

ART & DESIGN | ART IN REVIEW

Bob Mizer: ‘Artifacts’

By HOLLAND COTTER JAN. 17, 2013

Invisible-Exports

14A Orchard Street,

Lower East Side

Through Jan. 27

Bob Mizer (1922-1992) was a photographer and filmmaker whose entrepreneurial talents led him to form a one-man empire in the field of homoerotica, beginning in the 1940s. Working out of his home in Los Angeles, he was photographing at a time when bodybuilder magazines were as close as gay pornography got to being legal, and he pursued both genres when he established his Athletic Model Guild in 1945.

Mizer soon ran into trouble with the law. In 1947 he was convicted of sending obscene material through the mail and put in jail for nine months. Once out, he picked up where he left off and, with the help of his mother, Delia, kept his studio going for decades. He occasionally used female models; the young Susan Hayward posed for him. But a majority by far were male. A few — Alan Ladd, Victor Mature, Arnold Schwarzenegger — became Hollywood stars; others became luminaries of the gay underground.

The Mizer show at Invisible-Exports, organized by Billy Miller in cooperation with the Bob Mizer Foundation, is an archival display, engrossing on several levels. First, it's a record of extreme creative industriousness. Mizer was apparently a nonstop worker and cottage industry micromanager. Over the decades he produced countless promotional catalogs from paste-up boards, then photographed the boards to use as handouts. Examples of all these formats are here.

Mizer worked with thousands of models, on whom he kept meticulous files, not just on their physical appearance, but also on their character, habits, backgrounds and sexual repertory, with all the information both written out and distilled into pictographic codes for quick reference.

Although he did plenty of single-figure shots, much of his output was based on multicharacter narrative vignettes. In conceiving them he both created and helped preserve a compendious essay in midcentury American concepts of masculinity — straight, gay, whatever.

And while certain images give pause (a hunk in Nazi uniform), others are delightfully funny — innocent, even, with campy horsing around and everyone having fun under the California sun. No wonder David Hockney, in chilly old England, took one look at Mizer beefcake and decided Los Angeles was the place to be.

As a record of changing times, fashions and mores, the show is well worth a visit. It's also a moving tribute to a pre-Stonewall pioneer and artist-visionary, which Mizer was. Finally, it's a gold mine of sheer information, and there's tons more where it came from. So come on, all you students in cultural and queer studies. There are dissertations to be done.

A version of this review appears in print on January 18, 2013, on page C31 of the New York edition with the headline: Bob Mizer: 'Artifacts'.