

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

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Weird Dumb Dude Energy

by [Alicia Eler](#) on July 2, 2013



Nick Wylie and Andrew Mausert-Mooney, *Clean Every Whit* (2012 — ongoing), footwashing and nail-painting performance (image courtesy the artist)

CHICAGO — Born from the girl brains of Chicago artists Eileen Mueller and Jamie Steele of the curatorial project [GURLDONTBEDUMB](#) (GDBD), the exhibition *Weird Dude Energy* (WDE) takes its inspiration from [the blog of the same name](#), which was started in 2008 by Christine Boepple and Kerry McLaughlin. In their current formats on the ever-changing internet, one could consider GDBD and WDE as [indexing the aesthetics of gendered dumbness](#), though ultimately the meanings of each of these blogs and their curated content is up to the users who peruse them. Mueller and Steele's *Weird Dude Energy* group show features a gang of male artists working across mediums toward a single common dudely denominator.

While a show about a masculine energy-force curated by two women is, er, ballsy, the end result didn't quite live up to its expectations. For the record, the curators keep it gendered by only including masculine-identified artists in the exhibition, yet sidestep gender essentialism by making sure that not every "dude" in the show was born with a dick. But beyond the show's potentially potent premise, the work in the exhibition lacked the balls to really go all out — but it certainly got people talking. The space was packed on opening night, and the weird dude energy almost sent the room vibrating. I decided to grab a coffee with artist [Latham Owen Zearfoss](#), a quasi-'dude' whose work was not included in the

exhibition, and have a conversation about the show, about what worked and what didn't, and why we are still talking about what dudes are up to. We chatted away while sipping iced coffee from Cafe Moustache, a favorite Chicago coffee shop named after yet another variation on the construct of — you guessed it! — masculinity.



Andrew Doak, *College Was Just a Phase* (2010), archival pigment print (image courtesy the artist)

Alicia Eler: *There are already a lot of group shows featuring work by male artists. How does Weird Dude Energy work against that, in your opinion?*

Latham Owen Zearfoss: It seems like if you are going to do a large group show of only men, it's kind of a problem, or considered retrograde or just really not of the moment. The idea of doing so intentionally and calling it out and also making it the premise of the show makes it very intriguing, and intends to push buttons in a way that I like.

AE: *What was your take on the show overall?*

LZ: I like the way the premise of the show pushes buttons and checks a knee-jerk reaction—which is that a show of all men is a suspect and/or retrograde thing — but I don't know that WDE or the work itself is cohesive enough or pushing against those notions enough. I feel like maybe my take on the show is a little incomplete, and maybe the show was a little incomplete, or too expansive. The premise is full of so much potential, and the show itself doesn't meet that. Part of it is that it rests too much on a literal interpretation of 'weird dude energy.' That's okay, but there's a strain of weird dude 'party art' in there that

maybe is a little too ironic and jokey, and inherently avoids risks. I want the show to be as risky as the premise is.



Alan and Michael Fleming, Pizza Boxes (Stack), 2013, cardboard pizza boxes and metal brackets, 18 x 76 x 18 inches (image courtesy the author)

AE: I was thinking about what you were saying about Oli Rodriguez's photograph from *The Marking Project*, which is about what he calls sex play involving razors, plastic wrap and other fetish objects, and the opening night performance by Nick Wylie and Andrew Mausert-Mooney — an oily, ceremonial feet/body washing in a hand-painted, serpent-shaped kiddie pool—kind of felt like 'let's throw some queer dude energy into the mix.' It felt a little too purposeful to me, but maybe that is because I have encountered both of those pieces outside of this show. And then there's this idea that dude art needs to be made by cismen to be considered as part of 'weird dude energy.' To me, that is actually pretty limiting when considering the premise of this show, and suggests this underlying idea of hetero dude party art idea as defining 'weird dude energy.' And yes, that's not transgressive at all—that's just what we see in the art world all the time! It's a totally sexist straight white male art world, and the rest of us are . . .

LZ: . . . trying to fit in or make space for ourselves. I guess when I think of *Weird Dude Energy* now that we are talking about it, a really great precedent for me is Vito Acconci. Those performances that have that a super aggressive sexual tone to them, but make you hyperaware of your body. As a viewer you become a participant, but you're also being transgressed upon. I feel like the *Weird Dude Energy* show doesn't grapple with those power dynamics. I thought I would feel implicated, and then I don't see that happening.

AE: It's strange that there's a show about dudes that is mostly self-involved. By that I mean, the viewer isn't ever implicated in or even really included in the conversations that these dudes are having through their artwork save for Jesse Butcher's *Season of the Witch* which does physically at least offer you an opportunity to interface with it.

LZ: There's also a way in which Ivan Lozano's *MILAGROS I*, *MILAGROS II*, and *MILAGROS III* does that as well because there's a sort of sensory element—there's hands, it's bodily representation. The picture of the James Belushi lookalike, Andrew Doak's *College Was Just a Phase*, offers an opportunity for the viewer to insert themselves into a male archetype. There's a representational transference happening there, very literally—like restaging so that his likeness takes over James Belushi's. He ends up in this role, that is part of a narrative and opens up a space for us to think about how we do that ourselves in other contexts.



Jesse Butcher, *Season Of The Witch* (2013), wood, latex paint, aerosol paint, polyurethane, framed mono-print, leather jacket, hardware, 38 x 28.5 x 54 inches (image courtesy the author)

AE: *The show is of mostly younger emerging male-identified artists, but there isn't any art historical*

reference point in the show at all . . .

LZ: True, although there is a reference to Donald Judd with the Flemings' pizza boxes. An all-male show feels so antiquated, but the show itself feels youthful. It's confusing because the main question for me is why or what for.

AE: *Yeah, it felt sort of like a novelty in that way. I think they went overboard with the koozies—talk about dude parties! That made it gimmicky, which is fine because it is kinda gimmicky, but it felt like at certain points it should have been a frat party, least during opening night.*

LZ: The thing about a frat party is that it is a very loaded and gendered space in a way that's sexual, dangerous—things that in a hypercritical art environment would make those power dynamics more self-evident, and could be interesting. I feel like the show is caught in the middle between not being offensive enough and it's like neither transcendent or offensive. I feel like a show like that needs to be one or another — or ideally both!

AE: *Go balls to the wall, right? [laughs]*

LZ: Balls deep! [laughs] We both talked about liking that bat piece [Over and Over and Over](#), but I feel like even in a way that piece is sort of safe because it's masculinity but failed masculinity—it's like 'dad' or something. We're allowed to love that kind of masculinity because it's impotent.



Alex Gartelmann, *Over and Over and Over* (2011) (image courtesy the artist)

AE: *It's not sexually threatening — well, hopefully.*

LZ: Yeah — it's not powerful.

AE: *There's not any sort of incestual dad-son/daughter thing going on. It was super safe, that bat piece.*

LZ: Yeah, which I think is a problem because the premise is super risky. It's interesting that there are queer artists and a trans artist in the show, but I don't know how a public would know that. What's more interesting—if a public knows that or doesn't? And how do those assumptions activate the work? I think that's a good question.

Weird Dude Energy continues through July 7 at [Heaven Gallery](#) (1550 North Milwaukee, 2nd Floor, Chicago).

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