

Man up

Masculinities: liberation through photography explores half a century of photographic representations of men – their bodies, their identities, their social roles. It was chilling to visit this vast exhibition at the beginning of a week in which Harvey Goldstein went to prison for persistent acts of sexual violence, and each day's news seemed to bring more stories of men murdering women. Contemporary current affairs are full of powerful men – Trump, Johnson, Putin, Erdogan – behaving in stereotypically dominant ways. This show is based on the premise that masculinities are plural, changeable, and socially constructed – but you could be forgiven for thinking that the more things change, the more things remain the same. But #metoo is here to say it can't go on like this. "Hegemonic masculinity" – established, questioned, parodied, challenged – is at the heart of a show which is as much cultural history as it is art, but never more timely.

Richard Avedon's 1976 series "The Family" represents 73 members of the US political and cultural establishment, mostly white and almost all men. Mikhael Subotzky (2004-2012) offers more sinister portraits of South African security guards. But the concept of powerful masculinity is repeatedly questioned, as with Bas Jan Ader's famous 1971 film of a man weeping, entitled "I'm too sad to tell you", and perhaps referring to his father's execution by the Nazis. Fouad Elkoury portrays Beirut militia men posing artfully for the camera during the Lebanese civil war, questioning the way the media constructs the male fighter. Early in the show, we see John Coplan's huge, close-up, self-portraits from the 1980s, as his body ages, softens and sags. I also loved Deana Lawson's (2016) "Sons of Cush" staged image, with black men in tracksuit pants, presented as gangster types, yet tenderly holding the baby.

In other words, this is a show as full of play and questioning as it is of powerful male icons. I particularly enjoyed the "With my family" series by Hans Eijkelborn (1973). This photographer would visit homes during the day, when the husband was at work, and negotiate to take a family shot of the children and their mother – with himself acting as the *pater familias*. The resulting fake nuclear families are both funny and also completely convincing. Cuban artist Ana Mendieta models masculinity directly in photographs from a 1972 performance where she glues on facial hair that her

collaborator is trimming off his own beard, suggesting that gender roles are artificial, and thus epitomising the argument of Judith Butler's famous book, *Gender Trouble*, which suggested gender is always performative, not innate. More recently Aneta Bartos's 'Family Portraits' (2016) series shows herself with her body builder father – except that she is wearing underwear or swimwear while he poses next to her, beside or inside their country cottage.

This is not the only disturbing image. Curators Jane Alison and Ilona Pardo quote critic Laura Mulvey who famously said “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification”, and they prove it by including Rineke Dijkstra's series (1994-2000) of immaculately dressed bullfighters. Shot immediately after they have emerged from the ring, they are bloodied, bruised and torn, as if they have been gay-bashed. Adi Nes makes large format photographs of Israeli Defence Force soldiers, which appear strangely intimate and vulnerable, especially when you suddenly notice that one well built man is missing his left arm, presumably as a result of conflict. To me, these are more touching images than the more familiar Robert Mapplethorpe shot of “Arnold Schwarzenegger” (1975) or Herb Ritts' famous homoerotic image of “Fred with Tyres” (1984), because they reveal not simply muscles, but the homosocial bonds between men.

This show is big enough to contain almost everything, and thus would reward several visits. There is a powerful section of gay images. As well as images of gay stereotypes from Christopher Street (2019), Sunil Gupta pictures the gay subculture of India, where men turn their head away from the camera as they cruise around famous landmarks such as Humayun's Tomb. There's a section of images of African American and African men, for example Rotimi Fani-Kayode's clever black and white images playing with stereotypes of masculinity. The curators have perhaps missed the opportunity to engage with debates around disabled masculinity – although credit to them for including George Dureau's sexualised portraits of amputee BJ Robinson. The photographers they are most interested in tend to go for the bizarre or extreme rather than more quotidian fathers or workplace men. While always entertaining, it's perhaps a missed opportunity to depict ordinary masculinity in 2020.

Tom Shakespeare is Professor of disability research at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.