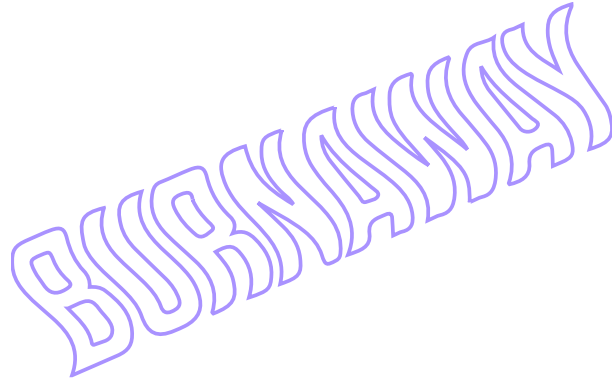




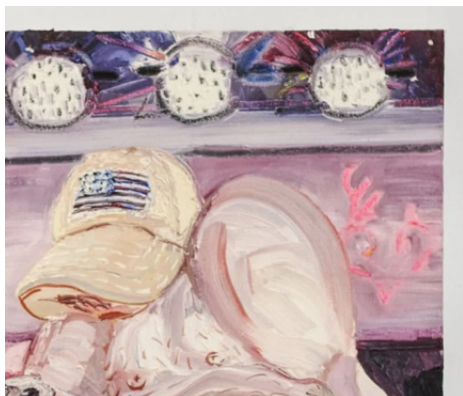
REVIEWS:
Make A Man: Vivian Liddell at VERSA,
Chattanooga

BY CHRISTINA RENFER VOGEL
APRIL 04, 2019

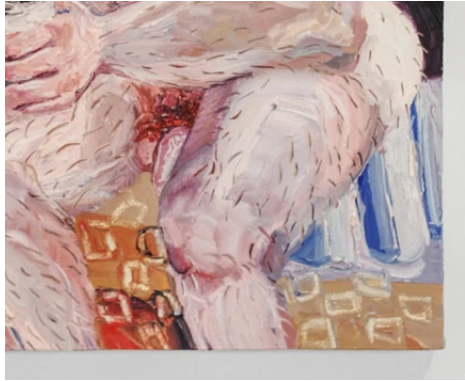


Vivian Liddell, *Make a Ma(Man)*, 2019

Each year in early September, dozens of fraternity brothers gather on the open field outside my faculty office, the air thickening with their collective chanting. Despite the event's annual occurrence, I am always caught off guard and unnerved by the public display of masculinity, relieved to observe it from a distance. These reveling young men are the flesh-and-blood counterparts of the figures shown in Athens, Georgia-based artist Vivian Liddell's solo exhibition *Men*, on view at the Chattanooga artist-run space VERSA through March 30.



Men includes a selection of drawings, paintings, and textile-based works that primarily depict unclothed male figures. Liddell's male nudes serve as a cheeky counterpart to ubiquitous sensationalized depictions of the female body, especially the voluptuous, quivering nudes of art history. The men she depicts are implied to be young, white, working-class rural Southerners; unencumbered by clothing, they loll around on the back



Man and Truck II, 2018

of pickup trucks, drink beer, and engage in uncertain group rituals. They are stripped down save helmets or baseball hats jammed down over their faces, which lend each figure a degree of anonymity.

Two large charcoal and ink drawings hang along one wall, each depicting a gaggle of men playing obscure frat games. Figures' overlapping limbs form a knot in the drawing *Men in Kiddie Pool* (2019), their heads festooned with helmets and beer boxes. *Men Tailgating* (2019) depicts men clutching beer bottles in a tangle of hairy limbs and meaty thighs, the bed of a pickup truck serving as their theatrical backdrop. There is something

both outlandish and ordinary about these figures. Unlike the heroic nudes of the past, the nakedness of these men reveals their absurdity and vulnerability.

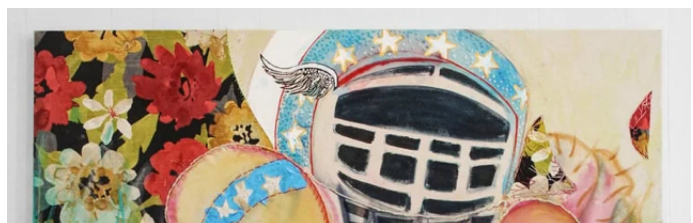
Visually distinct from these drawings, five small oil paintings show solitary figures nestled into lush yet crudely rendered environments. The pale figures appear to melt into the desaturated spaces that contain them, peppered with small flashes of bright pink, orange, and yellow. In *Man and Truck I* (2018) a chalky nude sits on the back of a pickup, his legs splayed and mouth agape. With a backwards cap pulled down to his nose, he appears dazed or lost in thought, beer balanced on one knee as he leans against a Yeti cooler. Though each painting is a portrait of a single figure, each man stands in as an archetype of masculinity. The small canvases are rich with juicy flourish and unfussy impasto. Though Liddell calls them studies, these small paintings sing.



Vivian Liddell, Men Tailgating, 2019

A large soft sculpture in the shape of a spider sits unceremoniously on overturned studio buckets, its patchwork legs unevenly suspended by monofilament. Titled *Make a Ma(Man)*, the work is a nod to Louise Bourgeois's sculpture *Maman* (1999), a massive steel and marble monument to motherhood. Liddell's sculpture, however, wears a MAGA hat whose standard text has been altered to read *MAKE A MAN*. In her artist statement, Liddell writes that she sees this work as "implicating women in this construction." Her phrasing assumes a dual meaning: not only does it reference her use of craft materials long associated with women's work, but it also indicates the artist's role as a mother of two boys. Crafted with sensitivity, the plump furry body is adorned with pink and red polka-dotted bows, and the mama spider's legs are pieced together from repurposed pant legs and floral material.

A hulking football player looms within *Man I* (2018), an imposing painting on canvas incorporating stitching and fabric. The figure



dons an Evil Knievel-inspired helmet, his fragmented form appearing to twist impossibly mid stride. Although she works within the visual language of craft, in this work Liddell approaches materiality through the lens of painting. In *Man I*, paint soaks into raw canvas, bleeding into the blooming fabric and bruising the figure amid a flurry of gestural brushwork. Drawing by way of embroidery introduces a variety of marks, boldly delineating, delicately hatching, or gently implying boundaries. The beefy foregrounded leg is punctuated joyfully with hair formed by thin strips of fabric twisting off canvas.



Vivian Liddell, *Man I*, 2019

The strength of *Men* lies within Liddell's ability to humorously reveal the absurdity and ordinariness of the figures she depicts. Both tenderness and violence are present in her renderings of these men. In Liddell's hands, these contradictory yet deeply human impulses are given form through the artist's materially varied approaches to depicting men's fleshy, hairy, vulnerable bodies.

Vivian Liddell's exhibition *Men* was on view from March 16th through March 20th, 2019 at VERSA, Chattanooga.

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