



Over exposed?

Fans of defunct sitcom *Spaced* may be thinking of Brian, the oft-naked artist, at this point. But unlike Brian, young Norwegian photographer Bjørn Venø is doing well. A teacher at the University College for the Creative Arts, his work reached the final of *BJP's Endframe* competition in 2006, and has been shown in numerous group shows.

He's also racking up solo exhibitions, last year at the Fotografiens Hus, Norway and now at the Nettie Horn gallery (which also represents Venø). Chapter II and III features two more sections from Venø's ongoing investigation of male identity, plus a 'diaristic video'.

In fact, all of his work is diaristic, and the images in this show are no exception. In Chapter II, *Paradigm* he revisits his childhood homes, depicting the inner child struggling with adult male roles. In Chapter III, *Behold*, he casts family members alongside himself 'to portray his

scenes of despair' and question his 'irrational fear of women'.

It's honest and it's certainly brave. Any young man who admits to 'an irrational fear of women' is open to ridicule, particularly one who regularly photographs himself naked. But then I guess that's the point. After all, Venø is questioning male stereotypes, and they include the confident butch womaniser.

The fact that he presents himself naked and looks so vulnerable – and that the resulting images are so disturbing – is part of that project. After all, women regularly appear nude in art, and artists such as Tracey Emin have made whole careers out of diaristic, confessional work. 'I have no shame,' states Venø online. 'I lay myself bare.'

From that perspective, the fact that Brian, *Spaced's* neurotic, sensitive soul is such a figure of fun really only proves Venø's point. But what makes *Spaced*

so different is its humour. Venø's images aren't humorous at all – in fact they capture a disturbing level of anguish. No matter how little shame he has, it's hard not to fear for an artist who strips this bare, both literally and metaphorically. So it's something of a relief to see the latest chapters of his project (Chapter III in this show, and one shot from Chapter IV online), which are altogether calmer and less claustrophobic, and in which Venø is no longer naked or always alone.

Masculine studies is the flipside of feminism, and from that point of view it's long overdue. But, as with feminism, it seems that challenging traditional gender roles is hard on the people who do it wholeheartedly. Whether the art that results is any good is really another matter and probably quite subjective. But one thing's for sure, it makes you think.

Diane Smyth

Above: taken from the series *Behold*, Chapter III of Bjørn Venø's ongoing investigation into male identity. Image © Bjørn Venø.

On show

Bjørn Venø: Chapter II and III is on show at Nettie Horn, London, from 13 February to 15 March. For more information, visit www.nettiehorn.com.