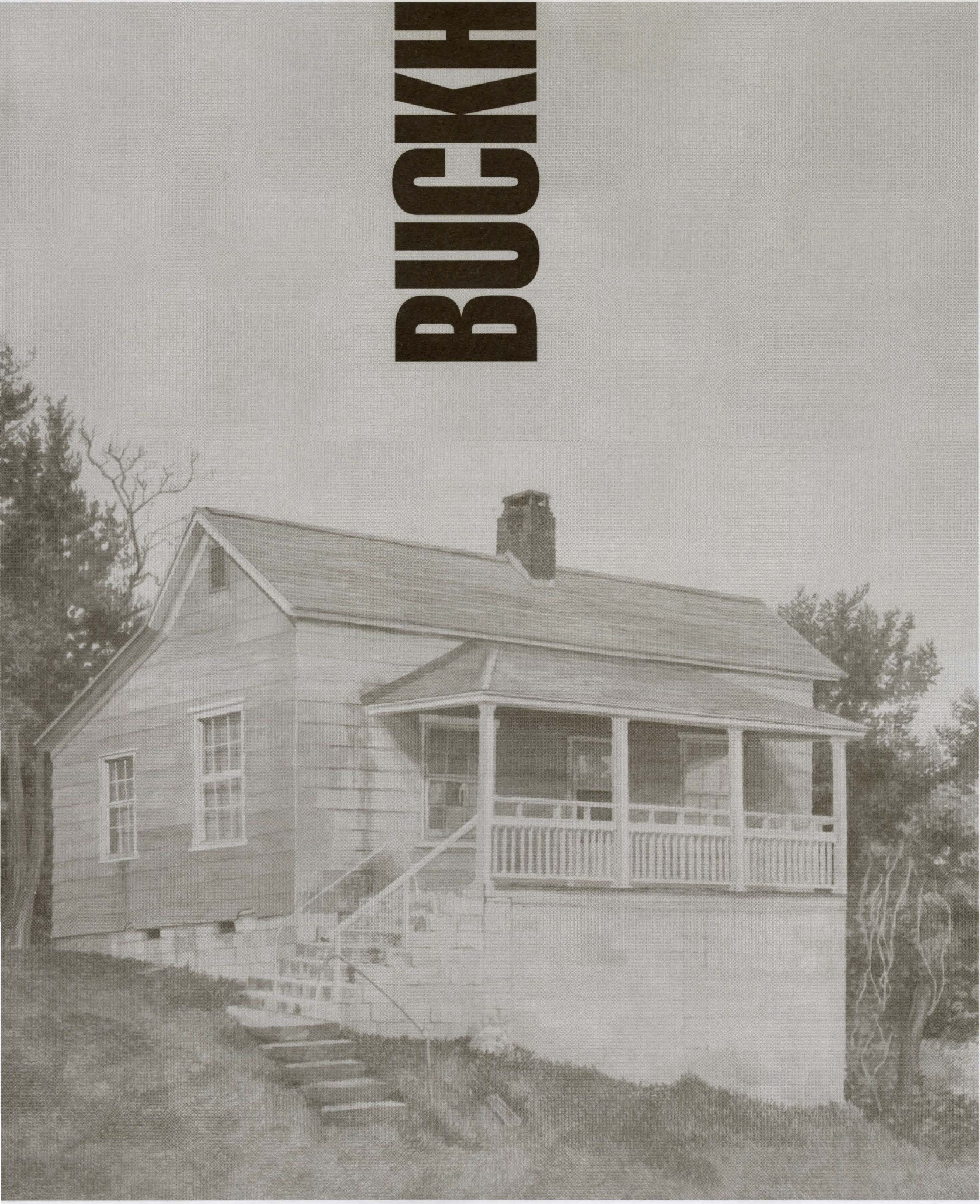


# JARED BUCKHIESTER

# LOVE ME TENDER



September 15 through November 12, 2017



it is an opposition born out of a prior devotion. The bully is desired as well as feared, and few are willing to state that to themselves much less to others. Out of that queer archaeology of desire and shame, Buckhiester's layered drawings expose the inextricability of attraction and repulsion in images that still hold sway.

This exhibition brings together works made over the last decade that illustrate the shifts in Buckhiester's use of drawing as a medium, and I have to this point been primarily referring to his works from the past five years that employ collage, facture, and other non-verisimilar practices of image-making. Interspersed among these works, however, are two drawings in the precise style that characterized his earlier work. A decade ago, Buckhiester created seamless and heavily worked drawings representing his remembered or imagined scenes from the North Georgia mountain town where he grew up. While some of these works came to include surreal collisions and depictions of masks, all relied upon a detailed and comprehensive attention to realistic detail. Because of this approach, the two works from this moment included here — *Untitled* (2009) and *Sky* (2009) — appear to be straightforward depictions. They have less of the overt and critical antagonism of the later works, and neither are about toxic masculinity so much as the attempt to find modes of escape from it.

The house depicted in *Untitled* is against a blank, timeless sky. It is a somewhat generic building — an example of a rural or semi-rural Appalachian type of domestic architecture. Buckhiester drew it from a low vantage point, so that its otherwise squat profile starts to loom. He attended to details such as the stains from the rain's sediments that have drawn a line from the porch's slanted roof to the foundation that sits on uneven ground. It is a quiet drawing in which there is no drama or event in the imagery, just the slow and loving attention to all of the little things that make this typical architecture unique. In Buckhiester's drawing, this house has become both humble and noble, easily readable yet withholding the dramas of the lives within it. Buckhiester's realist attention to detail has pored over the evidence on the house's exterior with a precision that is almost scientific. Nevertheless, the blinds are closed and we are relegated to the outside. No amount of careful attention to the house's surface can really tell us what histories have unfolded inside.

This same use of verisimilitude characterized the other early drawing, *Sky*, which shows another small, typical house with uneven and stained foundations. Conquering this domestic architecture is *Sky*, a friend from Maine who chose to remain in her rural community even though it would have been easier to take the more common route to move to a city in order to escape rural antipathy. She flouted the norms imposed on her, both in the self-determination of her openness to her community about being a transgender woman and in her free-spirited attitudes that refused to be easily categorized or delimited by convention. Buckhiester captures this strength in the triumphant pose of *Sky* and in the impromptu windswept stage she has created with a sheet anchored by rocks on her porch roof. Rather than depict her in her hometown in Maine, he fused this image of his defiant friend with the homely architecture of the small, withering mill town in South Carolina where he would regularly visit his grandmother. This was a way of paying homage to *Sky*'s determination to remain rooted in a rural community as well as means to forge a new "memory" of the possibility of such defiance within his local, rural context that would seem to disallow it. This work was among those culminating the series of drawings of rural genderqueer and queer youth on which Buckhiester had focused his early drawing practice. (An example of the origins of this series is the 2005 drawing *Blue Wednesday*.) He intended these drawings to testify to evidence of survival, struggle, and difference in rural communities that are often caricatured as lacking such examples of self-determination and resilience.

Untold, 2016



Twelve Bullies and a Bucket Revised, 2012



# JARED BUCKHIESTER: LOVE ME TENDER

David J. Getsy

When Jared Buckhiester and I had just finished choosing the works for this exhibition, he looked at me and said, "I need to make more tender drawings." This self-reflexive statement came after hours of us examining and discussing his work from the past decade. Our conversation kept coming back to ways in which he often practiced a kind of deformation of his imagery through his process. The bleed of the watercolor, the cut of the collage, and the drawn contortions that he put into his newer drawings all seemed to carry a kind of hostility to his images of American working-class archetypes. Studio visits (especially purposeful ones like this one was) are exhausting and psychologically-charged, and at the end of ours Buckhiester felt worn down by our attention to the aggressive imagery and techniques that he used to grapple with desires, memories, associations, and cultural scripts.

As soon as he said it, this offhand, self-critical comment sparked a reaction in us both. It snapped into focus our talk over the previous hours. It had this effect because it didn't ring true. Despite all the aggression towards those stereotypes in the drawings, we both immediately acknowledged to each other that there was also affection in every one of them. His confession of the need for tenderness laid bare the cross-purposed desire that weaves through his work. No matter how much he grapples with images of violence, of toxic masculinity, or of the bully's threat, his drawings are nevertheless suffused with his own captivation by those images. Every act of opposition in his process was made possible by, first, an attachment. Within the critical gaze that he brings to the stereotypes of American masculinity, that is, there is also a rapt stare that has been arrested and held by desire. Any push only has force because of the imagery's pull.

The emotional energy that I see in Buckhiester's work derives from this commingling of aversion and longing. Whether autobiographical or appropriated, each image-element in his drawings bears the weight of a deep identification. He wrestles with the understanding that the images that arouse us early on are not so much found as given — by environment, by culture, by family, by circumstance. Buckhiester's work struggles with the conflicted images of rural, working-class desire that became for him (and for many) part of his pantheon. Any queer child knows this tension created by their desire for something that they come to know can never repay the yearning for connection that they project onto it. For Buckhiester, this was located in images of the trucker, the inmate, the professional wrestler, the high school bully — all of which he would later disdain for their violence, their homophobia, and their emotional sterility even as he continued to feel the affective power of his desire to be their exception — to be the one they loved.

Buckhiester's drawings play out a struggle in which the image's power can be confronted as alien only because its constitutive impact has always already been felt. His imagery comes from the rural, white, working-class Appalachia, and he catalogues the kind of American archetypes that take hold in that context. These are not the mainstream national images of desire or masculinity, but rather the ones that come up for derision and caricature in popular culture under such stereotypes as the "hick" or "redneck." Buckhiester embraces these working-class, would-be idols not just because they shaped his adolescence but also because they are riven with their own fragility. The noble truck driver, the melodramatic professional wrestler, the high school football player that will never escape his home town, and the heroic inmate populate Buckhiester's drawings. Such archetypes are quintessentially American, but they are disavowed and downgraded in national popular culture — relegated to the rural and the working-class

imaginary as second-class heroes.

This made sense to me when I encountered Buckhiester's on-going series of photographs of truck drivers. These were taken from the passenger seat of his father's car on recent trips back to northern Georgia. I grew up in a different part of Appalachia than Buckhiester, in its upper reaches in semi-rural upstate New York. It was a place most people from other parts of the state knew only because it was where two interstate highways intersected. When I was very young, I remember being fascinated by truck drivers and their eighteen-wheel behemoths. The trucks were mighty, chrome-encrusted machines and their masters were symbols of freedom, traveling from town to town in elaborate chariots. Later in my teens, this fantasy of seeing beyond the limits of my hometown coalesced as erotic and re-attached itself to truck stops rather than trucks, but underwriting this shift was the kind of pre-given image of desire that was born from location and class rather than any choice. I recognized the re-enactment of that spark of desire in the anxious visual relation in Buckhiester's photographs of being looked down upon from an eighteen-wheeler's cab at 65 miles per hour. The truck driver might not be seen as one of the heroic masculine archetypes that American popular culture propagates today, but it was nevertheless an image that was imbued with mystery, liberty, and vigor. It was only as I got older and moved away that I came to disavow such adolescent idols, retrospectively criticizing myself for my supposed provincialism. For me, the truck driver successively came to embody both the sense of erotically-charged possibility and the shame that this had been my only local traveler onto whom I could project such fantasies of escape and self-realization. It is the entanglement of such divergent entreaties that Buckhiester plumbs with his drawings — the recognition of the local, limited, and pre-given images of desire that make us who we are and our inability to fully shake their hold over us.

In our conversations Buckhiester talked about ways in which images of arousal are built into us as children, before we have a language for sex or the erotic. In our adult lives, such imbued images continue to be determining and, as adults, we recurrently seek them and their ilk. Buckhiester's work hinges on his exploration of the repetitive circuit of desire in which the norms of a cultural context are infused as imposed images of desire, impossible ideals, and unrequited loves. He takes on such archetypes as a means to bracket their power and to expose their fragility and compensatory violence. That is, Buckhiester doesn't just criticize the toxic masculinity and presumptive whiteness of the rural South that helped to form him. He also uses his own story to restage the struggle adults have with their pasts, and he wades into the conflict between conscious (and conscientious) critique and the undertow of desire, upbringing, and the pre-existing foundations on which our selves have been built. This is why there is always tenderness in these drawings of inmates and bullies. It is there because it is also a tenderness toward the child who learned about themselves through their rapt attention to such images — regardless of how much they are now disavowed or understood critically.

Even though the truck driver photographs are not included in this exhibition focused on Buckhiester's drawings, I have started with them because they crystallize the dynamic that underwrites the drawings' more

elaborate struggle with desires and the archetypes that underwrite them. The slower practice of drawing and the resistance of its materiality stretch out the engagement with the image over the course of trying to realize it on paper. Both with the deliberate scratch of graphite or the unexpected flow of the watercolor, the practice of drawing compels the artist to be deliberate in their striving for the image. The practice of graphic representation involves both a love for and a subservience to the thing being rendered on paper. Buckhiester's work capitalizes on the ways in which this love and subservience of the process of drawing can be used to reinforce (both conceptually and emotionally) his confrontation with images of conflicted desire. This is where his deformations of imagery come in, whether through the employment of materiality to alter the image or through a collage practice that cuts into his meticulous drawings.

There is a loving attention in all his works, even as each attempts to wrench power from his images of inmates, wrestlers, truckers, and bullies. His work takes on those stereotypes and fights against the toxic ver-

Subject at 72 MPH I-85 GA State Line, 2014



sions of masculinity that they propagate. He struggles with the ways in which whiteness and class become calcified into this imagery, and his critical approach to such politically problematic elements is reinforced by his interrogation of how such ideals and norms are inculcated and imposed. His work is often foreboding in its insinuation that violence looms against anyone perceived as other. *Twelve Bullies and a Bucket* (2012) lays this bare with its homogenous gang staring out. Buckhiester, however, fearlessly presents this image both for that intimation of homophobic violence and because of the ways in which that intimation has an inescapably erotic charge — one that would be consciously and politically disavowed but never fully dissipated. He has drawn this image more than once. Other such hints of violence's nearness are there in a floating knife, the wrestler's struggle, or the ghastly visage created by the seepage of watercolor under a football player's helmet. Buckhiester's determined and committed attack on toxic masculinity, however, always comes with an anxious tenderness for the vulnerability being compensated for in such propped-up stereotypes of masculine power. His is not the self-satisfied, echo-chambered irony that passes for critique in much contemporary art. Rather,



Squadron of 12 position 3B, 2012

Both *Untitled* and *Sky* exhibit a mode of observational realism cultivated by Buckhiester to witness the emotional complexity that is often lost in caricatures of the working-class rural community. These drawings make heroic the humble, and they echo this through the painstaking rendering of details that fill their paper with the image. The realism of this phase of Buckhiester's work is not just about such attention but also about the partiality of observation. With both the anonymous house and with the transgender hero against a home-made backdrop, the accounting of the exterior only goes so far. Buckhiester's detailed drawings stage a divergence between merely looking and actually knowing, and neither of the drawings fully reveal their emotional complexity immediately. Both drawings evidence an attempt to do justice to exterior appearance but both also maintain a protection of the interior. In the drawing of *Sky*, the full force of her defiant gesture from her porch only starts to become evident when we come to know more about her (and thus grasp why this same flourishing gesture of strength is also brave because of the violence and reprisal that all too often are inflicted upon transgender youth). Much more is there than can be observed, and Buckhiester used his precise renderings to make allegorical the hidden strength and depth in these everyday architectures and heroes.

Buckhiester made a deliberate shift in his attitude toward drawing about five years ago, and inverted the terms of his earlier practice. Rather than images of escape or rebellion, he instead chose to tackle archetypal images of masculinity and their presumptive power. Again, these are the conflicted working-class images of the inmate, the football figure, or the wrestler — the kinds of archetypes that cut through and determine American popular culture even as they are disavowed or denigrated for their working-class appeal. Eschewing the realism of his earlier practice, Buckhiester's drawings from the last five years take on a rampant experimentation with such imagery, and he has explored a range of approaches to graphic representation. In his large-scale images of football players and cheerleaders, for instance, there is none of the precision of his earlier work. Instead, there is a willful looseness of the rendering and the reliance on the uncontrolled staining of excess watercolor to deform and complicate the nevertheless easily recognizable images of teenage idols. That is, rather than the devoted realism that testified to hidden strength beneath carefully-rendered and defiant exteriors, Buckhiester in these more recent works uses a non-verisimilar style to plumb depths and to expose the psychologically compacted energy that they contain. In this case, the faces of these teenage icons become grisly masks in the process, and any idealism we might expect is dispelled and replaced with an abject image. The football player is revealed without full uniform, wearing instead a helmet, socks, a jockstrap and a tank-top rolled up to reveal the nipples. Through these attributes and through the ambiguous rendering of longer hair, Buckhiester undermines the presumptive gender of the ideal of the football player. Instead, that iconography is mocked and its echoes with the cheerleader are established, making the jockstrap-wearing football player appear — despite the disturbing, gaping face — to take on a cliché cheesecake pose. Similarly, Buckhiester's cheerleader gives us little of the conventional erotic objectification often laid onto its iconography, instead blocking the viewer's gaze and offering a figure that is equally undetermined by stereotypical expectations of bodies and genders.

Such use of the medium to engage in deformations and ambiguities can also be seen in the 2014 *Drawing from Behind II*, one of the many works that employ collage elements from the comic books that fueled Buckhiester's adolescent erotic imagination — *The Savage Sword of Conan* series. Its images of violence and muscular display were, like the professional wrestlers that appear in other works, built into the conflicted image of masculinity to be both desired and feared. It is

the unraveling of this fusion that Buckhiester's drawings labor towards, and they use this adolescent imagery to conjure past images of desire that are complicated through drawn deformations and material play.

Another central image for Buckhiester is that of the cowboy, which (unlike some of his other iconographies) retains a general hold on American national clichés. In his cowboy works, Buckhiester explicitly sexualizes this figure, making the “cowpoke” receptive as a means to undercut the stereotype of the conquering, phallic pioneer. *Ice Cream Cone* (2014) does this in spectacular fashion through the depiction of manual self-penetration with a gloved hand — an image that re-describes the mythical image of the cowboy's riding into the distance as a masturbatory, receptive loop. The title of this work came from the photographer Judy Linn. She first saw the work in the memorial show to Hudson, the director of Feature Gallery where both Buckhiester and Linn had been in group shows together. She said she thought it was a drawing of an ice cream cone and claimed she could not see the self-pleasuring cowboy with pants around his booted ankles. Buckhiester retained her comment as the title since it calls forth the kind of sublimations or displacements through which one copes with sexual desire. The licking of the melting ice cream cone is an oft-repeated example of the mundane evocation of sexual pleasuring, and Linn's misrecognition of the cowboy's gymnastic anal masturbation compounds rather than detracts from this image's erotic charge.

The large drawing at the center of the exhibition, *Untitled* (2015), is characteristic of Buckhiester's current approach, which combines elements of his previous verisimilar practice with moments of deformation and collage. An appropriated image of a prison inmate from behind, the drawing presents its subject as heroic, with arms akimbo, perfect (retro) blond hair, and requisite tattoos. Like *Ice Cream Cone*, there is a looseness that comes from the watercolor that fights with the precise rendering of space and figure. This back-facing figure is eroticized, and we again are viewing from a slightly low vantage point upward. Buckhiester has superimposed onto this figure other cliché images of masculine power. On his lower half, he wears the Sumo wrestler's fundoshi rendered economically with the application of a collaged white paper “T” around the waist and between the buttocks. An analogous stripe evokes a football

player's helmet in the upper half, and this is reiterated by the section cut out of the drawing in the shape of football pads. Through this hole, we see a second layer made of fabric printed with flamboyant ice skaters (the inverse of the iconography of tough masculinity) that, itself, is ripped to reveal a third layer underneath. While it is made into the shape of armor (in the form of football pads), this archaeological layering of underlying images can be understood, by contrast, to evoke the earlier ways of being in the world that the hard shell of the adult inmate must suppress. In this ambitious large-scale drawing, Buckhiester layers symbols of conflicted masculine power onto the prisoner who, because of his incarceration, becomes both desired and pitied, powerful and impotent.

Perhaps the most psychologically charged (because the most narratively unstraightforward) drawing in the exhibition is the 2016 *Untold*. For this, Buckhiester took a 2009 self-portrait drawing as the basis for a new collage. His return to his earlier work is another attempt to unpack his imagery's emotional and psychological

significance, and Buckhiester reinforces this with the collaged element of the wrestler's face superimposed on his own and with the hunting knife that floats nearby. The knife is itself a detailed drawing that has been overlaid on the earlier drawing, and Buckhiester has rendered it with near-photographic precision to throw into relief the looser drawing of its support. It is only on close inspection that we realize that this dangerous tool is not found (image) but made (drawing), thus instilling a kind of temporal unfolding at the level not just of image but of medium in the work. It was this work that we were discussing when Buckhiester said he needed to make more tender drawings. His initial self-portrait was one of his images of queer self-determination in rural communities, and now it had been shadowed with violence both in the contorted face and the lavishly-rendered hunting knife (which is a ubiquitous tool that can quickly become a weapon). It is not immediately apparent how much the imagery of violence in this drawing's current form took as its foundation the loving



*Ice Cream Cone*, 2014

representation of queer self-determination that was the original subject of the source drawing. In a balder way than in other works, the ominous additions to *Untold* both transformed and relied upon the drawing's initial tenderness.

In that same conversation about aggression and tenderness, we arrived at the title for this exhibition. “Love Me Tender” is a song about the subservience of the one who is loved: “Love me tender / Love me sweet / Never let me go / You have made my life complete / And I love you so.” Famously performed by Elvis Presley in 1956, the song is supremely sentimental and, itself, carries a Southern valence due to Presley's twang. Recorded soon after Presley had relocated to Memphis and his first non-rock ballad, the song was written by Vera Matson and Presley based on the 1861 song “Aura Lee” written by George R. Poulton. In his 2008 book on the history of song lyrics (*Love Me Tender: The Stories Behind the World's Favorite Songs*), Max Cryer details the century-long story of the song, from it being the anthem for Antebellum graduates at West Point to its becoming a



Sky, 2009

favorite of Civil War soldiers to its later appearances in many military movies such as *The Last Musketeer* (1952) and *The Long Grey Line* (1955). In 1956, Matson and Presley's new lyrics and arrangement built upon its status as a long-surviving American armed services song that had become "timeless" despite its tangled Civil War history. Its folksy association with duty was recast as the lover's vulnerability. Presley sang this song of the subservience of love to show his sensitivity, and that move of self-exposure was reliant on the deeply-rooted associations of the tune with military duty and self-sacrifice. "Love Me Tender" is song about dependence that is, itself, dependent on its history. It is also a song about vulnerable masculinity, and it is counterposed to the swaggering, sexualized persona that had been Presley's trademark. With the song (and its deep history), the previously brash Presley was allowed to show a different, passive side. He could plead to be loved back, tenderly.

Buckhiester holds out for such an unlikely tenderness in the stereotypes of masculinity he exposes and critiques. He does this out of an understanding that — however much they might be disavowed and opposed — these unchosen images are inextricable and affecting. It is the ethical complexity of this self-awareness that forms the emotional ground for Buckhiester's drawings of conflicted desires and the archetypes that anchor them. He fearlessly exposes the process of self-criticizing one's given assumptions and pathways of desire, and he uses the slow medium of drawing to imbue his images both with loving attention and with committed resistance. In the end, his practice seeks to face head on that which few of us can face — the limitations

of the conditions that forged us. However, Buckhiester's work does not resign itself to determinism. Instead, it is hopeful in its brave understanding that to critique a toxic culture's norms is to take to heart how much any such opposition is fueled by a history of entanglement.

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