Gay Images in Photography
Picturing the Homoerotic
by Allen Ellenzweig

In the 1970s there was a new proliferation of photographs of the male nude—clearly the result of the sexual revolution, and the feminist and gay movements, making inroads into the social consciousness. Suddenly women were photographing men as erotic love objects (in ways that men had been picturing women for centuries), while gay male photographers began expressing their sexual preference in pictures. Such an outpouring of erotic male photography has not been seen since the late 19th and early 20th centuries when male nudity was, for the most part, presented under the guise and imprimatur of a pastiche classicism. Stick a laurel wreath on a naked boy, as did Baron Wilhelm Von Gloeden, and you had art, and not a little bit of Eros as well.

Yet Eros is in the eye of the beholder, and few serious observers have examined the exact role of the homoerotic in photography, consigning it instead to some subcategory of the erotic (which was always the heteroerotic, anyway). Photography critics either have ignored the question of homoeroticism, limited the works of art they examined to contemporary “art” photographs aimed at gay men, or marginalized homoerotic photography along with pornography.

So what exactly is homoeroticism? It has to do with feelings of desire and affection between members of the same sex, but not necessarily their physical expression which is more properly the province of pornography—especially when that expression is sexual. These feelings can encompass the full range of male (or female) bondings, from friendship to teacher-student relations to the fellow-feeling of brothers or men at war; and often an erotic aspect to these relationships may lurk like a phantom in the background.

There is a considerable body of historical work that could be said to fall into the homoerotic canon. These are images by photographers who have long been recognized for their contribution to the medium, but rarely have been discussed for their homoerotic potential. Understanding this past can help place present accomplishments in perspective, for today’s photographers dealing with homoerotic motifs, like Duane Michals, Arthur Tress, and the late Robert Mapplethorpe, invariably have been aware of, and found inspiration in the implicit same-sex eroticism of those earlier pictures.

One important example is a typical picture by Thomas Eakins, the American 19th-century realist painter. Eakins often photographed his students, active and robust young men, in plein air settings. But among a series of pictures on classical themes is one showing two of his students from the Pennsylvania Academy wearing Grecian togas. One figure stoops and draws on the floor; the other stands and looks down as if receiving instruction. The composition seems a likely illustration of the Greek ideal of a mutual intellectual exchange as described in Plato’s Symposium:

...when the lover is able to contribute towards wisdom and excellence, and the beloved is anxious to improve his education and knowledge in general, then and then only ... is it honorable for a boy to yield to his lover.

This suggestive reading of the picture is only further encouraged when we realize that the statue hovering in the background between the boys is the Goddess Aphrodite, goddess of love.

OUT/LOOK
An informed gay audience can read both the intended and clandestine clues.

In contemporary terms, a somewhat similar atmosphere of "exchange"—intimate, tender, and potentially sexual—appears in Arthur Tress's picture of two teenage boys sitting on some steps, *Teenage Runners*, 1976. Among his contemporaries, Tress has most consistently pictured homosexual fantasies and male beauty in a surreal manner. In a large group of pictures from the 1970s, he created elaborate psycho-sexual mise en scene dealing with specific power relations in gay sex that often were metaphoric depictions of pornographic situations. Here, however, the camera has closed in on the two boys, yielding a composition that seems more documentary in effect. One boy peels a band-aid off the other's thigh. It is a moment of odd intimacy between youths; at that age, boys are eager to prove and maintain their manhood by denying their gentler selves. However, the utopian ideal of teenage homoerotic encounter is strengthened by an iconicographic element: the boy on the right's gym shirt is emblazoned with the word XAVIER, referring to a Catholic boy's school in New York City. We only have to look at the slender pair of naked limbs in Tress's picture to clue into the potential for ardent teenage sexual excitement.

What Makes a Photo Homoerotic?

In both of these examples, the element of homoeroticism originates from two sources: first, the figures in the photographs appear to engage in an intimate exchange of knowledge and affection, potentially erotic. Second, we as viewers, recognizing this (if we are male and subject to this pull) gravitate to the sweet intimacy they illustrate. When we do, we likely project onto the image our personal sexual preoccupations.

There is of course a third homoerotic direction—indeed, perhaps the most vital one—which involves the feelings between the photographer and his subjects. After all, the homoerotic is a human emotion, not an artistic quality. The photographer unavoidably brings to this male imagery an emotional point of view. Whether these sympathies are acknowledged by him as homoerotic, or are the subconscious expression of a latent interest, they likely will be the subtext of his pictures in which male bonding or male beauty are central concerns. It is up to the viewer to decode in the photographs the homoeroticism implicit between the photographer and his subjects.

Arthur Tress
*Teenage Runners*
1979

Winter 1990

74
The question of the photographer’s intention is frequently raised as a barrier to reading homoerotic elements into a photograph; critics, curators, and heirs fear that so-and-so will be labeled “gay.” As if that would be so terrible. Or, as if defending the honor of a master photographer (such as a 19th century master like Eakins), few will admit a homoerotic interpretation because it cannot be proved.

Yet we don’t need to ascertain a photographer’s homosexuality to bolster a homoerotic interpretation, although biographical clues certainly can be used. It would be a simplification of photographic history, though, and simple-minded as well, to suppose that only homosexual photographers deal in homoerotic images. Furthermore, the very concept of the “homoerotic,” much like the “homosexual,” was hardly current in thought or discourse until the full flower of Freud and would not have been available to photographic commentators and critics until well into the 20th century.

That artistic intention may not decide the issue can be seen in a photograph by the Pictorialist photographer, Frank M. Sutcliffe. The aims of the Pictorialists were high; they were the leading exponents of photography as art. With their belief in the subjective vision, the manipulated print, and a frequent romantic bias (soft focus, imitative painterly effects), they set out to escalate photography from its secondary position beside the other fine arts.

Sutcliffe was essentially a genre photographer, artfully documenting the everyday life of an English harbor town. In Natives, however, he moved beyond the local moment into a transcendent realm, by posing three young nude boys against a beached fishing cable in imitation of some generalized classical conception. These boys are like kuros, the antique statuary of graceful nude youths, come to life in the 19th century, deliberately posed in such a way as to express an ideal of serene physical grace. But a heightened degree of eroticism is implicit: the long stem of the boat’s mast stretches out toward the distant horizon like an erect penis. However chastely intended, the picture is ripe with phallic suggestion.
A relatively recent example of ambiguous intentions yielding equally provocative results is the Polacolor photograph by Marie Cosindas, a portrait photographer of a certain class of beautiful people in, out, and around the demi-monde. Her Sailors, Key West features two men, one lounging like an Odalisque, the other crouching by his buddy's back in a proprietary manner. Already, a division of male and female roles is hinted. The reclining man also adopts an open-legged position, while their similar display of naked arms and chests seems a candid, even calculated, sign of seduction. But whether they offer themselves to the female photographer or beyond to a larger public, the dewy lighting, muted colors, and close correspondence of the men's hands and groins at the picture's center, develop an atmosphere of ambivalent erotic invitation. They may or may not be real sailors, but pictured as they are, they play with the sailor as a homoerotic archetype.

The Cosindas work is an instance where photographer's own gender, sexual orie and even intention, does not a priori v against the reading of male homoerotic picture. The opposite can also hold. Whi Words Must Be Said, Duane Michals the most active man-to-man picture mak given us a sublimely poetic "image wi where a reading of lesbian love inescapable. The composition is v Michals: an interior in which two wot fixed in a suspended moment, a conter assailnix riouy. One woman looks out a expectantly and is bathed in the glow light; the other is seated nearby beside. Though what is "happen" between not represented, Michals (one of the f certainly the most prominent conten photographer to combine words intri with his images) suggests in a handwriti that we are witness to a same-sex i
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of profound delicacy and tension:
Things had become impossible between them and nothing could be salvaged. Certain words must be said. And although each one had said the words a hundred times to herself, they had never said them to each other out loud. So they began to hope someone would say the words for them. Perhaps a letter might arrive, or a telegram delivered that would say what needed to be said. Now they spent their days waiting. What else could they do?

Combined, word and image are elliptical, dealing in fundamentals of human feeling, not social categories. Originally, Certain Words was shot for an editorial fashion layout. So much for intention.

The iconography of images with homoerotic themes is not limited to allusions to the classical world like Von Gloeden's campy Hellenism, Eakins' more sober Platonic illustration, or the reflective reference to Greek statuary in Sutcliffe's Natives. Nor are exceedingly macho archetypes—like Cosindas's sailors or the cartoon porn figures of The Cowboy, The Trucker, or The Construction Worker—the only images to set off the erotic pulse. Homoerotic intent has also been signalled through the use of certain religious motifs, especially the arrow-pierced figure of St. Sebastian.

In the late 19th century, the American F. Holland Day was one of the most important Pictorialists to deal with Christian themes, though a significant portion of his photographs followed the homoerotic conventions of the period and were highly refined. He often took chimerical portraits of young boys dressed up in classical garb, or posed as figures of Pan, Orpheus, or other mythological figures.

Duane Mich
Certain Wo
Must Be Sai
1976

Credit: Sidney Janis Gallery, New York
Study for the Crucifixion shook Boston society. Full frontal nudity was new for Brahmins.

In the last decade of the 19th century, and especially after the Oscar Wilde scandal, the lure of Christian martyrdoms presented apt if exaggerated analogies to gay aesthetics like Day. He made over 250 photographs on the theme of Christ’s Passion, and a smaller number of St. Sebastians. He himself posed as Christ, and these images, such as his Study for the Crucifixion, shook Boston society. Full frontal nudity was new for Brahmins. Such a pose is now almost a cliché for sexual ardor: arms upraised, head thrown back, torso stance contraposto, hips tilted and knees bent. The body is modeled by soft, shimmery lighting. The crucifix, however, is barely shown; the circumstances that are the reasons for the pose are neglected in favor of the pose itself.

A New Twist for Art’s Sake

Some contemporary photographers who work with homoerotic imagery invert the religious themes of the past to produce non-religious icons. Robert Mapplethorpe’s Dennis Walsh, New York is such a photograph. Light models the stretched torso and upraised arms, while the rest, except for the model’s head, drops off into a dense grey, then an opaque black. The smooth and toned muscularity of bicep and chest give the pose a concise seductive message. Except for his T-shirt, the model appears to exist in a social and historical vacuum; all is subordinated to sheer physical presence in the now. No external themes—not Truth, Virtue, or Martyrdom—exist to certify his pose. Allusion to classical statuary has given way to appreciation of perfect proportion as it exists in the real world. The theme appears to be the love object as diety.

Mapplethorpe played shrewdly with the boundaries between subject and style, between an overt homoeroticism and a formalism devoid of context. This was even true of his harshest images, those that concentrated on sadomasochistic relations or were otherwise sexually graphic. “I’d rather call it pornography than call it homoerotic,” he once said. “If it’s a good photograph, it has to be good beyond the subject, too.” This is an understandable remark from a photographer who, even in his most pornographic work—those images showing men or body parts engaged in sex acts—could not help but artfully compose and print the picture.

F. Holland Day
Study for the Crucifixion
1898

Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Alfred Stieglitz Collection

Winter 1990
Mapplethorpe's censors hope to deny the very existence of the homoerotic.

Robert Mapplethorpe
Dennis Walsh, New York
1976

Credit: The Robert Miller Gallery, New York

Mapplethorpe emerges from the art for art's sake tradition in which classical formal values, not moral bias, find succor. The lessons of commercial fashion photography and advertising—each branded by surrealism's juxtaposition of odd objects and dreamlike drama—have also widely influenced photographers like Tress, Michals, and Mapplethorpe, who have chosen to work in the directorial mode. There, the photographer creates his own narrative vision, mapping out the scene with the same dedication as the film auteur. For this new generation of photographers working in a more open social atmosphere, it has been their own erotic ideas and impulses which have found expression in their art—just as surrealism was the visualization of many Freudian ideas.

The history of homoerotic themes in photography takes on compelling interest in light of the recent controversy over the cancellation of a major Mapplethorpe show scheduled for the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC. Mapplethorpe's censors, who have sought to deny Federal funds "to promote, disseminate, or produce obscene or indecent materials including but not limited to depictions of...homoeroticism..." quite simply hope to deny the very existence of the homoerotic as a valid field of artistic inquiry. With such moralistic language guiding our laws, how long would it be before exhibitions by Thomas Eakins and F. Holland Day would be deemed by government fiat unacceptable for funding support, and unworthy of public viewing in the largest civic sense?

Tress, Michals, and Mapplethorpe are just three of the contemporary photographers whose explicit homoeroticism is indebted to the liberalizing atmosphere that the gay liberation movement in particular helped spawn and which now is increasingly threatened. But there are many others who have been contributing to an enlarged sense of the male homoerotic, among them the Americans Edmund Teske, Robert Giard, the late Peter Hujar, Keith Smith, David Lebe, and women like Starr Ockenga, Eva Rubenstein, Ernestine Ruben, Lynn Davis, and from Canada, Sorel Cohen. Among lesbian erotic image makers are such photographers as Tee Corine, Morgan Gwenwald, Ruth Bernhard, and Joyce Culver. In the 1980s, Bruce Weber has made a huge dent in the homoerotic canon with his exceedingly chic studies of corn-fed American beefcake. In France, the color fantasist Bernard Faucon has created elaborate and imaginative narratives using boy mannequins.

The field remains wide open because the homoerotic need not be a category of picture-making, but a by-product of it. And an informed gay audience can read both the intended and the clandestine clues; gay and lesbian photographers in particular are willing to address these cognosciti. But in any case, the truer the inquiry into the land of personal intimacy and affection that the photographer—male or female—dares go, the surer we are of finding homoeroticism a constant, not an exception, in the history of photography.

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