

Kenneth Tam *The Loving Cup*

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Countless scientists have spent their hard-earned research grants on demonstrating the lengths to which men will go to protect their sense of masculinity. From guys who throw punches harder after being induced to braid hair, to fellows who exaggerate their height, sexual prowess and athletic ability after scoring low on a handgrip strength test, male identity has been shown to be a fragile thing.

The extent to which masculinity is socially determined forms the subject of much of Kenneth Tam's work. Tam, who was also included in the Hammer Museum's biennial *Made in LA* this summer, has been inviting strangers found through Craigslist to perform unusual activities in his videos for almost a decade now. Tam's subjects do all sorts of things in exchange for a modest fee, including shaving the artist, offering a massage from the confines of a cardboard box and binding themselves to Tam's body using cling film. Of late, however, the artist has moved from these absurd provocations to a more subtle investigation of social norms.

For his solo exhibition at Commonwealth & Council, Tam has made *The Loving Cup* (2016), a three-channel video in which the artist and three middle-aged men play out a series of actions, such as blowing up balloons and slow-dancing together. The camera focuses closely on the men's hands as they delicately tie ribbons

around multicoloured parcels. One bald man exhorts the others to try and tickle him; this gentle play is accompanied by much giggling. In the second video, which is silent, the same men pull poses ranging from the quasi-yogic to the positively balletic. The activities here seem to demand greater concentration, each participant focusing deeply on finding his balance. Tam participates in these movements like everyone else and never appears to orchestrate the proceedings, despite surely instigating them. The absence of any instruction from him softens the potentially authoritarian construct at work here. Instead, each situation appears to possess its own internal logic, one that the participants understand but we outsiders can only gawp at in befuddlement. The viewer is offered what looks like a corporate team-building exercise gone awry. No introductory voiceover or subtitles explain these bizarre scenarios.

One striking quality of these situations is how easily the male participants appear infantilised to us. Dressed in pastel polo-shirts, socks and slack leisurewear, at home among soft furnishings, they seem vulnerable and devoid of aggression. Sequestered in Tam's dance space, governed by an alternate set of rules, where touching and play becomes permissible, the men collaborate and offer reassurance to one another. The competitive

edge that our society encourages men to cultivate is entirely absent here, indicating the degree to which our behaviour is conditioned by context. The viewer's own amusement or embarrassment indicates the narrow expectations we have of appropriate male behaviour.

The videos are accompanied by *tickle tackle* (2016), a small aluminium sculpture cast from a rubber bucket, the top of which has been forced shut. The symbolism of this vessel, full of weight but denied the chance to be open, feels a little heavy-handed. Also on display are photographs in which the artist and another man are seen embracing while showering one another with bottles of champagne. Locked in an ecstatic clinch and drenched in foaming fizz, the images ape the emotional celebrations of macho sports stars while also insinuating the homoerotic undertones at play. Mildly humorous, the photographs feel a little too overt – particularly in comparison to the weirdly captivating quality of the videos.

While Tam's work adeptly points out the malleability of male identity, what proves most compelling is its voyeuristic aspect. The videos satisfy much the same desire as does reality tv, ie the pleasure in watching human beings behaving in all their endearing and peculiar majesty as well as the reassurance that we are not the strange ones after all. *Ciara Moloney*



The Loving Cup (detail), 2016, 3 single-channel HD videos, colour, sound, 6 min/6 min/5 min 30 sec.
Photo: Ruben Díaz. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles