

How You Then For A Big Boy?

Bevan Blankenberg

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Photographs of final work by Toy-Yiebah Cupido & Jemma Rose

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	7
Artist Statement	8 - 9
Catalogue Essay	11 - 23
Works	25 - 51

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Dedicated to my mother, my rock, Salome Blankenberg. I thank you for always propelling me forward since the very start, with belief, prayer and unconditional love. The support you always gave me without question was unreal and not gone unnoticed nor unfelt;

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ARTIST STATEMENT

How You Then For A Big Boy?

My practice mainly draws on dumpster diving for wooden pallets, refurbishing them and repurposing them for a specific project. The removal of nails and sanding of the wood leave behind cavities, imitating a wound like tissue scarring of fighter dogs. The laborious and time-consuming effort to repurpose the wood informs my main practice in terms of materiality.

An important part of my childhood were my dogs and toys. I would fashion improvised toys out of backyard materials. Although improvising toys, play time remains interrupted by gang rows. These rows lead to kids either rebuking or glorifying the commotion, with it almost always being the latter.

Dogs were a big part of my childhood as I have seen many come and go due to brutal impromptu fights in neighbourhood parks. They fought either for small profits or street credit which is a currency of "respect". Along with blood money and the prevalence of toxic hypermasculinity, myself and other kids become desensitised to violence. Toys were used to supplement the loss of my trust with my pets and distract me from the overall hostility and hold onto whatever empathy I had left.

The creative body of work imply a subtle violence that lurked in my community and still persists in many others. By creating toys that cannot be played with, the loss of innocence and vulnerability is the ideal analogy a fighter dog which has been broken down. This is a response to the men who played a significant role in my upbringing, poisoning the roots of healthy masculinity with blood sport and anti-social activities.

The title of this exhibition is doublespeak for how one would be taunted as a small boy when sadness and tears were imminent. Also a reference to how my brother would speak to my dogs when training them for fights. The colloquial phrase "*How you den forra big boy*" is rooted in toxic masculinity which is used to make boys believe tears or the visible showing of emotions are signs of weakness and paralleled with encounters in blood sports.

When referring to dogs within my work, they are more symbolic in terms of past aggression inflicted on myself, family and broader people. This referral remains fluid as the works cannot be subjected to my experiences alone. I come from a community where the criminal subculture embraces the youth like a dog to bone.

CATALOGUE ESSAY

The objective of this essay is to offer a chronological development of my studio praxis over the past four years. By handpicking certain works created during my four-year praxis and briefly discussing them, I will establish a thread of concerns that culminate into my current body of artwork. I will draw content analysis from a small number of media sources to support my objective and main informer of the work, my childhood experiences. My essay will include news articles of News24 and an academic journal by author Wil Massey among other readings that will further substantiate my claims.

After analysing the articles, I will address the insensitivity perpetuated by blood sporting culture within minors and how toxic hyper-masculinity; is non-conducive to effective coming-of age within urban communities. The notion of culture will be fluid, as I will mention hip hop culture as a past informer and newly found Massey's (2012) text on the history of dog fighting is key to my body of work as it informs the installations and objects, I create and intervene on.

While doing research for my studio work practice, I came across an article that highlighted an experience I and few others can relate to about dogfighting. On 9 September 2021, The Cape of Good Hope Society for the Prevention and Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) were anonymously tipped off to an illegal dog fighting ring in Tafelsig, Mitchell's Plain.

Blood sport and live baiting are nothing new and quite prevalent in the area and other parts of the Cape Flats however this specific ring had been run by a group of minors with the oldest among the group being only 13 years old. (Live animal) Baiting; in any of its forms, is a blood sport, which can be defined as any activity of competitive nature regularly involving bloodshed or other debilitating bodily harm (Massey, 2012: 11)

According to SPCA Spokesperson Belinda Abraham, inspectors found the dogs on short static chains, with some of them having deep tissue scarring, a clear indication of dog fighting. While investigating the property, the inspectors discovered a puppy mill and have since confiscated all nine dogs ranging from breeds of Pitbull crosses, Pitbull terriers and German Shepards (Solomons, September 2021).

A puppy mill is an inhumane high-volume dog breeding facility that churns out puppies for profit, ignoring the needs of the pups and their mothers (Greenberg, HSUS; 2021) As a result, dogs from puppy mills are often sick and unsocialized and ripened for blood sport such as the canines rescued in Tafelsig.

The foundation of my current body of work is informed by childhood events involving the age-old blood sport and conflict filled episodes that would desensitise myself and other minors to violence. These events were like the above-mentioned news article extract. Misdemeanours were a means of navigating my community at times due to being exposed to a significant number of violent scenes.

Scenes such as illegal street gambling where dogs, drugs, weapons, and other illicit merchandise were commonplace. Other minors and I were exempt from the preconceived notions held by task forces which surveyed these scenes. Due to this exemption, some would carry make-shift weaponry and others including myself would walk the fighter dogs.

This blind trust and glorification we had in street thugs by doing their bidding could easily be compared to the fighter dogs willing to kill and die for their owner's satisfaction. In a statement with News24, SPCA Chief Inspector Jaco Pieterse stated his disdain for people who take advantage of dogs' best qualities – unconditional love and loyalty, so that they will endure pain, fear, blood loss, ripped flesh, broken bones and even death; all to please their owners (Edwardes, October 2020).

In the reading “Bloodsport and the Michael Vick Dogfighting Case: A Critical Cultural Analysis”, the author offers a detailed historical, theoretical, and thought-provoking analysis about a contentious news spectacle involving National Football League (NFL) player Michael Vick running a “state-wide” dog fighting ring. My interest in the reading only stems from the detailed history of the blood sports as an academic informer to the sculptures and installations I created that make up my fourth-year body of work.

This reading informs one third of my practice, as the other two thirds consist of oral narrative provided by my brother as a direct link into criminal subculture and my childhood experiences with activities such as blood sport. His tumultuous adolescence has lead him straight into gangsterism and caused speedbumps in the road of my upbringing¹.

My studio praxis developed at Michaelis was rife with political commentary. Issues focused on land inequality, unemployment and the mountain of challenges left by the legacy of colonisation which Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) face with no real end in sight. With the idea of challenges in mind, my practice took a narrower approach in 2019 (2nd year) to look within my community and investigate the idea of “making it by any means necessary”.

¹ My older brother started organising and fighting dogs in his early teens around the mid '90s and continued to do so up until the late 2000s. His reasoning for this was purely monetary gain. It should be noted, after multiple run-ins with the law, he served a 12-year sentence in prison. As a reformed ex-con, his input is of great importance to this body of work as he clarified the blurred childhood memories concerning my dogs.

Alluring to financial self-empowerment, I thought of the Afrikaans phrase “*‘n Boer maak ‘n plan, maar ‘n Kleurling is met een gebore*” which translates to, “A farmer makes a plan, but a Coloured is born with one”. This phrase is a contrasting indication to how non-white racial groups in Apartheid South Africa had to be readily equipped with street savvy to earn a living. This reminded me of a phase where I constantly traded and exchanged merchandise such as gaming consoles, shoes, and occasionally puppies. My concerns spawned into two directions which were inspired by the idiom. Dogfighting and child exploitation.

A print media project where I created 10 stamps representative of signet rings sported by rappers and commonly thugs. Historically the signet ring had family heralds engraved into them and men of status, such as Dukes of England, Wales etcetera wore them. The subversion of the signet ring which has its roots in European patriarchal tradition, is centred with images and statistics of illegal dogfighting in a South African context.¹

A Pedigree Certificate states a dog's value according to its genealogy. Along with the statistics, texts from rap music lyrics accompany the contrasting images of the signet ring stamps. The signet rings stamped together to form the word “Boef” {shortened version of boevanah – (slang for blood)} undermines the dog's worth when viewed through the lens of breeders or dog fighters.

² The statistics were laser engraved in Roman Numerals as indication of where dog fighting originated after canines' usage in ancient war. According to Mike Homan (1999) after the Romans acquired these “broad-mouthed” dogs, they tested them against their own fighting dogs in matchups that were dominated by the Mastiff (Massey, 2012; 11). i.e., MMXXXIII (2333): The amount of years dogfighting has been taking place up to date. MCCL (1250): The percentage increase of illegal dogfighting in South Africa in the last decade.

For a core project, I created an installation of improvised controlling and aggravating tools that would encourage reluctant dogs to fight one another. They represented the growing lack of empathy that became evident in minors such including myself who did not understand the gravity of animal cruelty however saw it as a necessary evil to fit in and not be ostracised other boys. Dog fighting promotes and encourages a culture of non-empathy and for children to be routinely exposed to animal abuse is not okay as stated by SPCA Spokesperson Abraham (Solomons, September 2021).

My concern with the topic of exploitation spanned over from dogs to children for my woodworking project of 2020. My focus shifted from communal to corporate concerns that influenced children across African borders, specifically the Ivory Coast and Ghana. Around 2014 the cocoa industry predicted a shortage in chocolate by 2020 due to issues with cocoa production according to an article by Marketplace. The cocoa deficit has been prevalent for some time now because of changing weather conditions with cocoa prices soaring in 2013 due to the supply issues (Tam, June 2017).

To economists' surprise, cocoa production saw an increase in 2018/19 period thanks to the ill practice of child labour. Food company Nestle has a contentious history; allegedly purchasing "black cocoa" from Ghana and Ivory Coast, majority of cocoa pods harvested by unpaid minors. In response to this controversy, I deconstructed wooden pallets and reconstructed them into a 1:14 scale sculpture of Nestle's most popular confectionery, the Kit-Kat 4 finger bar. The pallet is a universal symbol of product shipment and trade, as for the "chocolate", it acts like a reminder of childhood sweetness and innocence lost while child labour persists within the industry.



"The signet ring stamps contained hidden historical numbers. These numbers are modern day statistics, laser engraved in Roman Numerals as indication of where dog fighting originated after canines' usage in ancient war. i.e., MMXXXIII (2333): The amount of years dogfighting has been taking place up to date.
MCCL (1250): The percentage increase of illegal dogfighting in South Africa in the last decade"

- Extract from essay footnote.

“The pallet is a universal symbol of product shipment and trade, as for the “chocolate”, it acts like a reminder of childhood sweetness and innocence lost while child labour persists within the industry.”

- Extract from essay.



Images from left to right:

1. Preliminary sketch for 'Boef', 2019. Printmedia Stamp Project.
2. D.R..E.A.M. (Dogs Rule Everything Around Me). 2019. Installation. (Found objects) Animals & Empathy Project.
3. Eye Candy. 2019. Wood. Woodworking Project.

My current practice primarily draws on dumpster diving for many wooden pallets, deconstructing and repurposing them for a specific project. The removal of nails and eventual sanding of the wood leaves behind chaotic holes with a velvet smooth surface, imitating a sort of wound which was of contribution to the start of this project.

The cavities left behind introduced a brutalist aesthetic which I was so pleased with, I actively look for pallets that appear rigid as they have more nails to remove and create the look that represents how I envision my childhood. The laborious and time-consuming effort it takes to break down pallets and transform planks to blocks and then sculpt form is conceptually important as it completely juxtaposes the "live fast, die young" mentality in criminal subculture when perpetuating anti-social activities such as blood sports.

Gathering found materials for this specific body is just as important as the objects are from literal city streets or properties in the Northern Suburbs where the potentiality for puppy mills is high. Industrial materials such as steel bars, static chain, ski and anchor rope and car wheel rims are prevalent within this exhibition as these objects reflect the "makeshift" environment in which fighter dogs must adapt to survive their competition.

Toys were a major part of my growing up as they distracted me from the ongoing tension concerning my dogs and the unsafe spaces, I had to enjoy them in. As kids we would fashion bikes, wagons, and bats out of old wooden planks, poles, and beams. The decision to recreate some of these objects in concrete is symbolic of the hardened state we had to revert to when witnessing local gang fights and impromptu dog fights in neighbourhood parks.

Wil Massey's text introduces a grim reality of the tools used to pacify fighter dogs in Michael Vick's breeding kennels. According to the U.S. District Court (2007: 18) a "rape stand", which is used to force overly aggressive female dogs to mate and "break sticks", which are used to pry the jaws of a dog off the body of an opponent and treadmills, which are used as part of dog fighting training regime along with 54 American Pitbull Terriers were among the evidence seized from a property belonging to Vick (Massey, 2012: 8).

Taking inspiration from objects within my domestic scenery, I decided to include them into my works i.e., creating break sticks from chair legs – a connotation to the spectatorship that encapsulates a broad range age groups as stated by articles referenced. Curtain rod brackets that support a sjambok, and enshrines the tool used to aggravate and deter dogs when fighting. These are some of the interventions I conceptualised when realising how enclosed violence was within my childhood home. The notions of masculinity were ingrained by blood, sweat, money and inevitable mayhem.

My artistic inspirations are mainly South African in terms of visual research. Cape Town based artist Warren Maroon's work titled, "Backspeen" (2019) is a sculptural work composed of a found brick from the excavated fields of District 6 with platted rope tied through it. Backspeen (2019) and other works are made up of ordinary, seemingly insignificant, objects and household items, and titled strategically, each work contributes to the recreation of an experience that is both individual yet shared by a past, and present, community. (The Act of Brutal Curation, 2019).

This was partly inspiration for the conception of my current body of work. Another South African artist, Pieter Hugo's series "The Hyena and Other Men" (2005 – 2007) also inspired my work through the means of representing power and control over wild animals and the different types of relationships it creates. In Hugo's images the hyena handlers are posing with tamed hyenas despite them being inherently wild and how the power of the animal is undermined.

In response to Massey's texts with oral confirmation from my brother on specific breeding and fighting operations, I created a number of "break sticks" that refer to countless fights my own dogs were subjected to however with the notion of hypermasculinity embedded by the break sticks symbolic of phallic forms and .50 calibre bullets. Guns and other firearms are a "hidden" constant in the dark world of (un)organised crime.

Bullets and penises are the manliest components I could conceptualise while thinking of the subject, considering the irony that dog fighters are cowards by participating in this entertaining form of animal cruelty. Dog fighting as a blood sport similarly centred by sexuality, masculine values and the deployment of animals as symbols of a culture infused with macho aggression and menacing violence (Kalof & Taylor, 2007: 321).

By exhibiting improvised contraptions present at few dog fights, the body of work will not feature a single canine instead the representation of absent hounds along with the objects used to promote physical terror and psychological trauma.

Referring to (fighting) dogs in my work, they are more symbolic in terms of past aggression inflicted on myself, family and broader peoples. The objects themselves are a link to physical blood sports I have witness and been informed about. This reference remains fluid as the work cannot be subjected to my experiences alone as I know many who share the past experiences of violence within the community.

In conclusion, through news article extracts I have established that many minors have partaken in dog fighting as the money and danger of criminal underworld is glorified by hip hop/rap culture. As a result, empathy has dissipated and introduced normalisation of violence.

I do not condone the physical acts of blood sport however I will go as far to say I understand why minors pursue it, based on similar experiences during my upbringing. By establishing a thread of past works, and concepts, the reasoning for revisiting the topic of dog fights is clearer however the dogs themselves are symbolic for a heightened state of dormant aggression. The texts of Massey (2012) and Kalof & Taylor (2007) supported my studio practice by informing me of the history of blood sports and confirmed my suspicions about the underlying complexities relating to masculinity and canine bloodshed.



Pieter Hugo. Abdullahi Mohammed with Mainasara, Lagos, Nigeria. 2007. Photograph forms part of "The Hyena and Other Men" series (2005 – 2007). Dimensions unknown. Courtesy of Public Delivery and the artist. Accessed on 20/10/2021. Available: <https://publicdelivery.org/pieter-hugo-the-hyena-and-other-men/>

Warren Maroon. 2019. A friend once killed a man on the backspine. Found brick from fields f Distric 6 and platted rope. Dimensions unknown. Courtesy of Brutal Curation and the artist. Accessed on 20/10/2021. Available: <https://brutalcuration.com/>



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Based on the black plastic bikes owned by many kids including myself, I thought about the mobility and pseudo freedom experienced while riding one of these. Any child riding can be presumed innocent, as they speed on end without tiring and labelled a headache. While being attracted to this bike, they are not magnets for trouble however fall within the target spectrum when tensions are prevalent in community parks and streets. The feeling of anxiety is linked to past feelings of immobility, experienced during playtime when conflict-filled events would spontaneously happen.





Kop Pyn, 2021.
Wood, metal, concrete.
76 x 44,5 x 49 cm. 15.32 kg.





Maak Klaar, 2021.
Wood, insulation tape.
Dimensions vary.



"The concrete state we had to revert to when witnessing local gang fights and impromptu dog fights in neighbourhood parks."

-Extract from essay.

"Break sticks, which are used to pry the jaws of a dog off the body of an opponent"

- Extract from essay.





Pick Up Sticks, 2021, wood, dimensions vary.



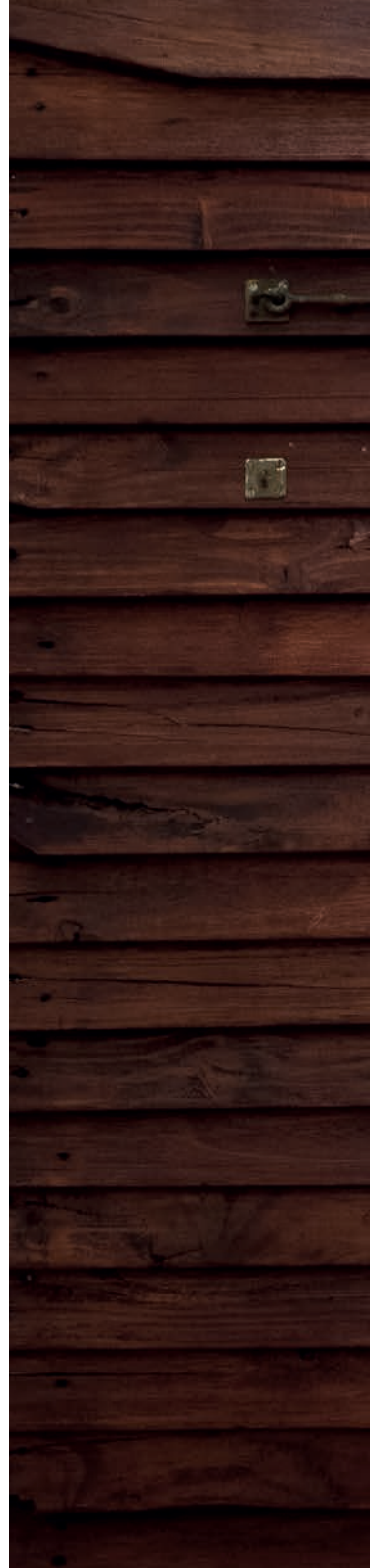
'You see the bungalow nuh? You wrap it up with plastic, from the walls, big green plastics...on the walls, and on the floor also. So when we done, you just wrap the plastics up and take the hose. Mos a lot of blood going (around), you see man.'

- Extract from Dog God.









Bungalow, 2021.
Wood, brass, steel (found objects),
130.4 x 38.2 x 120 cm



I used domestic objects such as drapery holders as a referral to how close to home violence can be. As gunshots and attacks rip through windows and unfortunately kill innocent bystanders in their home. I re-fashioned the curtain holders to act as a rifle plague with the removed nails reminiscent of .22 calibre bullet holes.



"Spread your legs and widen your stance, and shorten the leash so that you walk the dog, and not the dog walk you."

"This plaque is now a place of enshrinement, what is found,
now belongs for as long as it remains in place."



Experiment (Hold on Tight), 2021, wood, ski rope (found objects)

115 x 14.5 x 25 cm .



Haal Bokkie , 2021, wood and sjambok (found object),

130 x 11.5 x 27.6 cm

This work was inspired by the thought process of my experiment (Hold on Tight). Initially created for a rifle to be displayed on, I thought of the most common weapon one would find hidden in the household. The sjambok, this specific on display was used to intimidate a number of people in acts of aggression. The very same one, was used to break up a dog fight which I was a witness to.



This work is an evolution of 'Haal Bokkie'. Focussing on the bond between man and dog, these objects one would find proudly on display in homes unlike the hiddenness of a sjambok or knobkierrie. Caps, hats and leashes are common sight in many homes however these objects on display are just that, found in the streets of both Northern and Southern suburbs, with each object finding commonplace in some past of animal mistreatment and cruelty.





Walkie, 2021, wood and dog leashes, harness and key ring

88.6 x 15 x 20.3 cm

"The neighbourhood park was a place of public fun. The exposure to money, blood, sweat and tears was shockingly thrilling. The winner's dog was the children's dog, everybody wanted to walk him even though we could not. He was too dangerous."





Parkie Parkie, 2021, rope and tire (found materials), dimensions vary.





"Tie a chain around the tyre and securing it either in a wall or round a washing line pole will make it so that not even a Piti' can get it loose."

Lock Jaw, 2021, static chain, metal and tire (found objects), dimensions vary.



"According to the U.S. District Court (2007: 18) a "rape stand", which is used to force overly aggressive female dogs to mate" in puppy mills.

- Extract from essay



Feed Me More, 2021, metal, flat steel. angle iron, leather collar, rope (found objects).

90.3 x 60 x 73 cm

