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***Dogs & Dads* at Diane Rosenstein**

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The first lesson a boy learns under patriarchal masculinity, bell hooks writes, is to wear a mask. In an act of “soul murder,” as hooks calls it, the boy betrays his authentic self to become a patriarch.¹ Subsequently, by wearing this mask, he’s rewarded with power and prestige, feeding a relentless cycle that entrenches traditional masculine gender roles into our society. In *Dogs & Dads*, a recent group show at Diane Rosenstein, artworks pictured aggressive snarling dogs alongside cheeky, comic-style drawings of fatherhood, exploring the myriad ways this mask of patriarchal masculinity manifests. Playing with the colloquial refrains that cast men as dogs, the exhibition wove together humor, introspection, and symbolism, probing patriarchy’s corrosive effects on boys and men while underscoring that, ultimately, the cost of conforming to patriarchal ideals is one’s self. In the far-left of the gallery’s entryway sat one...

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Dogs & Dads (installation view) (2024). Image courtesy of the artists and Diane Rosenstein. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

of Karl Haendel's life-size hyper-realistic pencil drawings—a puppy solemnly staring. The work's title, *I didn't ask to be born and I don't want to die*. (2024), floated above the puppy's head as a thought bubble. The drawing, a little over three feet tall, was hung near the floor as if the pup, its fur soft and shiny, was actually sitting there begging for attention, eyes twinkling. A few steps to the right, *Bad Drawing!* (2024) by David Sipress—a longtime cartoonist for *The New Yorker*—was sketched directly onto the gallery wall. Crudely drawn, a short man with a faltering hairline reprimanded a wonky-looking dog with a cone-shaped nose. "Bad drawing!" the man exclaims sternly, wagging his index finger at the dog and Haendel's nearby puppy all the same. The man's reprimand, a riff on the phrase "bad dog," playfully jabbed at poor artistic execution while subtly introducing the exhibition's themes of power, control, and patriarchy. Both dogs seemed to cower under this stern reprimand.

On the opposite side of the wall, this cartoonish levity shifted to a darker tone with Taylor Marie Prendergast's *All That's Left* (2024). In this vast, seven-foot-tall oil painting, Prendergast's chaotic and energetic brushstrokes stretch a dog's head across most of the canvas, creating a feeling of dreadful confinement. Many of Prendergast's greyscale subjects in the show are depicted in perilous, perpetual motion, and here, the dog's mouth, wide open and drooling, is blurry as if to convey a snapping jaw

in motion. Still, the dog's eyes are sullen and unmoving, fatigued with dark circles that drag down its cheeks. One could read this dog as Haendel's puppy, now a bit older and hardened by life

—wearing a mask that

obscures its youthful vulnerability with rows of knife-like teeth. In *Night Watch* (2024), another of Prendergast's muddled oil-paint mirages, two dogs—even more hardened than the last—stand stoically amongst looming trees and gloomy clouds, their mouths muzzled to keep them from lashing out in anger. Echoing hooks' sentiment that anger is the only emotion that the patriarchy values in men,² these muzzled dogs' instinct to protect grants them the distinguished role of night watchmen while also isolating them in punitive seclusion. On a dim-lit path in the forest, they sit in solitude, save for the presence of one another and the shadows encroaching upon them.

Inside Sipress' cartoon world, satirical domestic scenes double as quippy explorations of other absurdities and disparaging impacts of patriarchal masculinity. In *Mind Reader* (2020), a man, legs crossed, shouts at a woman, "How should I know what I'm thinking? I'm not a mind reader." Sipress confronts how men weaponize incompetence against others to evade tasks, often in relation to domestic and emotional labor. Faced with the man's manipulative tactic, the relatable cartoon woman's eyes are widened and her brows raised, caught somewhere between bewilderment and an eye roll.

At times, *Dogs & Dads* felt on the nose in its use of angry dogs as stand-ins for angry men (Haendel's *Angry Dog 9* [2024], a large, close-cropped drawing of a snarling German Shepherd, felt particularly obvious). However, the straightforwardness was tactful. Set in the middle of the exhibition, amongst the cacophony of barking dogs and reprimanding fathers, was a black curtain leading into a dark room. Behind it was a video by Haendel and filmmaker Petter Ringbom called *Questions for My Father* (2011). If outside the curtain, artworks portrayed the masks that boys and men don to the world, inside this dark space the mask was lifted

—all the reprimanding, hostility, and manipulation nally confronted. The video features shots of middle-aged men framed against a black studio background, asking the camera questions they've always wished to ask their fathers but never could.³ Some ask about sexuality, affairs, and fantasies; religion, suicide, and depression; race and politics; violence and war; fear and disappointment. By naming oft-ignored emotions about oft-ignored topics, Haendel and Ringbom disrupt the cycle that synonymizes manhood and paternity with repression, anger, and control—the cycle that has entrenched generations of men into patterns of violence, emotional dysregulation, and alienation from themselves and others.

Questions for My Father is the crux of the exhibition. Passing through the curtain, the men's voices echoed throughout the gallery. Their wounded eyes could

be found stowed away in Prendergast's violent dogs, and their emotional scars left untreated beneath Sipress' callous dads. Their questions, curious and some rather intrusive, quieted the growling and stifled the aggression. In this way, *Dogs & Dads* offered an escape hatch from the destructive cycles of patriarchal masculinity. Lifting the mask, or curtain, reveals the potential for change, only to come if men take it upon themselves to begin asking the vulnerable questions, moving toward a culture of healing. It's possible, then, to imagine a not-too-distant future where a boy can sit comfortably in his vulnerability and softness without contempt or reprimand. This time, the twinkle in his eye stays.

1. bell hooks, *The Will To Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* (New York: Atria, 2004), 153.

2. hooks, *The Will To Change*, 7.

3. Karl Haendel and Petter Ringbom, *Questions for My Father*, 2011, <http://questionsformyfather.com/synopsis.html>.