



## Photography: Gay Male, Post-Stonewall

by Ken Gonzales-Day

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The Stonewall riots should not be seen as the only shaping force in the development of contemporary gay male photography, but it makes a convenient dividing line. Put simply, Stonewall contributed to the sexual revolution and the sexual revolution contributed to the development and visibility of a gay male subculture that in turn contributed to gay male photography.

Although erotica may be the first genre that comes to mind when gay male photography is mentioned, the category comprises more than erotic photography. As a meaningful element of the fine arts and contemporary culture, gay male photography must also be recognized for its particular contributions to fine art, photo-journalism, and advertising, as well as erotica.

### **Contributing Factors in the Development of Gay Male Photography**

Since Stonewall, gay male photography has become decidedly more political. In the 1970s, in the heady atmosphere of gay liberation and community building, gay male photographers were particularly concerned with documentary and photo-journalism. Sexual liberation, self-representation, and community documentation became popular photographic themes.

In the 1980s and 1990s acceptance and commodification of the male body emerged as a staple of gay male photography, as epitomized by the famous Calvin Klein underwear ads in New York's Times Square.

Although the male body has always been a crucially important image for gay male photographers and for advertising to the gay male community, the Calvin Klein ads were a marketing breakthrough that continues to influence advertising and representation.

But perhaps the greatest single influence on contemporary gay male photography was AIDS, whose impact began to be felt most strongly in the mid to late 1980s. If Stonewall solidified the celebration of the male body found in earlier periods, then AIDS forced photographers to see the gay male body very differently.

Moreover, the health crisis redefined notions of community, which now no longer coalesced solely around the eroticism of the male body, but now also around questions of frailty, mortality, illness, loss, and transformation.

### **The Stigmatized Status of Gay Male Photography**

Gay male photography was already a thriving creative and economic force for many photographers and consumers before 1969. But the commercialization of gay male photography became infinitely easier in the post-Stonewall world. However, this ease should not be confused with acceptance. Today, in fine art galleries and museums, gay male photography continues to be stigmatized as a marginal or subcultural art form.

The stigmatization of gay male photography, of course, parallels the state of gays within society as a whole. However, with gay mayors in Berlin and Paris, along with gay and lesbian elected officials across the United States, the gay and lesbian community is finding increasing acceptance, which translates into increasing acceptance for gay and lesbian art.

### **Ambiguity in Gay Male Photography**

All images that fall under the rubric of gay male photography are not fine art, just as all erotic images of the male body are not pornographic. This ambiguity may in fact be the clearest expression of what has been gained since Stonewall.

Strict boundaries continue to fall away and distinctions, both subtle and extreme, can be found between fine art, pornography, and a wide range of politically charged visual strategies. Gay male photography can sell clothes, cologne, embrace S&M subcultural practices, celebrate gender bending, and increasingly encompass just about any subject.

### **Representative Gay Male Photographers**

The following is an alphabetically arranged summary listing--representative rather than comprehensive--of some gay male photographers who have contributed to glbtq culture since Stonewall.

#### **Al Baltrop**

Al Baltrop (1948-2004) lived and worked most of his life in New York City. A Vietnam War veteran, he worked as a mover and a lithographer and spent much of the 1970s in and around the West Side piers. Pre-AIDS New York was the age of discos, bathhouses, and gay bars; and Baltrop, working from a Dodge van, began to photograph the ebullient gay life he saw in the city.

Taking pictures since his teens, Baltrop briefly studied at the School for Visual Arts. His photographs are at once remarkable documents and aesthetically striking art. They depict beautiful young men, homeless youth, voyeurs, sunbathers, homeless queens, all clinging to the edge of Manhattan amidst deteriorating buildings, meat packing plants, and abandoned piers. Baltrop's photographs remind us of loss and change.

#### **Mark I. Chester**

Born in 1950, Mark I. Chester lives and works in San Francisco. Self-described as a gay radical sex photographer, Chester has photographed a wide variety of hooded and bound men, often in rather simple, even elegantly composed images that document and celebrate the gay male S&M community.

Chester's flyers and posters are ubiquitous in the San Francisco gay and lesbian community.

#### **George Daniell**

George Daniell (1911-2002) worked as a freelance commercial photographer from the 1930s to the 1960s and became well known for striking black-and-white photographs of celebrities such as Sophia Loren, Audrey Hepburn, Tennessee Williams, W. H. Auden, and Georgia O'Keeffe.

However, his most important work, in addition to his paintings, are his photographs of dock workers, fishermen, swimmers, and ballet dancers, which celebrate the male figure. His sensual photographs are only now being recognized as important contributions to gay male photography.

#### **George Dureau**

New Orleans artist George Dureau (b. 1930) may be best known for his paintings and drawings, but his black-and-white photographs, often of black youths, street trade, dwarfs, and amputees, are not only striking in their own right, but also have had an immense influence on the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, among others.

Although Mapplethorpe adopted many of the same compositions and poses utilized by Dureau, the effects of the two men's work are quite different. Whereas Mapplethorpe's photography aspires to a kind of classical objectivity, Dureau's is warmer and more involved, evincing compassion as well as desire.

### **Robert Flynt**

Robert Flynt (b. 1956) lives and works in New York City. He creates surreal and sensual photo-montages of the male nude. At times, using an underwater camera, Flynt captures the weightless and ethereal movements of his models. He frequently collaborates with performance artists and dancers. His work is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Flynt frequently utilizes secondary images drawn from a variety of sources, including anatomy charts, first aid textbooks, X-rays, astronomical maps, nineteenth-century etchings, men's wear catalogues, and even classic Roman sculptures. Such overlapping of images allows Flynt to create collage-like effects that begin with the male form but ultimately transcend it.

His work is complex, reminiscent of nineteenth-century photography and alternative process-based photography from the 1970s, but employing contemporary innovations that replace darkroom manipulations with digital ones. He has published several books, including *Compound Fracture* (1996).

### **Robert Giard**

In 1985 photographer Robert Giard (1939-2002) set out to create an archive of portraits of gay and lesbian writers from across the United States. His intention was to present visible evidence of their presence in our culture and to document their particular voices. His book, *Particular Voices: Portraits of Gay and Lesbian Writers* (1998) contains 182 of the more than 500 portraits Giard has made.

### **Gilbert & George**

British artists Gilbert Proesch (b. 1943) and George Passmore (b. 1942) began collaborating in the late 1960s, when they adopted the name Gilbert & George. They met and studied at St. Martins School of Art in London in 1967.

Pushing the boundaries of art making, they were first known for their performance piece "The Singing Sculpture" in which, with hands and face covered in metallic paint, they became literally a singing sculpture. In foregrounding action, time, and space, Gilbert & George challenged the material privileging of the object over the artistic intention.

The duo is perhaps best known for their large-scale photographic collages in which they often represent themselves. Created from individual squares the larger images are several meters tall. Homoerotic in content, many of their photographic works have a gay subtext and often confront political and social issues.

### **David Hockney**

Born in Bradford, England in 1937, Hockney lives in England and Los Angeles. He began his career as a painter who worked in a highly figurative manner. He quickly earned an unusual degree of success, becoming one of the best known artists of his time, and soon branched out into stage design.

Hockney employs the solid color fields usually associated with modernist abstraction but in the service of his compositions. In doing so, he creates images that are striking in their palette and distinguished by the juxtaposition of solidly rendered figures and objects against flat, abstracted fields of color. His paintings and etchings are often strongly homoerotic, especially those now known as the "Love Paintings."

Hockney began using photography to assist his painting and to photograph his young male friends and models. As he continued to experiment with polaroid cameras, he began to combine individual polaroid images to create larger composite images. These popular polaroid and snapshot assemblage pieces suggest the same playfulness found in his other artistic works.

Although not strictly a photographer, Hockney has made an important contribution to gay male photography. His photographic works now have as many fans as his paintings, drawings, and set designs.

### **Peter Hujar**

Peter Hujar (1934-1987) lived and worked in New York City. He photographed a wide array of subject matter: nudes, animals, fashion, still lifes, Italian landscapes, erotica, street people, and transvestites, always finding beauty in unexpected places.

Hujar's best-known photograph, "Candy Darling on her Deathbed" (1973), is both gentle and heroic. His ability to show compassion is a constant in his work, from his early portraits of handicapped children to his late self-portraits.

In 1994, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam joined the Fotomuseum in Zürich to assemble the first major exhibition of Hujar's work. The retrospective included some 183 images and an accompanying catalogue entitled *Peter Hujar: A Retrospective*. Hujar died of an AIDS-related illness in 1987.

### **Robert Mapplethorpe**

Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) became one of the most famous gay male artists of his time as a result of the controversy surrounding his 1989 exhibit "The Perfect Moment." Perhaps best known for his X and Y portfolios, composed of S&M and flower images, respectively, Mapplethorpe combines cool elegance of composition, stylized forms, and shocking subject matter.

Mapplethorpe's work actually spans a range of media and subject matter, but it was his documentation of S&M practices that thrust his work into the center of the controversy over censorship in the arts. He died of an AIDS-related illness.

### **Duane Michals**

Born in Pennsylvania in 1932, Duane Michals settled in New York in the late 1950s and became known as a commercial and fashion photographer. He first exhibited in 1963, and by 1970 his work had been shown at the Museum of Modern Art. He has published over twenty books of his work, including *The Portraits of Duane Michals 1958-1988* (1989).

His early work became well known for its insistent, and often humorous, use of the narrative series. Many such works actually incorporated handwritten text onto the images. Thematically, Michals has a recurrent fascination with making tangible the intangible realm of love, death, dreams, and wishes. His works deal with human sexuality, both straight and gay, but always in a charmingly moving and innocent manner.

### **Pierre Molinier**

Born in Agen, France, Molinier (1900-1976) had some formal training and lived in Paris for a brief period. But most of his life was spent in Bordeaux where he remained until his death. Molinier began his career as a painter, but by 1950 he had begun to produce the self-portraiture for which he is best known. He had a solo exhibition in André Breton's Paris gallery in 1955.

The bulk of Molinier's photographs were incorporated into photomontage, or photographic collage, which allowed him to alter and repeat any given element. As a result, he created fantastic works, in which, for example, an army of figures could be seen cavorting behind fetishized masks, stiletto heels, and corsets.

Using himself and other models, he then positioned these fantastically gendered figures into erotic compositions that ranged from auto-eroticism to tangled bodies. His work explores transvestitism and auto-erotic fetishism.

Molinier's elaborate suicide in 1976--he shot himself while lying on his bed before a mirror--initially baffled police and secured his legacy. The police at first assumed that he was the victim of foul play, but his suicide was simply another extension of his enigmatic art practice.

### **Mark Morrisroe**

Born in Massachusetts, Mark Morrisroe (1959-1989) created photographs that have been included in numerous museum and gallery exhibitions nationwide, including the 1997 "My Life. Mark Morrisroe: Polaroids 1977-1989" exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles.

The exhibition included 188 portraits, the majority of which were self-portraits. The most striking element in these technically informal works is the voyeuristic appeal of the polaroids themselves. Morrisroe used a 195 Polaroid Land camera and a nearly unlimited supply of film donated by the director of marketing and communications at the Polaroid Corporation.

Captured over a twelve-year period, Morrisroe's naked body in these photographs deteriorates from youthful beauty to near-skeletal wasting as a result of his illness. The self-conscious innocence of Morrisroe's early work is unforgettable.

### **Walter Pfeiffer**

Born in 1946, Walter Pfeiffer lives and works in Zürich. His work has been exhibited at Frankfurt's Kunstverein (1981), Basel's Kunsthalle (1987), Bern's Kunstmuseum (1989), Stockholm's Maritmen Museum (1999), and Zürich's Kunsthaus (1999-2000).

His recent book, *Welcome Aboard, Photography 1980-2000*, contains a vast array of homoerotic images, many with a documentary feel.

### **Pierre et Gilles**

Working collaboratively since the mid-1970s when they first met, fell in love, and began making art together, Pierre Commoy and Gilles Blanchard have managed to create images that speak to a generation of gay men.

Using traditional photo-retouching techniques, painted backdrops, and display items such as fake flowers and fake snow, all combined with their predilection for buff-bodied pretty boys, they create camp-infused confections from classic themes, transforming religious saints and sailors into sexy celebrities.

Because of its unashamed sentimentality and unapologetic gay overtones, their work exists somewhere between high art and low culture. It has been seen more often in reproduction and advertisements than in

originals.

However, recently Pierre et Gilles were the subject of a traveling retrospective exhibition, organized by New York's New Museum for Contemporary Art, which also showed at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. The exhibition included 56 of their ornately framed portraits and launched their new Swatch watch complete with a photo of a mermaid and a sailor.

### **Jack Pierson**

Born in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1960, Jack Pierson lives and works in both Provincetown and New York City. Working with found objects, photography, and installation, Pierson creates work that has less to do with traditional fine art photography than it does with photography as an extension of his own conceptual art practice.

Indebted to the snapshot tradition, Pierson's images present a fragmented world infused with haunting solitude. Quickly taken and often blurry, the photographs juxtapose sexy young men in disheveled bedrooms with grainy images of flowers, found signs, and even American flags, cumulatively suggesting a groggy-eyed look at a media-saturated culture in which everything is already reminiscent of something else.

Pierson's work has been shown in galleries and museums. His books *All of a Sudden* (1995) and *The Lonely Life* (1997) display Pierson's signature style: soft focus, grainy, saturated colors, flowers, fragmented bodies all printed to the end of the page, texture against texture.

In one spread, one sees a distant village set against a blurry flower in the foreground; in another palm trees sway in a pink sky. These books, like his exhibitions, suggest a kind of post-disco melancholia that superbly melds emotional longing with hangovers and ennui.

### **Ken Probst**

An American born in Switzerland, Probst is best known for his book (*por ne-graf'ik*), which takes a behind the scenes look at California's porn industry. Adopting a semi-documentary style, it offers a surprising look at the difficult and often mundane work of creating erotic videos.

Probst captures on film those in-between and often awkward moments that describe the real space of the set, as opposed to the highly constructed fantasy of erotic desire.

Compositionally, the images are charged by a modernist desire for line, texture and form, at times nearly abstracting the events portrayed. A single sock is both a humorous detail and a compositional device to move the eye. A difficult camera angle becomes a humorous *mise en scène*. A bottle of lubricant is little more than a mundane fact. Even the pictures of actors resting between shoots tell us that creating desire can be a lot of work.

### **John Rand**

Born in Oakland, California in 1956, Rand currently lives in Los Angeles. His photographs have been included in a variety of publications including *Artweek*, *Bear*, *American Bear*, and *International Drummer*.

Working in black and white photography, Rand reflects a curious blend of documentary and erotic photography traditions. He is engaged in documenting "Bear" culture, one of the most prominent subcultures within the gay community.

His work is driven by a personal engagement within this community and as such his project stands as a re-evaluation of the idealized male form. In eroticizing hairy, heavyset bodies, Rand hopes to challenge the

dominance of the gym body as the apex of gay male culture.

### **Herb Ritts**

Born in Los Angeles, Ritts (1952-2002) studied economics at Bard College. His first success as a photographer came in 1978 when Ritts shot actors Jon Voight and Ricky Schroeder. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, he continued working in the entertainment industry in Los Angeles as a celebrity portraitist.

His photographs have appeared in *Interview*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, and *Elle*. In 1985, Ritts exhibited his photographs in a gallery setting for the first time.

Remarkably, in a six-year period, Ritts published four books. The first, *Men/Women* (1989), used the human figure in a sensuous and graphically charged manner, taking the best of both fine art and commercial photography traditions.

The second, *Duo* (1991), presented a series of gay couples in the nude. Sexualized by their nudity, and normalized by their humanity, the project drew from both studio and ethnographic portrait styles.

The third, *Notorious* (1992), showcased Ritts' success as a celebrity portraitist. His first major museum exhibition was held at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1986.

### **Wolfgang Tillmans**

Born in 1968 in Germany, where he was raised, Wolfgang Tillmans currently lives and works in London. He has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibits worldwide, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the 1998 Berlin Biennale, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, to name just a few.

In 2000, Tillmans was awarded the highly prestigious Turner Prize in Photography. His photographs have appeared in *i-D*, *Interview*, *Vogue*, and *Raygun*. His latest book, *Burg*, a retrospective of his photography over the last five years, was published in 1998.

One of the youngest photographers to receive international recognition, Tillmans not surprisingly focuses on youth culture in his photography. His work may be described as stylistically a cross between snapshot and documentary.

Tillmans shows us the interiors of bedrooms, empty Chinese food containers, random events that are less concerned with photo history than with photography's evocative power. In one photo, a young man with a Mohawk haircut urinates on a chair. The image's transgressive ambiguity is at once both mundane and erotic.

### **Arthur Tress**

Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1940, Tress currently lives and works in Cambria, California. From 1962 to 1968 he created documentary photographs throughout Europe. His work is in major museum collections such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

His recent retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C., entitled "Fantastic Voyage: Photographs 1956-2000," surveyed the vast terrain of his photographic career. The exhibition included his little seen early documentary work; the surreal dream imagery found in three of his best-known photographic series, "Dream Collector," "Shadow," and "Theater of the Mind"; and his exploration of sexuality and eroticism. As a photographer, Tress has touched on nearly all the major themes of his time.

## **Bruce Weber**

Born in Greensburg, Pennsylvania in 1946, Weber is well known as a commercial photographer. He has also produced commercials, videos, and a number of films including, *Broken Noses* (1987). In recent years, his photographic work has been increasingly shown in museums and galleries.

Weber's projects usually construct a world filled with celebrities and/or exquisitely defined, freckle-faced youths, usually caught boxing, rowing, swimming, or sleeping, all in a self-conscious naturalism that presumes to be as innocent as it is erotic.

## **David Wojnarowicz**

Born in New Jersey, David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992) suffered abuse as a child and grew up largely on the streets, managing somewhat amazingly to acquire a good education despite his troubled youth.

In 1979, living in New York's East Village, he began both his photographic series "Arthur Rimbaud in New York" and his street paintings. As Rimbaud, an alienated Wojnarowicz can be seen riding the New York City subway, eating in a cafe, and even masturbating.

Wojnarowicz worked in a wide range of media throughout his career but is best known for the series of photo-based works that were at the center of a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding controversy in the late 1980s, "Tongues of Flame."

Controversial because of their explicit gay content, they juxtaposed images culled from gay pornography with images from popular culture. In 1990, Wojnarowicz and the Center for Constitutional Rights sued Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association for illegally reproducing artwork from the "Tongues of Flames" catalogue.

His works, which resonate with the anger and frustration felt by gay men in the face of AIDS and homophobia, have been included in a traveling retrospective.

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### **About the Author**

**Ken Gonzales-Day** is a Professor of Art at Scripps College in Claremont, California. His art has been included in solo and group shows in Los Angeles, Guadalajara, Mexico City, and New York. He has published in *Art Journal*, *Art & Text*, *Artissues*, *Artpapers*, and *Poliester*.