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Philip Auslander

Jacques Lacan once observed, "In the human being, virile display itself appears as feminine." The title of Joe Sola's recent exhibition, "Taking a Bullet," first mounted at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, hints at a similar paradox. Sola evokes memories of Hollywood genre films, suggesting that the person offering up the ultimate sacrifice is most likely to be either a man's male buddy or a femme fatale. The gesture itself--the refusal to get out of harm's way--combines stereo-typically masculine action with stereotypically feminine passivity, and this dialectic is at the heart of Sola's project.

The centerpiece of the show, the performance/installation *Male Fashion Models Make Conceptual Art, 2006*, takes a swipe at the archetypal dyad of the dynamic masculine artist and his inert feminine model. As the title suggests, Sola hired five male models to make art at the exhibition's opening. The only instructions Sola gave his performers were to use all of the materials available and to work for a prescribed period. The content of the work--within-the-work was devised entirely by the models themselves, who thus became artists--of a sort. The result approximated a large, garish Rauschenberg Combine, incorporating a diverse array of elements laid out on a horizontal platform. Any assumption that models necessarily lack critical self-awareness was debunked by an assemblage that included articles of clothing, texts demanding that viewers interrogate their own desire to look, and an Oldenburgian burger-and-fries sculpture. Whatever the work's other achievements or shortcomings, its spectacle of a group of beautiful men hard at work was clearly appreciated by those attending the opening. Even when assuming the active role of artist, the models thus remained eroticized objects of the viewers' gaze.

In interacting with these and other icons of hypermasculinity, Sola always marks his own masculinity as different from theirs. In a monitor-based video *Riding with Adult Video Performers, 2002*, the artist rides a roller coaster with a group of male porn stars, but it is obvious even in this context that he is a breed apart. His physique does not resemble the performers' and his ebullient enjoyment contrasts with their more restrained reactions. For the other monitor-based video in the show, *Saint Henry Composition, 2001*, Sola allowed himself to be used as a tackling dummy by a high school football team and was inevitably knocked over by the uniformed players. By presenting himself as either more emotionally expressive or physically passive than the more "masculine" men with whom he interacts, Sola becomes their feminized Other.

He takes a more active role in the projected video *Studio Visit, 2005*, the most engaging work here. This documents a series of visits by art-world professionals, including Artforum contributor Jan Tumlir and LA Louver gallery's Peter Goulds and Chris Pate, to Sola's Los Angeles studio. Each time, after showing his guests around and asking them if they would like to see a new performance, the artist suddenly takes a flying leap out of a closed window, crashing through the (breakaway) glass and leaving those present bemused. Here, Sola emulates that archetypal movie scene in which the desperate protagonist seizes a slim chance to escape a threatening situation. Particularly likable is the moment just before each leap when Sola feigns interest in the conversation while visibly planning his dive to freedom. (Perhaps this video provides the backstory to Yves Klein's *Leap Into the Void, 1960*. Is it possible that a curator was responsible for driving Klein out the window?)

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

That Sola repeats a physically demanding action many times in both *Saint Henry Composition* and *Studio Visit* suggests a connection to endurance art. But whereas that genre emphasized the body's material presence, Sola's primary concern is the way in which cultural phenomena still disseminate standards of masculine behavior that real men feel obliged to live up to.

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