



Wrestling with Masculinity

Riffing on moves from football and boxing helps performance artist **Shaun El C. Leonardo** understand what being macho means

BY ANN LANDI



ABOVE From a series of self-deprecating drawings, *Self-Portrait Icon*, 2006.
OPPOSITE Leonardo in a 2005 performance of *El Conquistador vs. the Invisible Man*, at Balazo 18 in San Francisco.

IN THE NAME of art, Shaun El C. Leonardo has suffered brutal pummeling by semipro football players, trained for eight months as an amateur boxer, and learned the tactics of a high-flying form of Mexican wrestling known as *lucha libre*. While he has more than once landed in the emergency room, he has come to see pain as “part of the process.” Performance art has a tradition of physical feats, but the arduous nature of Leonardo’s work is more directly connected to today’s notions of masculinity.

Leonardo, 29, who grew up in Queens, New York, was raised in a Latino culture that celebrates machismo. His mother is from the Dominican Republic; his father is Guatemalan. He adopted the middle name El C.—short for El Conquistador—as a reflection of “an internal struggle with my own identity,” he says. While earning his B.A. in painting from Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, he was making masks, cutouts, and paintings in which he portrayed himself as comic-book superheroes. Leonardo turned to performance as the logical next step. “I was presenting myself as the godly hero when I came to the realization that I could actually be doing this myself,” he explains. “Performance became a means of investigating what these role models, what this iconography meant to me, and the baggage I felt myself trying to live up to.”

Another important influence derived from Leonardo’s longtime involvement in organized sports: during high school and college he

played football. While in graduate school, he recalls, “I started to consider my athletic experience as a part of my work.” References to both sports and Latino culture were already evident in one of his earliest performances, *El Conquistador vs. the Invisible Man*, which he conceived during a residency in 2004 at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine; he has presented it frequently ever since. In a series of unchoreographed routines lasting from 10 to 30 minutes, the masked artist, sometimes wearing a cape, wrestles an unseen adversary, executing balletic leaps and tumbles and displaying a buff physique that’s clearly the product of years of athletic training. In other works, Leonardo takes on traditional macho dances, such as flamenco, but uses music from a different time and culture—songs by Justin Timberlake or the Bee Gees.

Perhaps his most radical performance so far is *Bull in the Ring*, which is included in the show “Hard Targets—Masculinity and Sport” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (through the 18th of this month). On opening night last October, the artist stood at the center of a moving ring of football players, who one by one charge forward to try to knock him to the ground. The object of this exercise, now banned from high school and collegiate training, is to “have the center player develop alertness by ‘keeping [his] head on a swivel’ and defending himself from all oncoming offenders,” as Leonardo describes it in the catalogue essay for the LACMA show. Christopher Bedford, who organized the exhibition and is now a curator at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, says he was first drawn to Leonardo’s work because he “exists on the threshold between the life of a practicing artist and the life of an active athlete, and that’s such a rare commodity in the art world.”

Since earning his M.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2005, Leonardo has been invited to show in museums from Oaxaca, Mexico, to Warsaw; he won a string of grants, most recently a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship in painting, which remains an important part of his practice. He recently made some exquisite graphite renderings of bullfighters and cavemen. Later this year he will be showing new works with Rhys Mendes Gallery in Los Angeles, where drawings and editions sell from between \$2,000 and \$7,000, and paintings, around \$10,000.

“I say that my work is half critique and half desire,” Leonardo explains. “As much as living up to these ideals of masculinity is a burden, we also take them on as a means to be falsely confident.” ■

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