

## Hazel Meyer, Muscle Panic

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**DUNLOP ART GALLERY  
REGINA  
OCTOBER 23, 2020 –  
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What a curious sight to encounter inside the Central Branch of Regina Public Library. Seen through a glass wall, orange and pink long-sleeve sweaters are piled up on top of a six-foot-long blue folding mat. The usual art-filled gallery that many library visitors are used to has been temporarily replaced with folding mats, scaffolds, metal planks and

wooden balance beams—items that are more common in a fitness studio. Hanging from the multi-level scaffolding structure at the back of the gallery, an assortment of banners, sweaters, flags, and a large bag bearing a graphic of intestine create a dynamic sculpture-installation that is prominently featured in Vancouver-based artist Hazel Myer's latest exhibition at the Dunlop Art Gallery. Titled *Muscle Panic*, the exhibition invites visitors into the artist's world, where they can see how desire, queerness and movement come together. Usually comprising a series of physical activities, visitors and participants are provided with a safe space to sweat together, exploring ways to resist the dominant heteronormative expression in sports and our larger contemporary society.

*Muscle Panic* is an accumulation of on-going individual projects dating back to 2014. The exhibition has been iterated a few times in eccentric spaces like a basketball court inside an abandoned barn (*Muscle Panic Cow Palace*, 2014), a garage turned gallery (*Muscle Panic: garage*, 2015), a narrow locker hallway (*Muscle Panic*, 2015), or the Dutch Masters



room at the Art Gallery of Ontario (*Muscle Panic – Dutch Masters House*, 2017), before it opened at the Dunlop in fall 2020. The project is iterative and responsive not only to the physical context of where the exhibition takes place, but also the temporal reality of when it is on display. In every earlier version of the exhibition, a team of local performers were invited to engage in a series of physical activities with or around the installation and its objects. For instance, when the exhibition opened in Houston, U.S.A in 2018, “a troupe of local women, trans, and non-binary artists, athletes and activists entered the space and performed athletic drills, pregame rituals, teammate dynamics and workouts. Leading up to their entrance, these performers embarked on a 5k run that culminated with their arrival at the gallery space.”<sup>1</sup> Sweaters from these previous runs, games and workouts were collected into the pile that that visitors can see through the glass wall at the Dunlop Gallery.

Due to the on-going pandemic, a performance is not possible. Instead, Myer is collaborating with local athletes in Regina to create an “instructional exercise poster” as an alternative way for them, and volunteer participants, to sweat together during and after the show. As writer Robin Alex McDonald remarks in the essay accompanying the exhibition, the collaborative and instructional nature of the poster recalls the safer sex cartoons and information pamphlets created during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s by organizations like the Gay Men’s Health Crisis and the National Coalition of Gay Sexually Transmitted Disease Services.<sup>2</sup> The historical ephemera were used during the peak of the epidemic as a way to disperse useful information and to build solidarity inside the community that was still very much marginalized, and scapegoated for their intimate desire by the larger society at the time.

This idea of “sweating together” is essential to understanding the objective of the exhibition. Myer draws inspiration for the exhibition title “muscle panic” from the late sociologist and criminologist Stanley Cohen’s idea of “moral panic”—a paranoia that society’s moral values are being threatened by radical, non-conforming or “queer” ideas. Moral panics often occur when an unfamiliar element is introduced into a society, or community with a high level of homogeneity. As a result, the unknown factor provokes a sense of discomfort, which renders it as a threat to the local collectiveness and moral integrity. Myer’s message of “sweating together” confronts this irrational, and sometimes hysterical, sentiment through the intimacy between bodies, clashing encounters between beliefs, prejudices, and perceptions of the unknown. The installation creates and transforms a space where queer bodies can sweat, exchange touches, profess and explore their desires for one another. Its specificity is necessary to emphasize that outside the security provided by the event format of an art-performance-installation and the for-art-purpose spaces of an art gallery, interactions between bodies continue to be heavily gendered, girls versus boys’ sports, and regulated by a heteronormative system, where queer athletes still make headlines for coming out.

The topical history of queer bodies in sport is reinforced in the work *Non-archival Archive (Muscle Panic)*. Two blue rectangular scaffold frames are put together in an L-shape as the structure leans on the gallery wall. Tacked onto the pipes are a collection of images showing various unspecified sport events. The photo series captures moments of which our society would consider queer expressions. Men and women hug each other in joy, celebration, encouragement or consolation; a

lady in a basketball jersey smiles at the camera while showing off her long red nails. These images shift the practical objective of sports, which emphasizes the performance outcome, to an emotional intimacy between humans, which is cultivated through the means of sports. Within the installation, Myer reclaims teamwork, and all its benefits, exchanges, touches and expressions from the heteronormativity that runs the sport culture.

With this expansive multi-part installation, Myer makes the world queer, a “WIDE WORLD OF WHOLES” as it says on one of her banners. The “whole” can be understood as the opposite of the “binary” of male and female, masculine and feminine, soft ball and hard ball, and camaraderie and homosexuality. In an interview, Meyer says “I make installations that performance happens in and, within these installations, there are sculptures that also function as tools and as props... I’m interested in the slipperiness of these objects, and in the tools that extend us.”<sup>3</sup> The precariousness of Myer’s installation: tall scaffolding, leaning objects, and balance beams standing bare on the gallery’s concrete floor, is a subtle reminder that, while much progress has been made for the presence of queerness in sports and society, a slip can still send a queer body down onto the cold hard concrete floor, causing the muscle to panic.

1. Josh Inocêncio, “Muscle Panic: Interdisciplinary Artist Fuses Sports, Queerness at Art League Houston.” *Spectrum South: The Voice of the Queer South*, February 23, 2018.
2. Robin Alex McDonald, *Muscle Panic*, 2020. Curatorial Essay.
3. Inocêncio, *Spectrum South*.

Tak Pham is a Vietnamese art curator and critic. He is a graduate of Carleton University and OCAD University. His critical writings and reviews have appeared in *ESPACE art actuel*, *esse arts + opinions*, *Canadian Art*, and *Hyperallergic* among others. Pham is currently Assistant Curator at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, Treaty 4 territory, the original lands of the Cree, Ojibwe, Saulteaux, Dakota, Nakota, Lakota, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation.