REVIEW: The Golden Age of the American Male

From the archives of the Athletic Model Guild comes a unique insight into today's gay identity.

The Athletic Model Guild was a publishing and production house that operated in Los Angeles in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s – this is the subject of the documentary The Golden Age of the American Male.

The creative force behind the Athletic Model Guild was Bob Mizer.

Mizer created magazines and short films. Although some, such as the groundbreaking Physique Pictorial, masqueared as publications for budding body builders, the real purpose was to serve as erotica for men who were aroused by other men.

The actors and models that Mizer used were drawn from the periphery of the mainstream movie industry in Los Angeles – young guys hoping for their big break, rent-boys and rough trade.

The Golden Age of the American Male – which screened this week as part of London's BFI Flare film festival – is a compilation of some of the films produced by Mizer's Athletic Model Guild.

Viewed from today's perspective, Mizer's films seem silly and hammy, albeit produced with an easy humor and knowing sense of fun.

What's interesting is that they give some insight into what it was like to be a gay man in Los Angeles during that period. It is easy to imagine that the guys that appeared in Mizer's short films were at the Hollywood parties, lounging by the pools of the rich and famous, and readily available for hire by the hour. These boys generally appeared to be having a good time.

In a broader context, Mizer's erotic aesthetic has clearly played a pivotal role in shaping our sense of modern masculinity and what it means to be sexually appealing as a gay man. He had a fascination with military uniforms, with leather, discipline and control, and exploring the intoxicating allure of men in positions of power.

Cultural phenomena as diverse as Tom of Finland, Andy Warhol, Falcon Studios, and David Hockney have all been influenced by the work of Mizer. The way that men are presented in today's fashion and advertising campaigns celebrate and objectify the body in a way that was first explored by Mizer.
The magazines and movies of the Athletic Model Guild were primarily distributed by mail-order, at a time in the United States when it was illegal to produce, own, or distribute this type of material. Indeed, Mizer himself was convicted in 1954 of distributing obscene material via the mail.

It's hard to comprehend how important it was to consumers of Mizer's work to know that they were not alone, that there were others out there who wanted the same thing, who felt the same way, who desired the masculinity represented by the confident and uninhibited young men of Los Angeles.

The world today is clearly a different place from Los Angeles in the 1950s, but it is Bob Mizer – who died in 1992 at the age of 70 – and the Athletic Models Guild who have helped to shape who we have become.

Read more from Gareth Johnson

---

You May Like

This game will keep you up all night!
Sparta Online Game