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From Beefcake to Skatecake: Masculinity in the Swimming Pool

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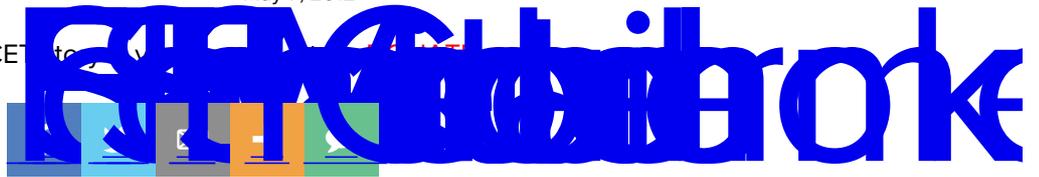


Photo by Bob Mizer.

In mid-century architectural images of homes and pools, whether taken by Julius Shulman or by a staff photographer for any number of home-and-garden magazines, people are absent. The pool is clearly just an ornament to reflect the home's implied occupants--predictably, the family unit--either to enhance their glamour by way of its Hollywood associations, or to illustrate a rise in social status, as a newly minted consumer in the postwar era.

Although the dominant image of the backyard pool was as a backdrop for family values, privacy, and consumerism, there existed alternative uses and representations of the backyard pool as a site for expressing erotic desire, voyeurism, and a liminal state between nature and culture. From beefcakes in bikini bottoms to skater bros flipping tricks in empty pools, various depictions of masculinity are manifest in photographs of these backyard bodies of water from mid-twentieth century through the late 1970s.

Backyard Oasis: The Swimming Pool in Southern California Photography, 1945-1982 at the Palm Springs Art Museum, on view through May 27, 2012, examines swimming pools in photographs from 1945 to 1982, exploring the SoCal ideals--Eden-like landscapes, healthy bodies, the mecca of entertainment, and a constant look toward the future. Crossing the boundaries of popular and high culture, commercial merchandising, journalistic reporting, and vernacular memorabilia, photography conveyed the developing ideologies of the period. The exhibition, organized by Senior Curator Daniell Cornell, traces the development of art and cultural history within the following thematic groups: California Architecture and Design, Hollywood and Celebrity Culture, The Shape of Desire and Dreams, The Utopian-Dystopian Topos of Suburbia, and The Pacific Ocean as Context.

Contrary to Shulman's often-reproduced images of architecturally significant, clean-lined, modernist homes with placid backyard pools, such as the Kaufmann House in Palm Springs, photographs made between 1945 and 1980 that show men at play in backyard swimming pools. Two Los Angeles-based photographers captured the action: the beefcake photography of Bob Mizer and his peers from the 1940s-1960s published in his *Physique Pictorial* magazine, and Craig Stecyk's photo documentation of the DogTown Z-Boy skateboard team for *SkateBoarder* magazine in the 1970s. Each focuses on a redefinition of masculinity in relationship to the swimming pool towards a new vision embracing hedonism. This shift in values associated with the masculine--from a man as hardworking breadwinner for his family to the single, unattached, self-obsessed, and leisure-seeking man--accompanies a cultural shift from the early 1950s to the late 1970s from an economy based on production to one based on consumption.

The notion of a pool as "family site" provides cover for erotic desires that challenge mainstream modes of masculinity and domesticity. Instead of creating images for families who may see their values reflected in magazines such as *House Beautiful*, or for the "family man," seeking out heteronormative, erotic images in men's magazines such as *Playboy*, both Mizer and Stecyk depict worlds of young men playing, posing, and emphasizing physique and performance. The work of each of these photographers was widely influential since their images were first published in magazines that could be found on most any magazine rack, as opposed to the rarefied setting of the fine art gallery or museum. Pools became art when captured by the photographer's lens.

Bodies in Motion

When the surf was down, many waveriders took to their skateboards and headed to another body of water to get their adrenaline fix: the pool. Without water, pools offered the plastered slopes and concrete curves that made for a clean canvas for skateboarder's decks, trucks, and wheels.

Cut to 1973, Venice beach. It was here that Craig Stecyk, Jeff Ho, and Skip Engblom opened the shop Jeff Ho Surfboards and Zephyr Productions on the now fashionable Main Street. They developed a surfing team called the Z-Boys, who caught waves at Bay Street in Santa Monica and were infamous for adventurous surfing amidst the dilapidated pier-pilings of the Pacific Ocean amusement park, an area nicknamed "DogTown."

They were also passionate skateboarders. Based on their surfing skills, they came to use banks of concrete throughout the city, especially at schoolyard playgrounds, to invent new, stylish moves. Instead of standing straight up, which had been the dominant stance, even in competition, they crouched low on their boards. It was a low-slung style, akin to a surfer guiding one's hand through a wave to steer their surfboard.

Southern California had experienced rapid postwar suburban expansion, accompanied by the construction of a few hundred thousand, backyard swimming pools--made affordable and accessible through bank loans and cheaper building techniques. But in the 1970s in Los Angeles, a prolonged drought forced many homeowners to drain their

...ing... pools. Word got around about these new "cement oases." The Z-Boys took their surf style of skating and their attitude of treating the urban landscape like their personal playground to the empty pools. For some, Stecyk's photographs and the Z-Boys depicted a draining of the Edenic California dream. But for skaters, abandoned pools are a slice of paradise.

The Gay Gaze



Photo
by
Bob
Mizer

Before skateboarders made empty pools into kinetic courses, Bob Mizer, pioneer of gay, nude photography, made the pool into an aquatic runway showcasing muscle-bound physiques. Mizer founded the Athletic Model Guild, or AMG, in 1945, and published *Physique Pictorial* magazine from 1951 to 1990. Mizer's photographs could be found printed both in his own magazine and in the so-called "beefcake magazines" published between the 1930s and 1960s. While their primary market became gay men, until the 1960s these publications were typically presented as dedicated to encouraging fitness and health. They grew out of bodybuilding magazines that began publication in the early twentieth century. Up until several significant Supreme Court cases in the late 1960s, United States obscenity laws allowed women, but not men, to appear in various states of undress in images for publication. After the U.S. Supreme Court lifted the ban on representing full frontal, male nudity in 1967, the market was flooded with shots of the male physique. And after the Stonewall riot in 1969, gays become more visible in society. These two elements combined began to change how men behaved, as well as how they were depicted and viewed by the mainstream. What was groundbreaking about Mizer's work for *Physique Pictorial* was that he had no pretense about showing men without their clothes and celebrating their beauty. He was neither secretive nor apologetic. Muscles were ornamental flourishes adorning the body's architecture, and Mizer's images imbued brazen sexiness to these organic structures.

Pools as Playpens

Mizer's world is one of homoerotic playfulness. The key to the success of Mizer's images was the printed magazine. The accent is clearly on the single man seeking privacy for self-satisfaction. Through the playfulness, it could be argued, that Mizer is helping his young men, regardless of sexual identity, to learn to enjoy their bodies. In Stecyk's world of Z-Boy skateboarders, the underlying message seems to be that classic male bonding--if such a distinction exists--occurs through the shared, extreme experiences of vertical leaps in empty pools and the rebellious brigands' trespassing of private homes.





Photo
by
Craig
Stecyk

Stecyk's Z-Boy skateboarders challenged the sports model of military-like discipline and bending the body to rational will. Rather, the Z-Boys were not he-men, but were putting themselves on display for one another. They enjoyed performing and watching one another's bodies in motion. Skateboarding is a sport, but it's also an art form, a performance meant to evoke awe. Like the "observer effect" in physics, which postulates that the mere act of observation changes the outcome of an experiment, the style and daringness of skateboarders' tricks often are accentuated when performed in front of an audience. So when these skaters were being photographed by Stecyk, and being written about, thus becoming new role models for young men around the country who would read *SkateBoarder* magazine, their tricks elevated from the realm of sport, to the performative nature of art.

In the context of the postwar backyard swimming pool, so often used as a location for shelter magazines to self-consciously display the nuclear family and its values, Mizer and Stecyk employ the same setting to pose a challenge to those values.

Sensual Architecture

Mizer's and Stecyk's representations and actual use of the backyard pool are an example of architectural space rethought in terms of the body that occupies it. Both Mizer's boys cavorting and posing around the pool and Stecyk's skateboarders hugging the pool's empty curves emphasize a desire for one's body to be in motion. Their engagement with the architectural and social other represents a rebirth of body and identity.

The bowl shape of the pool, filled with water, with bodies suspended in it, resembles a baby in the womb. In the case of Mizer and Stecyk, groups of men circulate around the womb-pool, both in its childbearing state, when it is

case of Mizer and Stecyk, groups of men circulate around the walled pool, both in its unobscuring state, when it is full of water, and in its barren state, when it is drained of water. Their appropriation of this site in order to reconfigure and challenge dominant ideas of masculinity suggests an active process of rebirth. It is a representation in direct challenge to the single-family unit and the suburban identity of the backyard pool, where privacy and security separates and protects from homosexuals and trespassing skateboarders. Mizer and Stecyk, in their depictions of communal masculinity, suggest a space of shared experience, and in this sharing of an alternate value system find new security and renewal.

Backwards into the 1980s

In 1980s, one could argue, that there was a cultural jump backwards to the 1950s, as if World War II had just ended again, some thirty-five years later. The past is the future and the future is the past. The cultural and political conservatism of the period managed to co-opt the energy of the liberatory self-reliance of the previous decades; the free love of the 1960s was replaced by the Reagan administration's Adolescent Family Life Act, which promoted chastity education in schools; the artistic freedom in music and art were now subject to censorship by the Parents Music Resource Center. In addition, wealthy families enjoyed relative freedom from taxation, increasing their buying power. Yuppies bought suits, while underserved communities bought drugs, as drug enforcement agencies focused on arrests rather than treatment. In other words, privilege and consumer excess reared their heads again, in combination with moral restraint, obligation, and respecting so-called public norms.

Now, forty years after the drought of the 1970s, there is another sort of calamity stretching across the landscape of the Southland--foreclosures. The American dream of home ownership is disappearing with the Southern Californian dream of owning an oasis in the backyard along with it. Today, in empty subdivisions and abandoned McMansions, pools lay dormant, they're vestigial organs leftover from the playful days captured in Mizer's photographs. But in these dry backyard lakebeds dotting the suburban horizon, skateboarders see beauty, and a thousand opportunities to dive in.

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Backyard Oasis: The Swimming Pool in Southern California Photography, 1945-1982, Palm Springs Art Museum, On view through May 27, 2012, <http://psmuseum.org>.

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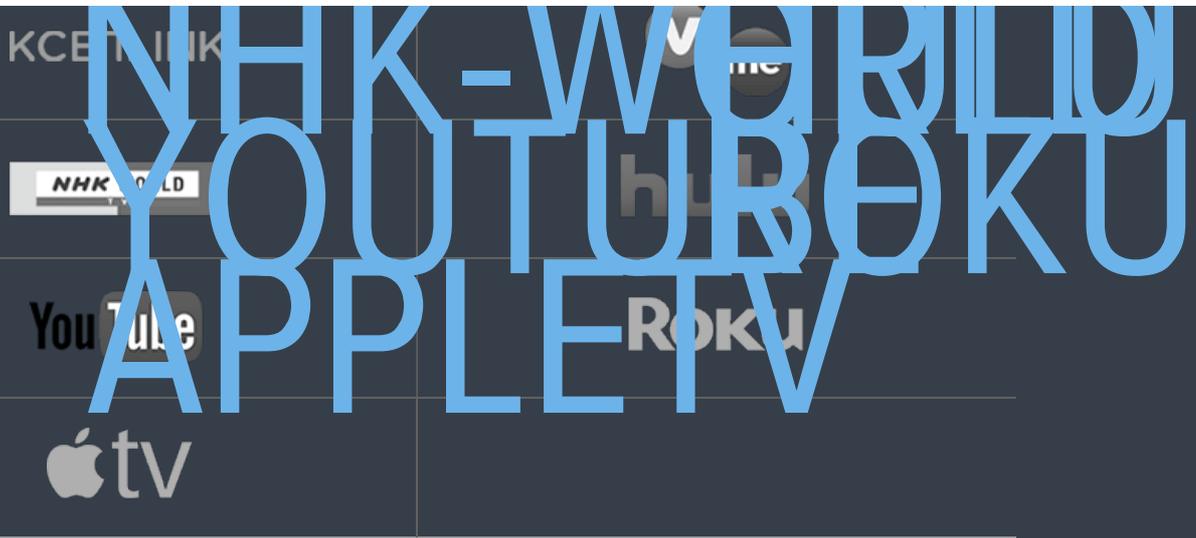
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