



ENTERTAINMENT, FEATURED



## EXTRA! EXTRA! 'PHYSIQUE PICTORIAL' RELAUNCHES AS PRINT PUBLICATION

In this social media age that's littered with #instastuds, #hoscoc and #silverdaddies, you only need to power up your mobile to peruse and consume your fill of hot male nudes and gay porn. You can get your eyeful of Instagram man candy as you order your Amazon Fresh poke bowl and schedule a late afternoon Lyft ride. (Just mind your data usage, mister.)

But this type of objectified male imagery was not so easily accessible during the acknowledged *Golden Age of Physique Photography* (approximately 1945-1969). During those tumultuous post-World War II years, America was in a state of cultural, social and economic flux: with the rise of the middle class, civil rights movements, disruption of accepted standards of Art, the Summer of Love and of course, solidifying touchstone moments at [Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco](#), [The Black Cat in Los Angeles](#) and [The Stonewall Inn in New York](#).

The rise of Male Physique Photography coincided with these events. One of the major forces of this movement in America was photographer Bob Mizer's Athletic Model Guild (AMG) and its publication *Physique Pictorial*. It can be argued that Bob Mizer helped to create and define a specific gay ideal: the young, handsome, healthy, athletically-built man. The models in *Physique Pictorial* were photographed and filmed solo, in pairs and in groups. Until the relaxing of obscenity laws in the late 1960s, they were often photographed from behind or in revealing buttocks-baring posing straps to obscure full-frontal genitalia. Beneath of the veneer of the coyly-positioned models with picture-perfect smiles, there was always an undercurrent of charged eroticism. The lure of what was left unseen and the grey area of legality/obscenity only added to the mystique. As a reader of *Physique Pictorial*, you were granted access a secret gay society not unlike [The Everlasting Secret Family](#).

Under the direction of The Bob Mizer Foundation's founder and CEO Dennis Bell and art director Frederick Woodruff, *Physique Pictorial* is relaunching this fall. We spoke to Frederick about the history, legacy and future of *Physique Pictorial* and The Bob Mizer Foundation. And how you can help with their efforts. This is part one of a two-part interview. Part two will run tomorrow.

**Hi, Frederick. Tell us a little bit about yourself.**

I'm an example of what it takes to not sell your soul to a corporation and still survive in the modern economy. Meaning I work full time at working part time with different obsessions: Writing, activism, astrology, and art direction.

**How did you come to be involved as the art director for the Bob Mizer Foundation?**

In the late 90s, I struck oil with my Web ventures and I moved to an island and kinda fell off the grid – but one of the few folks I jibed with in the online world, Dennis Bell, was also running an adult gay site at the time – a vintage queer creation called PosingStrap – and with our mutual interests, we gravitated towards hanging together.

### **And the relaunch of Physique Pictorial?**

After Dennis acquired the Bob Mizer estate we started talking about resurrecting Bob's popular little magazine Physique Pictorial and then earlier this year we decided to jump in and make it happen. The idea of publishing a real ink and paper magazine was a return to my roots, as I'd started out as an art director in the 80s. Also, surveying the larger cultural landscape, it feels like folks are eager to re-enliven tactile reality. Meaning, people are burning out on everything being digital – they want to touch things, rub things, feel stuff in their hands other than their smart phones.



### **What was your first exposure to the work of Bob Mizer?**

I became fascinated with Bob's photography on Dennis' website Posingstrap and sent him a fan letter – and so in that sense, it was Mizer that brought us together. Back in the 80s, by the time I was of age to purchase gay flesh mags – like Honcho and InTouch – the photos featured in those mags were extremely balls out. Though of course all of those publications were indirect offspring of Bob Mizer's Athletic Model Guild, though Bob was working a different artistic vector.

### **How did Mizer's photography resonate for you?**

Bob's work created a unique sort of gay frisson, different from, say, ogling nude guys in Mandate or Blueboy. It was more like seeing the boys on Dukes of Hazard shirtless for the first time. On that TV show it was understood that those dudes were all straight rednecks – and with a lot of Bob's work, there's that same vibe. In other words: it's not gay models modeling but guy guys getting naked.



### **Would you say a specific aesthetic developed?**

Bob had a very distinct – what I call polychromatic photographic eye, but also a skill to corral models from all walks of life – trade and hustlers as well as pro body builders and physique models – and that was a social knack he perfected to a science. Bob had peers but the approach to his work was distinct, a little bit rough around the edges but always striving for art. It's that mixture of the proletarian with the high aesthetic that I love about his work. Also, a big part of his success was that he wasn't lazy and he was obsessed. As John Waters says: "Life is nothing without obsession."

### **Do you have a favorite phase of Mizer's work?**

Yes, his output from the 50s to the late 60s. After Bob fought for and won the freedom to show full-frontal on his models in the 70s – some of the thrills – for me – dimmed. That the male body was finally liberated into pop culture was wonderful but I think

eroticism is fostered when there are taboos in place. Taboos that are right on the verge of being broken or corrupted. That makes things hotter and that's what Bob's implementing the posing strap was all about – aside from being a legal necessity. My favorite porn is the kind where guys are fucking but they're still wearing clothing.

### **So, basically what's left unseen made it hotter and enhanced desire?**

Yep. With that particular phase of Bob's work, you had full-on male nudity except for this tantalizing strip of barely-there material clinging to the crotch. I think thongs and especially that newfangled mutation of the jockstrap – where the ass is bare and framed like a bullseye by large strips of spandex – are vulgar. But the posing strap had class and erotic mystique.

### **For those not familiar with the male physique/posing strap phenomenon, can you tell us about the glory days in the '50s thru '70s? Bob Mizer thru AMG and the Physique Pictorial publication were obviously a big part of the history.**

Bob freed the 'male gaze' worldwide, a permission for men to ogle other men. It sounds corny to make the comparison, but if I had to define bookends on the male nudity trajectory it would go like this: From the Greek's veneration of the Kurous to Bob's adoration of naked thugs and hunks in his Hollywood compound – there's a lot in-between but Bob is hands down the modern-day pioneer.

But for a more comprehensive historical overview, I'm gonna do the lazy thing and [submit a link to the Foundation's Kickstarter – there's little historical crash course their for your readers.](#)

## **As a predecessor to gay porn, how did physique photography define a developing gay male aesthetic?**

Well, a straight guy being procured or 'turning' remains an indefatigable fantasy — new mutations of that narrative show up repeatedly in contemporary gay porn — so younger guys must be loving it too. I hope it never disappears — it's the queer trope that keeps on giving — despite masculinity becoming more 'fluid'.

## **Did Bob Mizer's work fetishize straight "trade"?**

Not intentionally, I think it was an outcome of the wild mix of forces and personalities he worked with. I have a sense that Bob didn't have time to intellectualize his art. He was an Aries, that sign generally does a lot of stuff impulsively and then once exhausted stops and evaluates what they've created. It's the charm — and maddening part — of their nature.

## **So, do you think Physique Pictorial presented an alternate iconography for gay men of the time?**

Good question. If Bob created a gay male aesthetic it formed spontaneously and had more to do with a particular spirit than anything contrived. You always sense a zestfulness in his work. Bob's photographs injected his fans with his joie de vivre. The majority of Bob's models had a blast — fun and freedom were evident in all of the frames — and that conveyed an "all rightness" about being gay. On one level there is the viewer's visceral response to male nudity, but at the core, we're attracted to the spirit — the promise of that sort of freedom — to simply be oneself.

## **Would you consider physique photography — especially the work of Bob Mizer, Bruce of Los Angeles, Western Photography Guild, Champion Studio—to be a specifically American phenomenon?**

Definitely not. Physique photography was huge in the UK, and other photographers all over the world were shooting in a similar style, there's was even amazing work arriving from Cuba. And the studios you listed are simply the ones that commercialized this phenomenon in the United States, I mean physique photography reaches far back to the 1910s — into the Victorian era. And many British models came to the United States to be photographed by American photographers, and vice versa.

## **In the context of gay male identity, how important were publications like Physique Pictorial especially in more rural areas?**

Pornography and social evolution progress in tandem. After the Guttenberg press was invented the first book printed was the Bible. The second book was someone's collection of porn. As film critic Pauline Kael once noted: "Sex is the great leveler, taste the great divider."

I'm convinced that gay porn facilitated the country's accelerated acceptance of same sex marriage. My last boyfriend was in his twenties. He's of that generation that popped out of the womb and started typing on a laptop. He explained that it was his easy access to gay porn as a kid that instantly confirmed and made him comfortable with his queerness. His coming 'out' was fairly effortless. And he was from one of the most retrogressive cultures in Eastern Europe.

## **And outside of the United States?**

Sure. The Net's universality supported a radical kind of confirmation process. Guys worldwide were able to move quickly through what was often an agonizing phase for queers of earlier generations. That translated into a quickening within the culture. I'm not saying this was or is true for everyone, but in a general sense, this is my understanding of why the tide shifted so radically. Everyone who was gay could know he was gay, within the span of a few clicks, in the privacy of his bedroom.

## **So you're connecting Bob's art with this same process?**

Yes. Mizer's Physique Pictorial was the precursor to this socio-political acceleration. The distribution system was different but the outcome was the same: Imagery that was smuggled or smart-phoned into a guy's inner sanctum. This is where behavioral changes begin within the psyche — in our relationship to images — stand-ins for essential longings and desires. From there, things shift and mutate in the culture.

(Editor's note: Part two of the interview continues tomorrow)

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