

Constructed Masculinities: Unpicking Working-Class Masculinities through Knitting

ABSTRACT: Connor Shields is a Leeds-based artist originally from Middlesbrough. Combining materials commonly associated with the construction industry, with those of knitting and textiles, he explores themes of queer identity and working-class masculinities through knitting and sculpture. Artist and academic, Dr Daniel Fountain, talks to Connor about queer craft and the process of exploring identity through art practice.

KEY WORDS: art practice, craft, knitting, queer, queer craft

BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Dr Daniel Fountain (he/they) is a queer artist and Lecturer in Art History and Visual Culture at the University of Exeter.

Connor Shields (he/him) is an artist who fuses materials commonly associated with the construction industry, with those of knitting and textiles, to explore themes of queer identity and working-class masculinity.

DF: Connor, I noticed you've worked with knitting and crochet for several years now. What first drew you to work with these materials and processes?

CS: When I was at University, I began looking at ideas around gender and how I was able to question and subvert stereotypes associated with materials and making. I was drawn to knitting because I initially thought it wasn't something that was for me; as we know, it has long been stereotyped as a 'female' or 'domestic' hobby, although historically this isn't necessarily true. When I started to use knitting in my sculptures, I realised that it generated an interesting conversation, especially when it was paired with opposing materials, such as metal and concrete. Knitting became a way of challenging these binary ideas of gender and labour, but of course it's also quite a tactile process and fun to sculpt with - it's malleable and pliant.



Fig 1: Connor Shields in his studio

Image Credit: Zoe Opal (Opal Video)

DF: Perhaps it is the malleability of the material that lends itself so well to strategies of queering; a way to “make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimise, to camp up – heteronormative knowledges” (Sullivan, 2003, vi)? It speaks to these notions of unpicking or unravelling, which are fundamental parts of the process of knitting. I’m also interested in whether you are self-taught or not? I never studied textiles at school and now as a textile artist people always assume I can knit them fabulous scarves, but I’ve never been able to get the hang of it, I much prefer sewing...

CS: I learned to knit in secondary school when a friend taught me, but I didn’t keep it up for very long, maybe because of the perception that it has. I taught myself again when I was at University. It is usually a skill that is passed down from the older generation to the younger, but this was not the case for me. In fact, I made a video piece for my degree show where I did the exact opposite, teaching my dad how to knit. Through the creation of *Teaching My Dad How To Knit* (2018) I was thinking about how craft is often used as a form of therapy for some, and also thinking about the alarming statistics of male suicide in the North East of England where I grew up, which was something me and my Dad talked about during this process.



Fig 2: Connor Shields, *Teaching My Dad How To Knit* (2018)

DF: As you say, it is usually a skill passed down from the older generation to the younger, and also typically from mother to daughter, but here you get a complete reverse of that. I think it's important to challenge these stereotypes associated with craft. It also makes me reflect on the beauty of the process itself; the slow and meditative nature of it which allows opportunity for reflection, deep thought, and conversation. In this sense, do you see the process of creation just as important as the 'final' work?

CS: The process is very important to me. The work almost becomes performative in a way. Although I usually make and craft in private in my studio, the action of making and knitting raises questions about how we gender and label certain processes. Aside from the gendered nature of these, I am also interested in the histories of craft more broadly; the way that they often existed long before industrial processes existed. For example, I think about sailors that knitted

guernsey jumpers, and I think about the Teesside steel industry and the resonance that it has with the people from this area that I live and work in.

DF: You also describe your work as “an enquiry into the nature of maleness” (Shields, n.d.).

Could you talk a bit about this?

CS: Where I grew up, in a working-class town, the binaries seemed far more rigid, and expectations of what a ‘man’ is were very rigid. These experiences and perceptions inform the work that I produce, and the work becomes a way of questioning these ideas. The materials reflect these binary positions, placing the brick (which is seen as masculine and industrial) with the knitting (which is seen as feminine and perhaps passive). I do think that there is an element of humour to this aspect of the work though, for me at least. It makes me reassess why the materials are, or were, perceived to be this way. There's always an interesting reaction when I say that I make sculptures with bricks and knitting. It is seemingly an odd pairing, but I think that they work together harmoniously. Ideas of class are at more at the forefront of my practice right now, but of course we will always read the materials as gendered.

Concrete is also a strange material. When I first started working with it, I thought that it would behave similarly to plaster in that you just mix it with water and it's done, but it is nothing like that at all. It often takes around 24 hours to ‘cure’ but if you want a stronger ‘bond’ you need to do a ‘slow cure’ and keep it wrapped up for as long as possible to retain the moisture. It can't be too wet, or not too dry in the initial mix though. Then it needs to be kept damp for a period. I still

don't fully understand the science behind it. So, there's me in the studio every day with a spray bottle keeping it moistened, then wrapping it up in plastic sheets...

DF: So, it literally is a 'labour of love', for want of a better term?

CS: Yes! Some days I would just have to go into the studio just to water the concrete and keep it hydrated.

DF: I am fascinated by the juxtaposition of materials and textures in your work; hard vs soft, concrete vs crochet. Do you see the process of uniting these seemingly binary material choices (typically associated with masculinity and femininity respectively) as a way of disrupting or problematising traditional understandings of gender and gendered labour?

CS: I definitely see it as an action of disruption. I always aim for the soft objects to appear hard or strong, and the harder objects appear softer and passive. I'm interested in altering these perceptions. I sometimes pour the concrete into bags and manipulate the shape. Once it cures, it leaves the impression of the folds and shape of the bag, almost mimicking that of a light pillow. With the crafted and knitted elements, I aim to make these the supportive parts in the work; its strength lies within.

DF: That's an important point, I think. The duality of the materials choices suggests that we need to move beyond binary cliches of craft as 'soft', 'domestic', 'passive', and masculinity 'hard', 'social', 'active'. The works, like masculinity, are not homogenous, but a beautiful interweaving

of different aspects of identity and lived experience, thus we might talk about masculinity as the plural, masculinities. It also seems to me that themes of endurance and tension often feature in your sculptures - I am especially struck by the fragility of rope holding up solid concrete blocks, or knitted structures that struggle to support the weight of steel bars. Could this be read as reflective of the queer experience? A feeling of not being supported or 'held up' at times?

CS: I would say so but perhaps the opposite. The softer elements are technically the 'strength' in the work. They are the supporting and nurturing parts of the sculpture. They brace the weight. Concrete is a material often used for creating strong foundations, but it's the rope or the knitting that is doing the supporting in these instances.



Fig.3 and 4: Left: '*Brace*' (2018) Right: '*Resilience*' (2018)

Image credits: Oliver Allen

DF: I guess as queer artists we sometimes jump to express negative experiences and even trauma in our work, and therefore people project that narrative onto every work we create. However, there's often an aspect of joyful celebration too; a cheeky smirk, a sense of defiance, and a celebration of what we can achieve in the face of adversity. Like you say, the knitted support mechanisms that hold the concrete sculpture 'up' are perhaps reflective of our own support networks and chosen families who hold us 'up'. Again, there's such an interesting duality to the work that leaves this narrative somewhat ambiguous.

DF: I have become a bit obsessed with your Instagram recently and have loved seeing the ways you document seemingly mundane objects and everyday encounters that might go unnoticed to some people, but which have resonance with you. There's washing lines strung up between terrace houses, signs of 'deep excavation', and mangled steel bars at demolition sites.

CS: Definitely. Some of the main inspirations to my practice right now are construction and demolition sites that I see around me daily. I am intrigued by the random assemblages that you find around these sites. They feel sculptural to me, and considered, although that is probably unlikely. I often wonder why the builder stacked the bricks in that way, or why this unusual and unknown object has been used to weigh something down. I find a lot of humour in the warning signs I see, when taken out of their original context. As you mention, signs that warn of a 'deep excavation' which immediately create a sexual innuendo. The shapes and material combinations that I see in these sites inform the sculptures that I make. Mounds of tarmac, bent metal reinforcement bars, tangled wires.



Fig. 5 and 6: Documentation images taken by Connor Shields.

As well as this visual inspiration, I have also been influenced by a text by Jason Prior (2014) titled 'Amongst The Ruins'. The paper examines spaces of urban ruin and how they facilitated an alternative mode of exploring gay identity away from mandated everyday life. These spaces, when left to ruin, became ideal spaces for gay cruising due to them not being policed and maintained in the same way as other areas of society. Away from "pervasive heteronormativity", you were not as likely to get caught in these spaces (Prior, 2014). It could be a place to explore freedom of expression of identity and sexuality, in times when it wasn't as socially acceptable, or legal, to be homosexual. These sites of ruin are described as creating "unexpected materialities" (Prior, 2014). When I began making a piece also called *Amongst The Ruins* (2021) I had been experimenting with rubber and concrete where woollen knitting is coated with these materials. I was thinking about the connotations that this material combination evoked and its reference to

fetish, and particularly to the aesthetic qualities of fetish bars, including the smells and textures. This led me to Prior's text, examining where perhaps this aesthetic influence filtered down from - these sites of urban ruin.



Fig. 7: *'Amongst The Ruins'* (2021)

Image Credit: Connor Shields.

DF: Part of the call out for this special issue asked about “contemporary issues in knitting” and “how looking to the past can inform the future of knitting”. I wondered if you have any reflections on this? Do you think people are starting to take queer craft seriously more than they have in the past?

CS: I feel like craft is taken much more seriously as an art form than it perhaps previously was. Craft has always been prominent within activism, and I think this is something that I do think

will continue, due to this history, but we are seeing it much more in the mainstream. For me, craft references this history and the people who engaged with it. It references important stories. My grandad was in the navy, and it always fascinated me that the sailors would knit alongside their wives without prejudice. Knitting was an act of necessity. Each village would have a different pattern on the guernsey to identify where they came from. I guess it was partly patriotic, but it also had practicality - that if they were lost at sea then they could be identified by the pattern. There was a certain intelligence in the use of materials and the process, well before we had a digitalised world with knitting machines. I think that it's important we remember these stories and consider how it is interwoven, if you'll pardon the pun, with gender, class and sexuality.

DF: I totally agree. Joseph McBrinn's (2021) new book 'Queering The Subversive Stitch: Men and the Culture of Needlework' also sheds light on some of the histories of men and the culture of needlework that have long been overlooked. I hope that many more of these stories can continue to be told and remembered.

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