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When a Man's Home Is His Castle to Care For

By Jessica Dawson
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Transformer's small but ambitious new exhibition, "Domesticated: Men and the Domestic Interior," hinges on reversals. Curator Al Miner chose eight works by four photographers whose staged, theatrical pictures cast men in roles once exclusively played by women: These men wash up, hold the baby or embrace their sons with a mother's intimacy.



Although its pictures rejigger gender stereotypes, this show hardly counts as feminist. Three of its artists are women, yet the female sex appears shrewish, depressed or absent. "Women's work" comes off as a second-class occupation. Rather than argue for a new paradigm, "Domesticated" boxes in both sexes.

The constraints are felt most acutely in Miner's accompanying essay, a lengthy analysis of these pictures that (unintentionally, I assume) belittles the domestic sphere.

Take, for instance, a pair of pictures by Spanish-born artist Yolanda del Amo, whom Miner describes as an artist aiming to "highlight men's loss of power." One of her tableaux features a family scene played at the kitchen table. Here, the woman turns away, staring wanly out the window as her dutiful male partner cradles their baby. Miner's text says the man is "forced into a 'Mr. Mom' role by [his wife's] postpartum depression."

Miner makes it sound as if guys will nurture only when women fail them. If a man is expected to hold a baby only under duress, his role is as limited as his partner's. What remains is an unspoken assumption that a man's only concern is shooting deer or climbing corporate ladders.

Another del Amo picture finds a man and a woman enacting a tense moment in a bourgeois interior. The scene could be a still from a stage play, a face-off between two partners. It looks like a minor argument, yet Miner writes that the male partner is "demeaned" by a "willful" wife. Must it be so?
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Elsewhere in the show, San Francisco-based artist Jamil Hellu exhibits pictures of his male partner doing the dishes. Even here, Miner reminds us that the dishwashing man "is no pansy." Men playing female roles must be apologized for, it seems.

One artist here -- the most compelling of the lot -- offers androgyny as an alternative to gender codes. Brooklyn-based Amy Elkins photographs two shirtless young men in half-length portraits that mimic historical modes of female portraiture. As we look at these men, we're reminded of a long tradition of Venuses as well as the Greeks' love of a luscious boy. The subject of "Kyle" proves an especially rich muse, his arm crossed over his chest in a gesture suggesting both protection and flirtation.

What works about Elkins's pictures is their lack of clear-cut agenda. Yes, they participate in the preconceived -- and sexist -- modes of art history. But they never, ever replicate them.

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