

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Xavier Schipani: Chasing Desire

June 30 – September 1, 2018

Opening reception: Saturday, June 30, 6–8 pm

Lora Reynolds is pleased to announce *Chasing Desire*, an exhibition of murals, paintings on canvas, and a sculptural installation masquerading as a public bathroom—all by Xavier Schipani.

The nude figures Schipani paints are flat, Wesselmann-esque silhouettes. Their bodies and faces are mostly featureless aside from hair, nipples, genitalia, and a wide range of skin tones.

The murals in the front room point to ancient Greece: wrestling athletes wrapped around a wall-sized amphora, a giant marble bust, and two groups of strongmen straining against each other in an epic tug-of-war.

The bathroom installation in the back room might first appear to be fairly straightforward—toilet stalls, urinals, sinks, a mirror—but upon entering a stall, one encounters a mass of entangled bodies swarming in hedonistic delight.

The interiors of the stalls recall all manner of historical, contemporary, and imaginary fantasies: peep show booths from Times Square's seedy past, back rooms in gay bars, and toilet-cruising graffiti ("For a good time, call..."). But the stall paintings also represent two opposing ideologies—one being that you should pursue your true self and deepest desires whether behind closed doors or in public, the other being that girls do not belong in boys' bathrooms and vice versa. Public restrooms are now a polarizing political battleground; policing gender identity with bathroom bills has lifted the veil on residual trans- and homophobia (even though the majority of Americans support same-sex marriage). In spite of this current controversy, Schipani's bathroom installation is crisp, clean, welcoming, and accepting—no matter who you are or how you identify. Even if a little subversive, it is a safe space.

The figures in this exhibition's murals are all men—because the show is largely a reckoning with masculinity. What is manliness? What has it meant in the past, what does it mean now, and what are its shortcomings? In a recent *New Yorker* essay, Joshua Rothman draws a distinction between manliness and virility that goes back to ancient Greece:

'Basic' manliness...is undisciplined and, worse, unearned, since, while men are born masculine, they must achieve virility...Watching the film *Gladiator*, for example, we readily recognize that Russell Crowe's quiet, temperate, and deadly Maximus represents the virile ideal, whereas Joaquin Phoenix's Emperor Commodus is too undisciplined to have true *virilitas*. Commodus is strong, sexy, intelligent, and undeniably masculine—and yet his passions control him and lead him in idiosyncratic and undesirable directions. He's a familiar figure: a man who represents the dangers of manliness without virility.

Today, while the American President is certainly masculine, his narcissism, thin skin, and faith in himself as a deal-maker lead him to slander allies, befriend despots, and play chicken with

nuclear warheads. At the same time, in the wake of the Me Too movement, men around the globe are trying to reimagine the way they think about and treat women. History may never have seen another time when the idea of masculinity has been in deeper crisis.

Analogously, Schipani's life has been a continuous reckoning with his own masculinity. For the past ten years he has lived as a man, after a lifetime of feeling out of place in the female body he was born into.

The thirteen portraits in the project room directly address this intensely personal part of Schipani's story. Twelve of them are ghostly, blue-toned paintings on canvas of queer people Schipani met around the time he was transitioning. He calls them his "trans-cestors." More detailed and realistic than the murals, they are tributes to all the queer people who have come before him and fought for acknowledgement and equality. At the center of the room is a neutral-toned self-portrait—the artist himself, looking to his trans-cestors for inspiration and guidance on his daily journey of self-actualization.

In closing his article about masculinity, Rothman quotes an essay by Thomas Page McBee, a trans man who wrote about his experience training at a boxing gym: "I love the beauty I find in masculinity, the way it can hold a bloody nose and a hug, a sharp razor on the jaw under the tender watch of a barber, the muscle that must be nursed carefully to its potential, the body that can make a puppy or a child feel sheltered, cocooned." Rothman wonders: "Perhaps this is what virility without misogyny could sound like."

Perhaps—but we still have a long way to go.

Xavier Schipani, born in 1984 in Washington DC, lives and works in Austin. Schipani has participated in exhibitions at MASS Gallery (Austin), Museum of Human Achievement (Austin), Open Space (Baltimore), SOMArts (San Francisco), and Vox Populi (Philadelphia). He has collaborated with *Transparent* creator Jill Soloway on several sculptural bathroom installations for Refinery29's 29Rooms. The *Austin Chronicle* named him the city's Best Muralist in 2016 after he produced murals for Irene's, la Barbecue, Arro, and Qui.