

ART REVIEW

Beyond Beefcake in the Work of a Gay Pioneer

By Ken Johnson

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In 1951, Bob Mizer began *Physique Pictorial*, a magazine loaded with photographs of muscular young men wearing little more than posing straps — G-strings for men. Its imagery ostensibly illustrated health and fitness, but was really aimed at what was then an underground gay market. Mizer (1922-92) was a pioneer in making explicit the genre's erotic appeal, enough so to attract attention from legal authorities. In 1947, he was convicted of contributing to the delinquency of a minor by taking nude pictures of a 17-year-old, and he spent a year in prison. In 1954, he was convicted of distributing obscene material through the mail. (That conviction was reversed on appeal a couple of years later.) Those speed bumps didn't stop Mizer's enterprise as a commercial photographer and publisher from growing to the point at which it occupied four lots near downtown Los Angeles, like a Hollywood movie studio, earning him the nickname "the Hugh Hefner of gay publishing." Mizer, evidently, was blessedly free of high-art pretension, but *Physique Pictorial* was nevertheless an inspiration for artists like David Hockney and Robert Mapplethorpe.

Considering his renown, it's surprising to learn that "Devotion: Excavating Bob Mizer," an exhibition at New York University's 80 Washington Square East Gallery, known as 80WSE, is, according to a gallery news release, "the first major institutional solo presentation of Bob Mizer's work to be shown anywhere in the world."

The show isn't what Mizer fans might expect. Organized by Jonathan Berger, director of 80WSE, and Billy Miller, publisher of the gay magazine *Straight to Hell*, in collaboration with Dennis Bell, president of the Bob Mizer Foundation, the exhibition of 45 photographs works rather as a corrective to the idea of Mizer as only a beefcakemonger. It makes a good case for him as an artist with interests and imagination considerably more expansive than what his popular reputation suggests. Notably, the show's first picture is not of a naked man but of a Siamese cat on a sofa, a large print from a negative made around 1945. There are men further on, including a number of vivid head-and-shoulder portraits. But there's not much that you'd call conventionally pornographic.

Some pieces could be mistaken for photographs by Diane Arbus, including one of a grinning little girl in a dance costume, holding a giant trophy, and a portrait of a woman with dark bouffant hair and a fur collar, whose grimacing smile and asymmetrical eyes give her a scary, masklike mien. If you didn't know better, you might guess that the image of a nude man on all fours, with antlers rising from the top of his head, was a Mapplethorpe.

Pictures shot in the studio include a man fully dressed in the fringed buckskin and feathered headdress of a Hollywood Indian; a woman in a striped dress, playing with a monkey; and, sweetly hilarious, a smiling boy sitting for his portrait with a large live chicken.

Some images border on slapstick, like one of two naked men entirely covered by silver paint, one on his hands and knees, straddled by the other, who has his arm raised, evidently about to smack his submissive partner.

There are pictures from which Norman Rockwell could have made paintings, like one of four pretty young blond women, looking beseechingly at a policeman, who smiles as he writes a parking ticket for their car in the background. In a similarly wholesome image, a group of eight handsome youths works on a partly dismantled sports car.

Most intriguing are two stills from a 1955 film, "Witch Boy." In one, a man wearing only a conical sorcerer's hat sits in an armchair, perusing a thick tome in a room with drapery-covered walls, where objects suggest some sort of magical practice.

The diversity of these and other pictures in the show defies generalization, except for one thing: They all share an optimistic spirit. You see this in his beefcake images, too. There's almost always a sunny, playful and happy feeling about them. Mizer was the opposite of misanthropic, and unlike Mapplethorpe, for example, he seems not to have been attracted to the more darkly disturbing dimensions of sex. But there is much yet to be known about him.

At his death in 1992, Mizer left a huge body of work, including about two million photographs and negatives; 3,000 films and videos; and untold quantities of costumes and props. His friend and lawyer, Wayne Stanley, inherited it all and struggled to manage it. In the ensuing years, it was parceled out to trash bins, storage and Mr. Stanley's garage, among other places.

In 2004, Mr. Stanley sold what he had to Mr. Bell, who eventually consolidated materials and in 2010 established the Bob Mizer Foundation in El Cerrito, Calif. Only a small fraction of what's in the foundation's possession has been properly documented, a fact that Mr. Berger has ingeniously taken advantage of. He asked the foundation to send, with the framed pictures, boxes of archival material for inclusion in the show.

Along with the Siamese cat in the first room is a wall-filling shelving unit, each of its cubbyholes containing costumes and props from the foundation's collection. N.Y.U. students are sorting and documenting these materials. In other rooms are work tables with computers and printers, where student archivists have been going through boxes of negatives for digital copying and annotation.

The students are also making inexpensive printouts of images they find interesting and clipping them up on gallery walls to produce a rotating, ad hoc show within the greater show. Thus you get to witness a buried history being uncovered right in front of your eyes, as the show's subtitle, "Excavating Bob Mizer," promises.

The title might be misleading, insofar as it anticipates the emergence of a coherent picture of Mizer and his oeuvre. Considering the vastness and variety of his output, that may never happen. But it's a fascinating work in progress.

"Devotion: Excavating Bob Mizer" continues through Feb. 15 at 80 Washington Square East Gallery, Greenwich Village; (212) 998-5747, steinhardt.nyu.edu/80wse/.

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