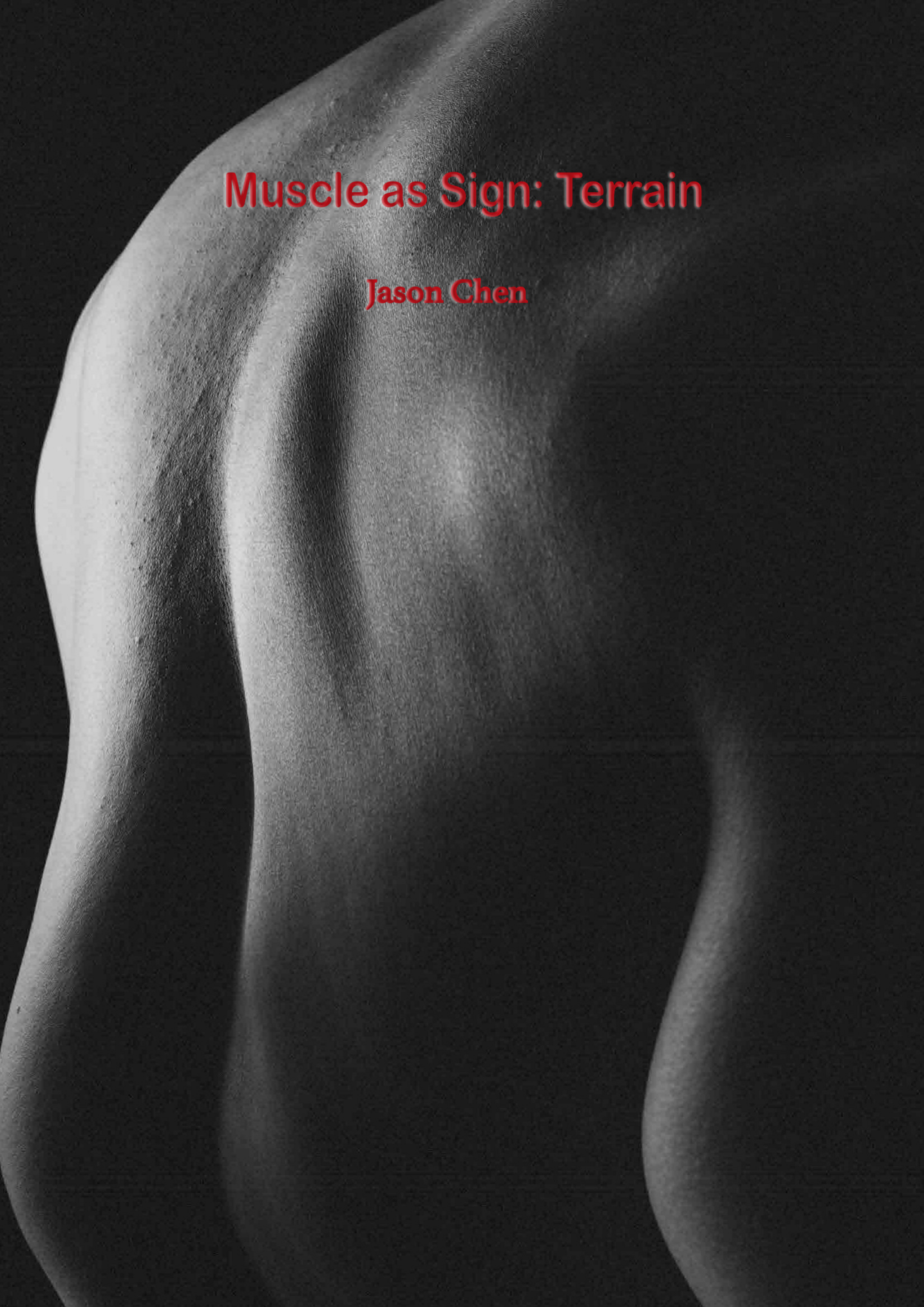
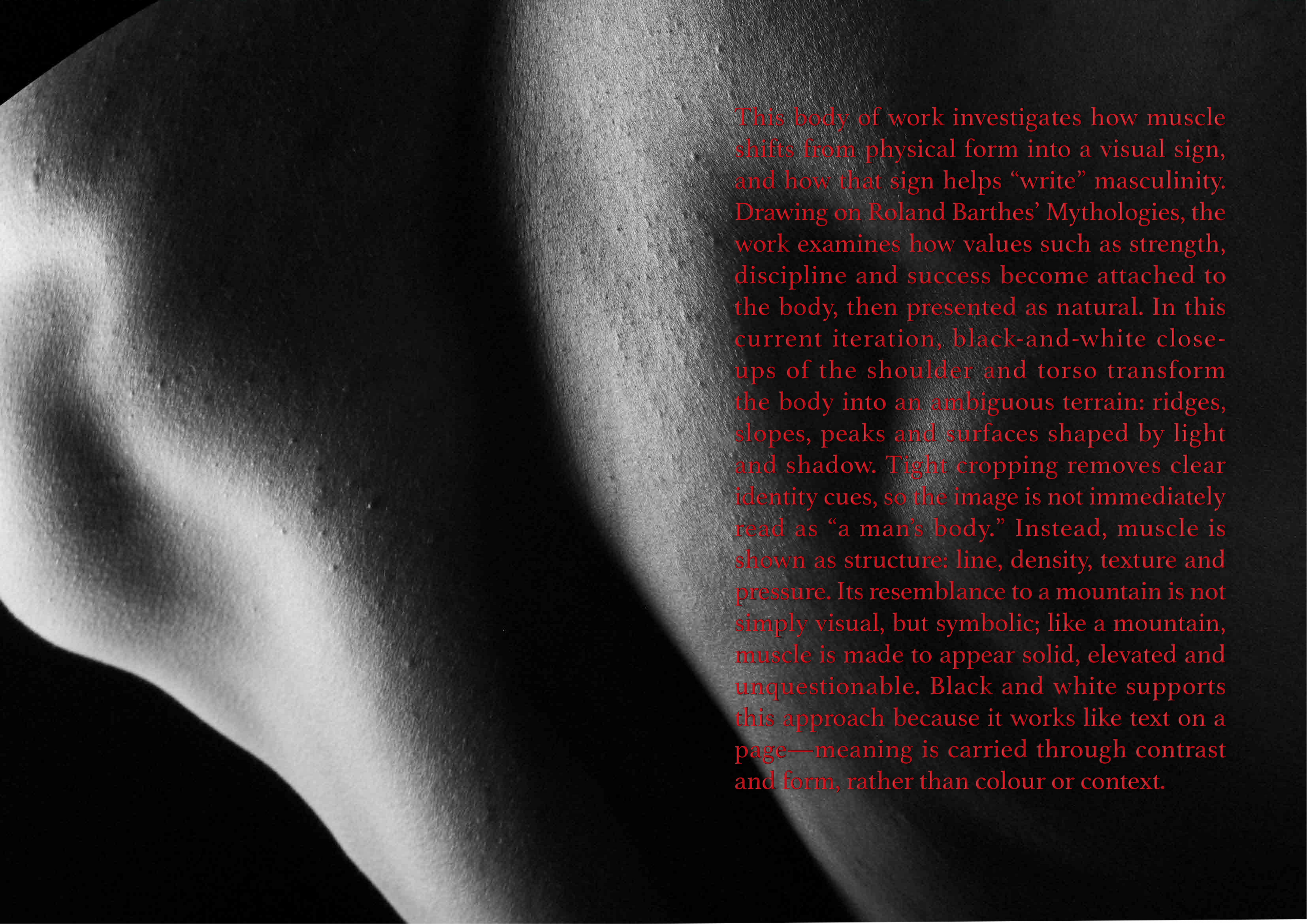




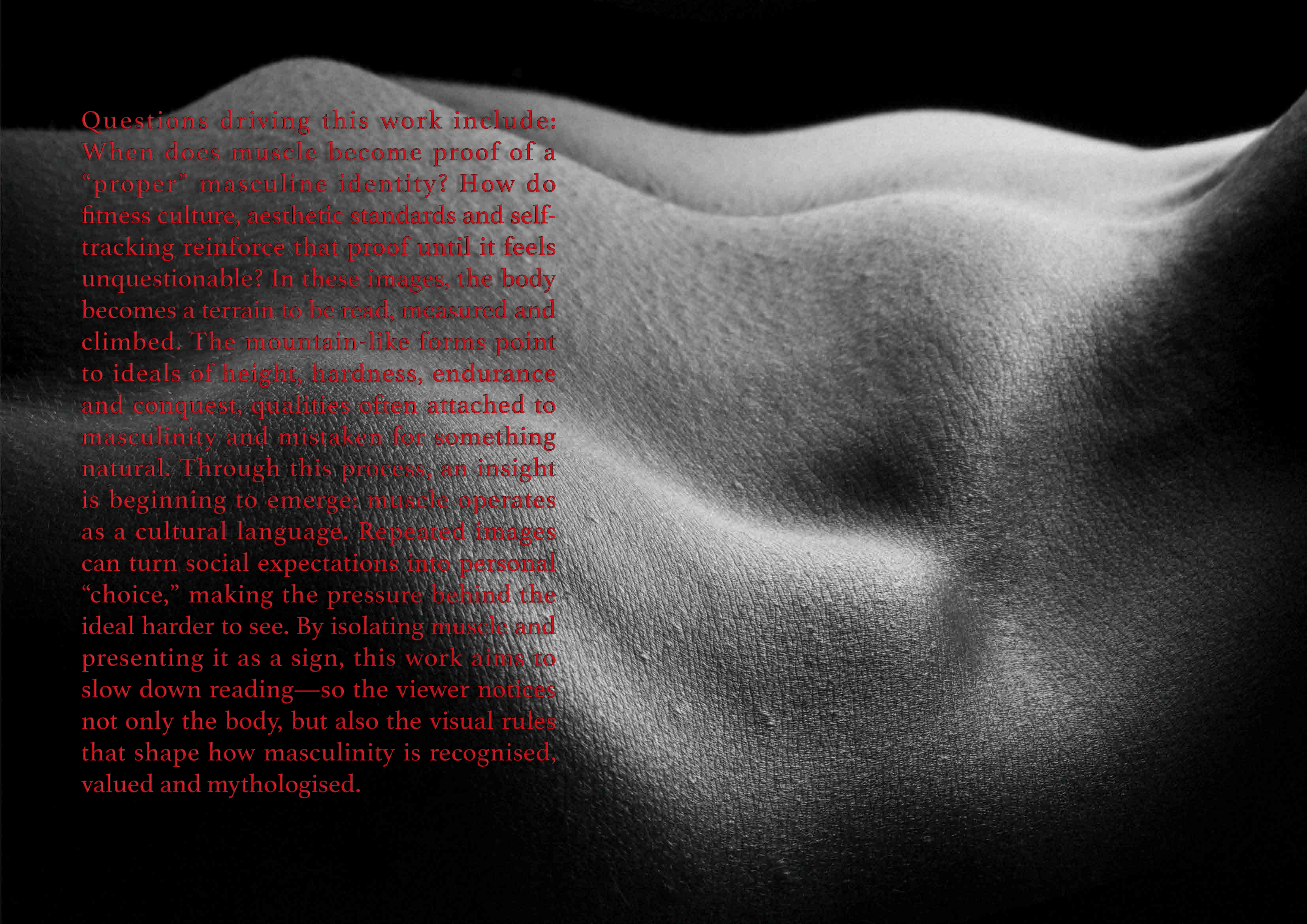
Muscle as Sign: Terrain

Jason Chen



This body of work investigates how muscle shifts from physical form into a visual sign, and how that sign helps “write” masculinity. Drawing on Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*, the work examines how values such as strength, discipline and success become attached to the body, then presented as natural. In this current iteration, black-and-white close-ups of the shoulder and torso transform the body into an ambiguous terrain: ridges, slopes, peaks and surfaces shaped by light and shadow. Tight cropping removes clear identity cues, so the image is not immediately read as “a man’s body.” Instead, muscle is shown as structure: line, density, texture and pressure. Its resemblance to a mountain is not simply visual, but symbolic; like a mountain, muscle is made to appear solid, elevated and unquestionable. Black and white supports this approach because it works like text on a page—meaning is carried through contrast and form, rather than colour or context.





Questions driving this work include: When does muscle become proof of a “proper” masculine identity? How do fitness culture, aesthetic standards and self-tracking reinforce that proof until it feels unquestionable? In these images, the body becomes a terrain to be read, measured and climbed. The mountain-like forms point to ideals of height, hardness, endurance and conquest, qualities often attached to masculinity and mistaken for something natural. Through this process, an insight is beginning to emerge: muscle operates as a cultural language. Repeated images can turn social expectations into personal “choice,” making the pressure behind the ideal harder to see. By isolating muscle and presenting it as a sign, this work aims to slow down reading—so the viewer notices not only the body, but also the visual rules that shape how masculinity is recognised, valued and mythologised.

