthropomorphize. The arrangement suggests a sports, criminal or military line-up. The scorching has caused the handles of some to wrench, others to lose charred bits or larger sections, giving each handle an irregularity, even personality. We can imagine the burning process; how the shafts twisted with the heat, as if in pain. Hung at eye-level, we are asked to look at, rather than use, them. Hammers are usually displayed in profile. Having them face forward, at our faces, suggests witness. Our gaze hits theirs head on—so to speak.

Even without the burning, this is not a utilitarian display; it is a collection. But what sort? Most contemporary hammers have metal or fiberglass handles. A metal hammer is a tool; a wooden hammer made useless by fire (and by becoming an artwork) becomes symbolic. A set of old-fashioned hammers so displayed feels nostalgic. Some tools have character. There are mere tools and there are tools that gradually wear to the worker's body, tools with personality and history. Wooden handled tools do this better than metal ones. A wood handle wears to a habitual grip and has a patina from its owner's sweat. It may be scarred by experience, and held on to for the same reason. Men love their tools. There is an expression of longing in *Knockout*, for an authentic relationship to tools and what they symbolize.

We associate wooden handles with old tools, old days and old men. I collect antique, non-mechanical hand tools. I know it's corny, but when I use them I like the feeling that my labour is linked to the work and specific bodies of

those past men. My prized tools were handed down from my grandfathers. But I also like strangers' gear, especially if they look well used. I even have some very old tools that are initialed by their owners.

Many western, urban men are estranged from daily manual labour but, consciously or not, see their masculinity dove-tailed with making and repairing things. Many urban men have well stocked home workshops. Even if little actual work goes on in there, it is a token of masculinity.

In *Being and Time*, the philosopher Martin Heidegger explains that we only realize the full nature of a tool when it breaks down. When it works, tools are invisible. They conform to their function as part of an (almost) unconscious action. A broken tool isn't its self, and its new nature isn't easy to determine. We have to examine the thing, turn it over in our hands. We have to rehearse the tool in its old ways to determine the nature of the damage. This rehearsal requires us—literally so in this case—to 'get our hands dirty', to interrupt work and relate to the object both intellectually and sensually as it is and how it ought to be.

I think *Knockout* is in the *memento mori* Still Life tradition. It reminds us of the fragility of flesh. Even the most virile body eventually falls apart. We all return to carbon. But it is less about ultimate demise and than about sudden failure. In the context of this exhibition, it evokes distressed bodies damaged by external forces—hammered, knocked-out. These broken bodies bear witness and demand address.

Our relationship to a broken tool implies an ethic and implies a degree of masculinity. Do you fix the tool yourself, send it out for repair, or replace it? Or do you collect or hoard them in a basement perdition to await salvaging and rebirth?

I used to visit the Hillhurst Sunnyside market most Sundays, just to see what they had. Ivan and Ruth Noble, who used to bring in stuff every weekend, as some form of entertainment and to make a few bucks. Ivan always had the strangest assortment of things, which were always worth a look, and Ruth brought pies and homemade pastries that were almost inedible they had so much sugar. In any case, I got to know them a bit after asking for stools when I was collecting those, and eventually I got an invitation to visit their spread near Cremona. It was unbelievable. Ivan was one of those guys that just couldn't throw anything away. He bought an incredible amount of stuff from country auctions and hauled it all

back to the farm. Every outbuilding, and there were about 8 of them plus 3 or 4 trailers, were stuffed with things, and whatever was durable was just left out.

I made a few trips, and always bought some thing, which seemed to make Ivan happy. Eventually, he pretty well gave me the run of the place and I got to poke around just about everywhere. One day I discovered the tool shed. It had a bewildering amount of stuff in it. Along one wall, high up so you could just reach it, was a 2 x 4 nailed to the studs that ran the length of the building and on it were hung old hammers. Maybe 150 to 200. Lots had metal or fiberglass handles, but most were wood. *Knockout* is essentially an homage to that image.

I asked Ivan, "How much for the hammers." He said, "Three bucks each" (expensive for the late eighties). But I wanted them all and it was too much money. I tried to get a bulk deal, but no dice. Three bucks it had to be. So I left it. But as an image it hung in the back of my mind. I eventually found myself buying hammers, always with wooden handles, wherever I could find them for less than \$3. To make a point I guess. After a couple of years I had maybe thirty and no idea what to do with them. They accumulated in the studio.

Life went on. After awhile I didn't see Ivan anymore, he wasn't coming in to the market. John Chalke, who has a place near Sundre, told me that he heard Ivan was sick. More time passed and then someone else told me Ivan had cancer. I guess I wanted to see him again and to see what had become of the place, so one day I phoned. Ruth told me I could come out on the weekend, since Ivan was due home from the hospital in a few days.

So I went, and waded through the farm dogs and knocked on the kitchen door and Ruth let me in and offered me instant coffee with lots of sugar. Ivan was in bed and Ruth told me to look around and he'd come out later. I told him from the hallway that I wanted a lot of his hammers. He said, "Go pick them out." I drove my van through the field as close as I could get to the shed and started to load hammers. I laid them out on the floor of the van in tens so that Ivan could count, 'cause I knew it was important to him not to be duped. I got 90 hammers with wood handles and there were still plenty of the others left. I poked around in a few other buildings for a while until Ivan came out.

We talked a bit about weather, being sick, and how much work he needed to do to catch up. It didn't look to me as if he had it in him, but that was his idea. I showed him the hammers in the van and pulled out the 270 cash and handed it over. I don't think he really believed what was happening for a minute, and then he said, "You didn't take any of my good ones, didya?" I told him that I just took them from the wall. Apparently he had a secret stash of the best hammers, in a bucket somewhere, that he wasn't about to part with for a piddlin' three bucks each. And he claimed that he had another barrel with just heads that he was getting around to putting handles on, if I wanted to come back.

John told me that Ivan died later that year. Which everyone but Ivan could see was coming. I wish I could have seen him again, but I think that at least I made one day for him, and probably gave him the opportunity to tell a story about the artist from the city and the hammers.

I still had no real idea what to do with them, so they were added to the thirty in the studio and they waited. Eventually the notion of burning arrived, probably through working on the "museum of fuel" pieces, and beginning to see them as fuel - as a symbol of a kind of capital necessary for exploitation (ie. the blunt and simple implement one needs for creating a simple constructed pioneer shelter in the face of too much nature), and when burnt, as a symbol of how one dirties ones hands, when employing such capital, and of a kind of poverty in nature that is created through our blunt and simple constructions.

I eventually made a piece with the hammers called *Damaged Goods* that I sold to the Art foundation. It consisted of all the burnt hammers piled on a 9' x 3' stone table that had been cracked. Sort of funereal, but very elegant. *Knockout* has a new collection of hammers, that are burnt quite a bit more than the last ones. There are 107 hammers derived from a numerical progression of $1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10+11+12+13+14$ to give some sort of notion of perpetual accumulation. And I feel there is something about loss that is implicit in the work. (Edited from a correspondence with Walter May, 2003.)