



## Weber, Bruce (b. 1946)

by Jason Goldman

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Anyone who has ever gazed upon the chiseled models in an ad for Calvin Klein underwear has probably been experiencing a photograph made by Bruce Weber. Working for Klein, Ralph Lauren, and a slew of other designers, Weber became one of the preeminent photographers of the fashion industry in the 1980s and continues to be one of the world's most popular commercial photographers.

In addition to his advertisements, however, Weber has published several books of his photographs, made several films, and had his work widely exhibited in museums and galleries.

Weber's success is owed to his bold, sexy portrayal of the male body and an erotic, yet nostalgic take on American adolescence. The widespread resurgence of the male nude in photography and the pictorial ubiquity of the muscle hunk during the 1980s are due largely to Weber's influence.

Yet, ironically, the breadth of his contributions is perhaps best measured in its seeming invisibility: Weber has worked so widely within commercial photography and his signature style is so emulated that the re-envisioned male beauty for which he is credited may now seem commonplace.

Simply put, Weber's photographs are populated by beautiful people. Many of his subjects are celebrities and lend his images a glamorous, Hollywood appeal. But the vast majority of Weber's works feature amateur young men, a choice that reveals a key element of his visual world: a whole milk, boy next door sensuality based on the idyllic, all-American white youth.

That is, Weber's images enlist those wholesome aspects of American culture that most resist--and therefore most compel--homoeroticism.

In 1987, for example, Weber produced *The Andy Book*, an entire volume of steamy photographs that worship the rough physicality of small town high school boxer Andy Minsker.

Similarly, his 1991 book *Bear Pond*, which features young lads skinny-dipping and cavorting with the photographer's dogs, centers on a sort of erotic nostalgia: the comely wholesomeness of young bodies in old-fashioned summertime recreation, replete with go fetch and the backdrop of our beloved National Parks.

Weber typically works in black-and-white, which also contributes to the wistful, memoir-quality of his pictures.

But for all the calculated, layered homoeroticism in Weber's work, the homosexual act itself is keenly kept out of the picture: Weber is vigilant, even in his most explicitly homoerotic works, about leaving narrative room for platonic brotherhood, no matter how incredulous we may be.

This feature is especially evident in Weber's recent commercial work for Abercrombie & Fitch, a trendy

American clothier. The pictures for the company's print ads and lavish catalogues (which, after some controversy, one must be eighteen to purchase) idolize a sort of collegiate sexual culture in which young men are everywhere on display: the indomitable prowess of the captain of the football team; the anything-goes debauchery of Spring Break; the sweaty camaraderie of team sports; or the sadomasochistic hazing of fraternity pledges.

Despite the mainstream pretenses of the Abercrombie campaign (and its mainstream target demographic), Weber's tantalizing, over-the-top depictions of homoerotic possibility have lent these ads widespread gay currency and, not incidentally, have gained the company entrée into a lucrative gay consumer-base.

Much as Weber's pictures for Calvin Klein underwear made that designer's white briefs the signifier par excellence of ideal gay male physicality in the early 1990s, Weber's work for Abercrombie has launched their merchandise into gay consciousness; A&F regalia surfaces in gay street culture, gay pornography, and many places in between.

It is difficult to say for certain whether Weber's pictures, by introducing the potential for man-to-man lust, further advance or subtly undermine the idol-status of the muscle-bound white men he so loves to photograph. However, the fact that the A&F campaign's homoerotic texts go largely unnoticed by straight consumers--and must for the campaign to be effective--speaks to the subversive limitations of Weber's art.

Born on March 29, 1946 in rural Greensburg, Pennsylvania, Weber has attributed his interest in photography to his father's tradition of taking family pictures every Sunday and his photographic style to the all-American aesthetics of his pastoral childhood home.

Weber first studied theater in Ohio, then went on to pursue filmmaking at New York University in the 1960s. While in New York, he studied photography under Lisette Model and was also influenced by his friend, photographer Diane Arbus.

Although Weber is best known for his advertising photography, he has also earned acclaim for his filmmaking. His first film, *Broken Noses* (1987), is a documentary about boxer Adam Minsker, the subject of *The Adam Book*. His documentary focusing on the life of jazz trumpeter Chet Baker, *Let's Get Lost* (1989), was nominated for an Academy Award.

His most recent feature, *Chop Suey* (2001), highlights one of Weber's "discoveries," a gorgeous hunk named Peter Johnson who became a highly paid photographic model; but it is also an autobiographical work in which Weber examines his own career and interests, including his passion for legendary lesbian cabaret performer Frances Faye.

Weber has also directed music videos for Chris Isaak and the Pet Shop Boys.

Although Weber is widely credited with elevating advertising photography to an art form, a more compelling effect of his practice may be the way in which it collapses, rather than elevates, the ad with the artful photograph.

The erotic traits so celebrated in Weber's images are themselves readable as market commodities. His privileged, youth-only world of smooth white skin on seething, untouchable bodies partakes of the formal language of advertising; Weber's men are redolent, seductive, and too perfect, partly accessible through the act of consuming, but ultimately unattainable.

Like any good advertisement, his pictures incite, but never fully quench the viewer's desire.

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### **About the Author**

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