

Globe Review

THE GLOBE AND MAIL ■ CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER ■ GLOBEANDMAIL.COM ■ MONDAY,



CHRISTINNI MUNCHO/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Male model: 'I look at this on one level as just trying stuff on,' Litherland says of his Absolutely Fabulous self-portraits, including the drag photos seen above.

Out of the closet

After 13 years, artist Paul Litherland's provocative photographs exploring male identity get a public showing

BY CHRISTINE REDFERN, MONTREAL

If you list Paul Litherland's passions — base-jumping, skydiving, motorcycle riding and boxing — you might assume he's a macho man. Anyone who knows him wouldn't hesitate to call him a regular guy. He is a respected professional photographer, now 44 and happily married to fellow artist Karen Trask. Yet take a look at his series of self-portraits, titled Absolu-

tely Fabulous, and suddenly his personality no longer fits so neatly into the realm of what society traditionally terms "masculine."

But Litherland decided to challenge the very idea of masculine identity. In the early nineties, during the heyday of headline critiques of the straight white male, he took a series of photographs currently on view at Montreal's Galerie Thérèse Dion. In half the portraits, he wears a pink dress, making no attempt to

hide his hairy legs or bulge. In the remaining photos, he dresses up and projects the attitude and uniform of a schoolboy, a businessman, a lesbian, a sadomasochist and a dead man. It is rare and somewhat visually refreshing to see this type of experimentation publicly displayed so unashamedly by the boy next door.

"I look at this on one level as just trying stuff on," Litherland explains, "to look at being a man from different

points of view. And I don't think I do that far, quite frankly. I don't feel the work is actually that extreme. It represents my own hesitations as much as it is an exploration of trying to be free from expectations. Both in and outside of my art practice, I think many of the things I do are about trying to feel alive, whether it's riding a motorcycle, freerunning, boxing or even wearing a dress.

See LITHERLAND on page R2



These actions make me feel more alive, because I am putting something at risk. I put my manliness at risk if I dare to name it, never mind play with it.

Looking at manhood, nervously

LITHERLAND from page R1

"These actions make me feel more alive, because I am putting something at risk. I put my manliness at risk if I dare to name it, never mind play with it like in this series of self-portraits."

Regardless of the tough talk about risk, the images were never shown in public until now. The concept of personally articulating and revealing a position outside of the powerful social ideal of heterosexuality, Litherland comments, was difficult "mostly because I was embarrassed." He explains the Catch-22 inherent in this type of project. "The minute you start questioning masculinity, the fact of questioning it means that you are up in the air. Heterosexual power relations exist in silence. When you start to put them on the table, you instantly feel that you are going against the grain. Any time you question this kind of relationship, you are putting yourself on the other side, the other side being gay or female or not part of the team."

Internally, Litherland felt like a heterosexual man; externally, the vibe was that "real" men don't act this way. He remarks that he is a different person now than when he originally took these pictures. It is as if he recognizes the need for some distance before he was able to exhibit the images. The dead man photo resurfaced last winter as part of the group exhibition *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography* at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. That exhibition and the accompanying coverage in *Artforum*, *ARTnews* and *The New Yorker* resulted in the whole series finally being dragged out of the closet 13 years later.

As we move around the room, we pass a photograph showing Litherland wearing lipstick and pantyhose. In another he is naked, tied up and sporting a sex toy. We talk about how our society is quick to link sexually charged male nudes to homosexuality. Somehow with the male-centric viewpoint that dominates our culture, we find it easy to associate masculine sensuality with homoerotic art, but find it difficult to connect it to our preconceived notions of the typical straight man. "I believe that part of me is lesbian, part of me is gay, part of me is my mom," says Litherland. He points to the image that shows him wearing a dress, holding a cigarette and tilting his head to the side as he stares directly at the viewer. "That one is based on my mom."

In the end, maybe what is inspiring about Absolutely Fabulous has nothing to do with how Litherland looks or how he is dressed, but that he found the guts to show a side of himself that in many would easily lead to feelings of humiliation. Absolutely Fabulous lays in the face of the fear of looking different. "What is really stupid is saying you are not a man because you have feminine attributes," Litherland counters. "Or that if you even think about being a man, it makes you less of a man. It is such a crazy code. Real men don't think about being men."

Paul Litherland's *Absolutely Fabulous* continues at Galerie Thérèse Dion in Montreal until Sept. 2 (514-398-3094).

Special to The Globe and Mail



Out of the closet

CHRISTINE REDFERN

MONTREAL — From Monday's Globe and Mail

Published Monday, Aug. 14 2006, 1:34 AM EDT

Last updated Monday, Apr. 06 2009, 10:40 PM EDT

If you list Paul Litherland's passions - base-jumping, skydiving, motorcycle riding and boxing - you might assume he's a macho man. Anyone who knows him wouldn't hesitate to call him a regular guy. He is a respected professional photographer, now 44 and happily married to fellow artist Karen Trask. Yet take a look at his series of self-portraits, titled *Absolutely Fabulous*, and suddenly his personality no longer fits so neatly into the realm of what society traditionally terms "masculine."

But Litherland decided to challenge the very idea of masculine identity. In the early nineties, during the heyday of hardline critiques of the straight white male, he took a series of photographs currently on view at Montreal's Galerie Thérèse Dion. In half the portraits, he wears a pink dress, making no attempt to hide his hairy legs or bulge. In the remaining photos, he dresses up and projects the attitude and uniform of a schoolboy, a businessman, a lesbian, a sadomasochist and a dead man. It is rare and somehow visually refreshing to see this type of experimentation publicly displayed so unabashedly by the boy next door.

"I look at this on one level as just trying stuff on," Litherland explains, "to look at being a man from different points of view. And I don't think I go that far, quite frankly. I don't feel the work is actually that extreme. It represents my own hesitations as much as it is an exploration of trying to be free from expectations. Both in and outside of my art practice, I think many of the things I do are about trying to feel alive, whether it's riding a motorcycle, freefalling, boxing or even wearing a dress.

"These actions make me feel more alive, because I am putting something at risk. I put my manliness at risk if I dare to name it, never mind play with it like in this series of self-portraits."

Regardless of the tough talk about risk, the images were never shown in public until now. The concept of personally articulating and revealing a position outside of the powerful social ideal of heterosexuality, Litherland comments, was difficult "mostly because I was embarrassed." He explains the Catch-22 inherent in this type of project. "The minute you start questioning masculinity, the fact of questioning it means that you are up in the air. Heterosexual power relations exist in silence. When you start to put them on the table, you instantly feel that you are going against the grain. Any time you question this kind of relationship, you are putting yourself

on the other side, the other side being gay or female or not part of the team."

Internally, Litherland felt like a heterosexual man; externally, the vibe was that "real" men don't act this way. He remarks that he is a different person now than when he originally took these pictures. It is as if he recognizes the need for some distance before he was able to exhibit the images. The dead man photo resurfaced last winter as part of the group exhibition *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography* at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. That exhibition and the accompanying coverage in *Artforum*, *ARTNews* and *The New Yorker* resulted in the whole series finally being dragged out of the closet 13 years later.

As we move around the room, we pass a photograph showing Litherland wearing lipstick and pantyhose. In another he is naked, tied up and sporting a sex toy. We talk about how our society is quick to link sexually charged male nudes to homosexuality. Somehow with the male-centric viewpoint that dominates our culture, we find it easy to associate masculine sensuality with homoerotic art, but find it difficult to connect it to our preconceived notions of the typical straight man. "I believe that part of me is lesbian, part of me is gay, part of me is my mom," says Litherland. He points to the image that shows him wearing a dress, holding a cigarette and tilting his head to the side as he stares directly at the viewer. "That one is based on my mom."

In the end, maybe what is inspiring about *Absolutely Fabulous* has nothing to do with how Litherland looks or how he is dressed, but that he found the guts to show a side of himself that in many would easily lead to feelings of humiliation. *Absolutely Fabulous* laughs in the face of the fear of looking stupid. "What is really stupid is saying you are not a man because you have feminine attributes," Litherland counters. "Or that if you even think about being a man, it makes you less of a man. It is such a crazy part of the code: Real men don't think about being men."

Paul Litherland's Absolutely Fabulous continues at Galerie Thérèse Dionin Montreal until Sept. 2 (514-398-9204). His boxing performance will be part of the Rencontres internationale d'art performance in Quebec City, Sept. 21 to 24 (418-529-9680). Special to The Globe and Mail

Follow us on Twitter: [@GlobeArts](https://twitter.com/@GlobeArts) [<https://twitter.com/@GlobeArts>]