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Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society  
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Nicola von Thurn

## Boys Will Be Boys

*An Art Installation: Staged Wilderness and Male Dreams*



**Figure 1:**  
*Boys will be boys—lumberjack*, C-Print/  
 Alu-Dibond, 70 x  
 100 cm (2014). Photo-  
 graph by Martin  
 Knobel.

Nicola von Thurn's series *boys will be boys* was created between 2011 and 2015 and remains an ongoing project. It consists of two main parts that together form an installation: staged photographs and porcelain sculptures depicting details of the photographic images. The white porcelain objects are casts of real tools as they appear in the photographs and reveal the activities of the men portrayed. In the images above and below respectively, for example, we see a *Lumberjack* firmly gripping his axe and a *Jäger* (hunter) posing with his rifle and the deer he shot. Further subjects (not illustrated here) include the *Cowboy* and the *Wilderer* (Bavarian poacher).

It seems evident that the artist is using these pictures to reveal stereotypes: stereotypes of male dreams, of a life in the wilderness—a far cry from civilization, in a seemingly wild landscape that appears as unreal and synthetic as the dreams themselves. Dreams constructed by society, by media, by advertising.



**Figure 2:**  
*Jäger* (hunter), photo  
print/acrylic glass,  
40 x 60 cm (2014).  
Photograph by Martin  
Knobel.

We're left with little doubt that the performed activities are male activities, the jobs male jobs; that the chosen settings—a prairie, a forest, rough mountain scenes—represent settings where men are the masters and protagonists.

However, Nicola von Thurn's photographs are actually self-portraits. It takes a second glance to realize that the male stereotype pictured is, in fact, a woman posing as a man . . . Is she eager to become one of these stereotypes or is she perhaps just dreaming about living this kind of life? Does she hope to fit in seamlessly with these male settings?

But why do we think of these places as male places? Why are these settings men-only territory? Why are these dreams male dreams? The pictures may reveal that even in our Western society—which prides itself on free thought and equal opportunity—perception and ideal concepts of gender are still biased. Does it matter if a girl dreams a “boy's dream”? And do the places themselves change if the gender of the protagonist changes? The pictures offer no real answer—the viewer's perspective, however, may be more revealing.

The clues lie in the small details—they unmask the scenarios as staged, as unreal. Looking more closely, we see that the man is a woman, the dead deer a puppet, the forest a suburban park, and the rifle a replica. Why shouldn't a woman take over the male role in this weird setup? Or must the whole scenario be dismissed as spoiled, as a figment of the imagination just because the protagonist is female? Would the scene be perceived as more "acceptable" with a "real" man, even if the setting remained visibly staged? Or is the gender switch the very thing that makes the scene interesting?

All the works in this series—the porcelain sculptures included—bring together apparent opposites to create a new aesthetic quality. Hard, rough, brutal tools are transformed by their antithetical material—in this case, fragile porcelain with all its connotations of femininity and domestic life. Through the simple diametrical combination of statement and material, two contradictory elements come together to form a more richly textured object. Suddenly, the cold metal of the hard rifle transforms into the homely white lace of a doily, and the rifle's ornamental baroque décor is revealed. The axe seems more fragile than the wood it chops.

This installation of photographs in combination with objects is an invitation to think outside the box. It's an opportunity to question norms, to find beauty in gray areas between the obvious—beyond gender-dominated conceptions.

Nicola von Thurn  
Munich, 2016

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### *Artists' Individual Works:*

Matthew Barney  
Claude Cahun  
Daniela Comani  
Pierre Comoy et Gilles Blanchard  
Sarah Lucas  
Robert Mapplethorpe  
Catherine Opie  
Richard Prince  
Man Ray  
Cindy Sherman  
Laurie Simmons  
Diane Torr