

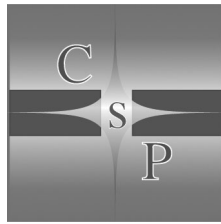
# Hunks, Hotties, and Pretty Boys



# Hunks, Hotties, and Pretty Boys: Twentieth-Century Representations of Male Beauty

Edited by

Steven L. Davis and Maglina Lubovich



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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## INTRODUCTION

# HUNKS, HOTTIES, AND PRETTY BOYS: TWENTIETH-CENTURY REPRESENTATIONS OF MALE BEAUTY

STEVEN L. DAVIS AND MAGLINA LUBOVICH

Beauty has long been understood as a concept most closely aligned with women. As Laura Fasick, the author of Chapter Six, explains, “even the word ‘beauty’ strikes our ears strangely when applied to a man.” Historically speaking, beauty has been associated with both femininity and/or effeminacy and antithetical to “true” masculinity (that is, “real” men do not bother with such things). For this reason, most of the work done on beauty has uncovered the ways that conceptions and ideals of beauty in patriarchal culture have affected women by working both for and against them. Feminist scholars’ approaches to beauty have made clear the way in which it acts as a “myth,” a category created, supported, and maintained by patriarchal power that is used as a way to keep women’s subordination firmly in place. Naomi Wolf’s 1991 study, *The Beauty Myth*, argues that this myth serves as a “contemporary backlash” against women and the feminist movement itself, but according to Wolf, “the beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and institutional power.”<sup>1</sup> Feminist theory has shown us the ways in which women have been constructed by and through their relationships with beauty; women have served as the muses and subject matter of beautiful works of art, while their bodies have also suffered under unrealistic definitions of what beauty means and who does—and does not—fit that contrived and unattainable standard.<sup>2</sup>

If beauty is a myth and a “carefully constructed narrative”<sup>3</sup> on the one hand, it has also been defined a variety of ways by artists and philosophers through the centuries as an ideal, a state of harmonious perfection, a desirable aspiration, and even a complex abstraction. No matter its exact definition, what has remained clear is that as we have traditionally

understood beauty, men's and women's relationship to it has been quite different. Men have been the subjects of patriarchal institutions and beauty myths, while women have been the objects. Men have been the creators of beauty through art and literature as well as the philosophers of it; men appreciate and create beauty; they are the gazers and the consumers of the beautiful—that is, of women. While scholars have acknowledged that beauty is about men's institutions and institutional power, they have tended to focus primarily on the consequences of beauty on women—not on men. Scholars have made beauty culturally visible as it relates to women, but for the most part have ignored the relationship between men and beauty.

This critical omission is especially unfortunate because like beauty, the diversity and historical contingency of masculinities are concealed through power relations and cultural processes of naturalization. In other words, both beauty and masculinity appear simultaneously natural and constructed; they are the site of a tension which our study seeks to interrogate and complicate. By focusing on *masculine* beauty, we examine the ways in which cultural discourses, practices, and relations are inscribed in gendered conceptions of beauty. Beauty, like gender, is proverbially subjective, flexible, and historically contingent (i.e. “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”). At the same time, beauty also appears stable and transhistorical; Michelangelo's David, for example, has endured as the perceived Western model of ideal masculinity for centuries even as we continue to disavow the connection between masculinity and beauty. Indeed, perhaps part of the reason that beauty strikes our ears as strange when applied to men is because beauty is both embodied and visible, and Western patriarchal culture has tended to render white, heterosexual masculinity disembodied and invisible—the *natural* category of subjectivity and citizenship. In other words, the power and privilege of white, heterosexual men has depended upon their status as the unmarked, universal standard against which all “others” are measured, and they have retained their position in patriarchal culture by eschewing visible and bodily markers such as race, class, gender, sexuality and, we would argue, beauty. Our study seeks to denaturalize this standard by uncovering the connections between beauty and the multifaceted field of masculinities, ranging from hegemonic and minoritized masculinities to “female” masculinities.

Despite the ostensible incongruity between masculinity and beauty in American and British culture especially, a few scholars have begun to explore the complex relationships between these two constructed categories. In the American context, Susan Bordo's *The Male Body*

explores a wide range of both private experiences and cultural representations of male beauty, ranging from her personal relationships with men to actors and models in popular culture. Throughout her study, Bordo is careful to analyze both the patriarchal and potentially feminist representations of the male body as well as the intersections and differences between male and female beauty. She identifies two important sites where images of male beauty have appeared in American culture: Hollywood cinema of the 1950s and men's advertisements in the 1990s. For Bordo, dissatisfaction with middle-class masculinity in the 1950s produced the figure of the "rebel" and sanctioned the display of the sensuous male body. The combination of a "gorgeous physique," animal sensuality and emotional vulnerability in Marlon Brando's Stanley Kowalski created an image of the rebel which inspired imitation (and sexual desire) by male actors like James Dean and invited visual pleasures from female spectators.<sup>4</sup> While the beautiful male went underground after the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the male body resurfaced in the 1990s, especially in underwear advertisements by Calvin Klein. Tracing the reemergence of the male body to "gay male aesthetics," Bordo points out that contemporary male beauty represents "a triumph of pure consumerism...over homophobia and the taboos against male vanity, male 'femininity,' and erotic display of the male body."<sup>5</sup>

Like Bordo, British scholars such as Sean Nixon have recently begun to examine the articulations of masculinity within the male fashion industry. Although it does not explicitly take male beauty as its subject, Nixon's *Hard Looks* analyzes the "new man imagery" that emerged in British television and magazine advertisements in the 1980s and that, like Calvin Klein ads, borrowed an attention to the male body from gay culture. More than Bordo, Nixon examines the interrelated institutional frameworks, ranging from clothing designs and the spatial arrangements of men's department stores to the men's magazine industry, which produce and circulate images of these assertive, yet soft and sensuous new men. Although displays of the stylish and narcissistic male open up new modes of spectatorship with the potential to reconfigure structures of gendered looking, Nixon points out that the new man remains entrenched in patriarchal discourses of power that undermine the progressive potential of this new figure.

For scholars working in masculinity studies, Bordo and Nixon have opened the field to questions of men's relation to beauty. Significantly, they share an understanding of masculinity as a cultural construction, and they recognize that there are a wide range of masculinities articulated in relation to both women and other men across the fields of race, ethnicity,

class, and sexuality. Furthermore, Bordo and Nixon bring valuable theoretical frameworks, ranging from semiotics and film theory to Foucauldian analyses of institutional structures, to bear on the study of masculine beauty. Finally, their studies point to important sites where masculine beauty has flourished in mid- to late twentieth-century American and British culture. At the same time, however, Nixon and Bordo's work leaves space for further investigation. While they bring valuable insights into constructions of male beauty, neither Nixon nor Bordo draw on Judith Butler's work on gender performativity. And because their objects of study are limited to men, neither explores the relation between beauty and Judith Halberstam's conception of "female masculinity." The scope of their work, moreover, is restricted to Hollywood cinema, advertising, and the male fashion industries of the 1980s and 90s, leaving a wide range of artistic and popular sites unexamined. Finally, while both scholars draw attention to borrowings from gay and black culture, their studies focus primarily on white, middle-class constructions of masculine beauty.

The essays chosen for our own collection address central questions about the relationship between men, masculinities, and beauty. The eight chapters included in *Hunks, Hotties, and Pretty Boys* contribute primarily to the field of gender studies, specifically masculinity studies. They consider twentieth-century representations of male beauty through a variety of mediums: performance, literature, art, photography, film and television. Although our contributors hail from both the humanities and the social sciences, they share a concern for treatments of beauty that complicate our understanding of hegemonic masculinity as a white, middle-class, heterosexual paradigm only. In what we believe is a timely collection, it is our hope that this book offers a much needed contribution to gender studies and more specifically, to an unexplored region of masculinity studies.

The essays presented here examine the way that "beauty" informs, shapes, defines, and re-defines our definition of masculinity itself. They explore the way that beauty complicates our understanding of how gender works. They show how Western definitions of beauty have been constructed and maintained through class and other structures of power and underscore how such seemingly stable categories can instead be challenged and investigated. To this end, they examine the ways that artists and authors *resist* dominant standards of male beauty and attempt to articulate subversive alternatives. Additionally, our contributors suggest ways that male standards of beauty have been influenced by women and female performance and highlight the ways such performances ultimately

show the instability of both gender and beauty itself. They revisit previous philosophical and theoretical conceptions of beauty and for example, deconstruct gendered conceptions of the beautiful and the sublime. They question gender, racial, and sexual norms that have defined beauty for centuries. That is, the following essays attempt to complicate so-called hegemonic models of masculine beauty by examining Chicano, Asian, queer, working class, and female constructions of male beauty, not only in the American context, but from a trans-Atlantic perspective.

We have divided our collection into three parts: Historicizing Beauty, Gendering Beauty, and Queering Beauty. Part One examines male beauty in the context of several previously unexplored historical moments and reveals how art and popular culture have helped to shape modern conceptions of male beauty and masculinity. No study on the representation of beauty would be complete without a contribution from art history, the academic field that has always been both interested in aesthetics and the body as well as in the changing dimensions of what beauty means. In “Naked Boys, Desiring Women: Male Beauty in Modern Art and Photography” Susan Baker explores the apparent lack of attention twentieth-century women artists have given to the male body in their work and argues that “female artists evidently have no interest or belief in objectified beauty.” When the male nude *does* appear in women’s art, Baker argues that it is not on mere reactionary grounds (that is, to turn the tables of objectification and do to men what they had for so long done to women). Rather, through her close examination of such artists as Alice Neel, Beth Van Hoesen, Jacqueline Morreau, Suzi Malin, Martha Erlebacher, Diane Baylis, and Robin Shaw, Baker argues that women’s renderings of the male body reveal highly individualized depictions of female desire and male beauty. These women return to beauty but not in its classical sense; there is something far more intimate, more personal and distinct that happens between the female artist’s gaze and the body of her sitter. In the work Baker explores, male beauty has more to do with individual desire (i.e. the artist’s) than it does with some standard, objectified, or universal representation.

While Baker takes the world of fine art as her subject, Steven L. Davis examines the “vernacular aesthetics” of masculinity in the pulp fiction of Depression-era America. In “New Deal Masculinities: Working-Class Readers, Male Beauty, and Pulp Magazines in the 1930s,” Davis argues that New Deal politicians and the creators of *Doc Savage Magazine* shared a project to redefine paradigms of working-class and professional masculinity in order to meet the challenges of the Great Depression. By linking the physical labor of the working class and the scientific expertise

of the professional to a vision of public responsibility, New Dealers reconstructed the former as “heroic laborers” and the latter as “social planners.” Davis asserts that the titular character of *Doc Savage Magazine* integrated the “bureaucratic organization and professional expertise of the social planner with the industry and muscle of the heroic laborer” into an ideal figure of New Deal masculinity. In the first section of his chapter, Davis examines how the narratives of *Doc Savage Magazine* “create[d] an arena in which” Doc Savage, “along with the cooperation of like-minded men,” could “test and affirm his New Deal masculinity...in what Philip Abbott calls ‘public adventure.’” In the second section of his chapter, Davis analyzes how “the covers and interior illustrations of *Doc Savage Magazine* offered working-class readers a visual discourse of New Deal masculinity that combined the signifiers of the heroic laborer and the social planner into an image of male beauty” that resonated with the iconography of “the manly worker” portrayed in federally sponsored arts projects. Davis concludes by comparing the original images of Doc Savage to the covers created by James Bama for Bantam’s popular paperback editions of the Doc Savage novels in the 1960s and 70s. For Davis, these two very different images of Doc Savage, the original “promising a vision of public adventure and the other offering a reactionary figure violence and vulnerability,” “register important shifts in our conceptions of masculinity and point to the ways that political and historical conditions shape our representations of the male body in popular culture.”

In “The Teen Idol: ‘Youthful Muscles’ from *Andy Hardy* to *High School Musical*,” Jeffery P. Dennis examines popular displays of muscular teens in American, French, and British cultural productions. Focusing on three distinct historical eras, Dennis argues that the “presumed absence of homoerotic desire ascribed to [the adolescent male] after the 1940s, as well as the presumed absence of erotic desire of any sort ascribed to him before,” sanctioned a display of the youthful male body “that tacitly acknowledged his beauty, thereby presenting him to the audience as an object of desire.” In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the spectacle of the muscular teen chest in film especially was often mediated by the gaze of an adult male figure and accompanied by what Dennis calls a “homoromantic partnership,” an intensely emotional and permanent pairing. With the rise of homophobia in the 1960s, representations of the youthful male body either served to reinforce heteronormative identification for young audiences or registered adult anxieties about the “younger generation.” Although the last ten years have seen a return of homoromantic bonds along with the display of teenage physicality, a

parental relationship often works as an attempt to foreclose homoerotic potential. At the same time, however, Dennis notes that “‘queer pleasures’ are available to everyone, regardless of sexual identity,” and the spectacle of youthful muscles provides a significant site for exploring the visual pleasures of the male body.

Part Two, “Gendering Beauty,” reveals the instability of both masculinity and beauty by exploring cross-gendered performances in the Victorian music hall, dance, and female bodybuilding. We begin this section with Scott Banville’s essay, “‘The Daily Male’: Vesta Tilley and the Performance of Masculinity and Class on the Victorian Music-Hall Stage,” in which he argues that Vesta Tilley’s “female masculinity” rewrote and reworked dominate constructions of *fin de siècle* gender and class. As Banville explains, “Tilley’s act was dangerous and disruptive precisely because in raising the question of what makes a man a man, she raised questions about the range of economic and social privileges and prerogatives that dominate masculinity assumed and promised but in actuality was unable...to deliver.” In an extension of Judith Halberstam’s work, Banville shows how Tilley’s cross-dressing performances affected the lower-middle-class audience for which she performed in at least three ways: she challenged codes of hegemonic Victorian masculinity (marked by intellect, muscles, and/or violence); as a woman performing as a man for men, she made possible a space for homoerotic gazes; lastly, and perhaps most important for this study, Tilley offered a version of masculinity that made beauty an integral component of it (rather than see beauty as its antithesis). In short, what Tilley’s performativity made clear was the multiplicity and fluidity of gender scripts at the turn of the century; moreover, she offered her male—and female—audiences new ways in which to imagine such constructions in their own lives.

Banville’s exploration of male beauty in the Victorian music hall is followed by Laura Fasick’s “Male Beauty in Matthew Bourne’s *The Car Man* and *Swan Lake*,” in which Fasick takes as her subject what she calls the “gender-charged world of dance.” She begins with a discussion of Edmund Burke’s 1757 treatise on the beautiful and the sublime, a distinction that British choreographer Matthew Bourne reimagines for contemporary audiences. For Burke, the beautiful implies that which is small and weak, while the sublime, on the other hand, claims its superiority through its capacity to evoke terror. In what might now be an obvious differentiation, the beautiful gets aligned with the feminine and the masculine with the sublime. Bourne, Fasick argues, refuses to accept such a rigid and binary conceptualization of gender and sexual categories and instead of seeing the beautiful as that which transpires only through

heterosexual gazes, Bourne (by reinventing gender roles) “suggests that beauty is an ideal for both men and women across the spectrum of sexual interests.” Ultimately then, in Bourne’s world, “the characteristics that Burke attributed to beauty and to sublimity respectively are not separate, but mingled.”

Nicholas Chare’s “Admirable Muscles: Male Beauty, Sex, Schmoes, and *Pumping Iron II*” nicely compliments Banville’s discussion of the way in which women have challenged and redefined what beauty means as it is understood through the lens of masculinity. With a focus on female bodybuilders, Chare argues that such women enact a kind of “embodied feminism,” one that gains its meaning through the appropriation of muscularity, the long-standing symbol of ideal masculinity and in effect, male beauty. When associated with women, however, muscles have tended to render them abject, Other, ugly and/or monstrous. Through his examination of *Pumping Iron II* (directed by George Butler), a film that documents the 1984 Miss Olympia bodybuilding contest, Chare finds a performance of masculinity that puts preconceived notions of both beauty and gender into question. According to Chare, the liminal figure of the female bodybuilder in *Pumping Iron II* (women like Bev Francis) “frequently disconcerts for the precise reason that she disturbs the field of vision and refuses easy identification as either masculine or feminine.” Chare redefines the way we understand beauty itself and furthers our conception of it through a focus on its neglected *tactile* dimension. He moves us beyond the definition of beauty that is, as Chare explains, “securely rooted in the visual” (beauty is in the eye of the beholder, for example). To advance these ideas, Chare uses the work of Sigmund Freud and George Santayana and also, in an important move for gender studies more largely, he introduces our collection to the seldom discussed “schmoes,” men who fetishize female bodybuilders and pay to touch their hypermuscular (and to them, beautiful) bodies. The physicality of women like Bev Francis acts beyond sexual difference and ultimately shows us not only how gender is unstable and performative, but how beauty is as well.

The two chapters in Part Three, “Queering Beauty,” work to queer white, hegemonic paradigms of male beauty. In “Racial Melancholia and the Enchantments of Whiteness in Ira Sachs’ *The Delta*,” Samuel Park notes that recent American gay film registers the “paradoxical” coexistence of a celebration of diversity and tolerance in gay culture with a “conformist, uniform, [and] generic” ideal of male beauty which privileges whiteness. Through an analysis of Ira Sachs’ *The Delta* (1996), Park shows how Sachs’ film offers a critique of white enchantment by



exploring a brief encounter and its aftermath between Lincoln, a young white man, and Minh, an older man of Vietnamese and African American descent. Drawing on Ann Anlin Cheng's conception of "racial melancholia," Park shows how Minh's incorporation of an impossible ideal of whiteness can lead to an internalization of the racism and violence that are directed at men of color by representatives of white society. Rather than a simple moralizing parable of racism, *The Delta* offers a complex exploration of the connections between race, sexuality, white privilege, and violence. For Parks, Sachs' film serves "as both a fascinating reminder of the kinds of characters left behind by more recent gay cinema, and as a study of the reasons why, as the film delves into...how whiteness serves as gay culture's organizing principle" and allows gay culture "to maintain the illusion of erotic progressiveness while pursuing a limited ideal of male beauty."

While Park explores the consequences of white standards of male beauty in gay culture, our final chapter in this collection uncovers Chicano artists and authors who challenge and articulate alternatives to white, heterosexual ideals. In "Queer Machos: Gender, Sexuality, Beauty, and Chicano/Latino Men," Daniel Enrique Perez identifies and examines the figure of the queer macho in the work of several literary, visual and performance artists. Synthesizing the "positive attributes" of both terms, the queer macho undermines the "straight/gay" and "macho/*maricón* binaries" and removes "Chicano/Latino men from an abject [position] to one where they are recognized as valued human beings" while simultaneously materializing alternative standards of beauty that acknowledge a "multiplicity of complex Chicano/Latino identities." From machoing the queer to queering the macho, this chapter explores a wide range of strategies that Chicano/Latino artists have deployed in their articulation of this *mestizaje* figure. Additionally, Pérez provides insights into how Chicano/Latino aesthetics have surreptitiously influenced both presumably heteronormative and queer standards of muscular beauty, offering a suggestive foundation for rethinking Susan Bordo and Richard Dyer's work, among others. Ultimately, Perez offers a theory of how "queer macho aesthetics" influence, challenge, and "reconfigure [hegemonic] beauty paradigms," opening a field for further (and future) investigation that might extend from the "Latin lover archetype" to contemporary artists and actors.

Ultimately, we hope this collection will be a valuable contribution to scholars, students and teachers of feminist, gender and/or and masculinity theories. At the same time, our book remains interdisciplinary and will contribute to scholarship in Chicano, Asian, African American, queer, and

cultural studies. Male beauty is an area in which scholars are beginning to do important work and we see our project as an early exploration into a new arena of masculinity studies. While there is much research left to do and many topics left unexplored, we believe this is the beginning of an exciting and promising area of gender studies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 10 and 13.

<sup>2</sup> See also Kathy Peiss' *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), Nancy Etcoff's *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), and Francette Pacteau's *The Symptom of Beauty* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Karen A. Callaghan, ed. *Ideals of Feminine Beauty: Philosophical, Social, and Cultural Dimension*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 136.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 179.

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**PART I:**  
**HISTORICIZING BEAUTY**

## CHAPTER ONE

# NAKED BOYS, DESIRING WOMAN: MALE BEAUTY IN MODERN ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY

SUSAN BAKER

As intriguing as the question may be, asking how women artists in contemporary western society represent male beauty is complicated at best. Many factors work against finding an answer, mostly because twentieth-century artists have had very little interest in depicting the human figure at all, let alone beautiful ones. Any artist wishing to render their version of a beautiful male body is up against an unwieldy Modernist tradition that abandoned human form in favor of abstraction on the one hand and challenged the agenda of beauty on the other. When in 1907, Henri Matisse was questioned about the ugliness of his now famous sprawling female *Blue Nude*, he replied, “If I met such a woman in the street, I should run away in terror. Above all, I do not create a woman, *I make a picture*.”<sup>1</sup> In one fell swoop eyes shifted to finding beauty in the artist’s crafted surface and towards the possibilities of finding a more profound beauty (or at least truth) in abstract form, while critical interest in the beauty of the actual human figure waned. It has only been in the last fifteen or twenty years that the art world has tolerated a return to figural form in general, let alone a beautiful rendering of one. Even now, artists claiming to have realized physical human beauty in their work raise suspicions of cultural prejudice and elitism.

The figural tradition that Matisse so readily abandoned in his *Blue Nude* was established by the ancient Greek sculptor Polykleitos who, around 450 BCE, developed what was known as The Canon, a treatise for rendering an ideally beautiful male figure in sculptural form. This Canon conceptualized perfect proportions for the male body that used the size of the head or index finger as the unit for constructing pleasing ratios.<sup>2</sup> Polykleitos recommended certain overall proportions for the length of the figure, as well as its width, limb proportions and facial features. Such

idealized beauty became emblematic of the fit noble hero, courageous, self-determined and proud. Polykleitos created a bronze sculpture that was based on his theories. While neither the original manuscript outlining The Canon nor the original bronze survive, well known marble copies of the sculpture do. Polykleitos' Canon became a benchmark throughout the classical period of art, the Renaissance, Baroque and Neoclassical eras, and was used, for both sculptors and painters alike, as standard training in the European art academies throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Variations of The Canon were applied to the female nude in painting from at least the Renaissance on.

In modern times, artists began to question the classical definition of beauty as Eurocentric and even challenged any necessary relationship between beauty and art at all. When artists like Lucian Freud, Philip Pearlstein, Chuck Close, or Alice Neel showed an interest in the figure later in the twentieth century, they rendered it in a matter-of-fact manner with very little concern for classical idealism. Subjects were clearly everyday models, not gods or goddesses, and they participated in no heroic narrative. Their forms were harshly and coldly lit while unexpectedly framed within the composition. The graceful, classical reclining nude so commonplace in French fine arts salons throughout the nineteenth century found no place in the late twentieth, and the idealized female nude particularly became the object of attack by feminists. As Saul Ostrow notes, "Many feminists held that beauty was not only a source of envy and antagonism among women, but also reduced them to mere objects in the eyes of men. This account of denigration and control has haunted our conception of beauty ever since."<sup>3</sup>

Ostrow continues, "Beauty, which had once been considered the supreme good, has come to be identified as a source of oppression and discrimination."<sup>4</sup> Neal Benezra describes this "strained relationship between art and beauty" that continues to the end of the twentieth century:

At one end of the spectrum are artists, critics, and curators who disparage beauty and aesthetics. From their standpoint, aesthetics are inevitably politicized and thereby an inappropriate avenue for artistic investigation. The opposing, equally large and committed group embraces beauty but poses new challenges for it. Here beauty is not considered a traditional aesthetic ideal to be sought after for its own sake, but rather, a complex cultural construct inseparable from contemporary attitudes toward the human body, sex, and mass media. The vast gap separating these diametrically opposing viewpoints reveals the difficult position that beauty has come to occupy in contemporary art.<sup>5</sup>

While unqualified beauty ceases to be relevant to modern artists, it seems to have been replaced, at least in many circles, with projections of desire. As Pamela L. Caughie notes, in this postmodern age the belief in the innate beauty of the object itself no longer can exist and what is certain is only one's *perception* of that beauty. Only the evidence of desire, as revealed in the material expression that happens during the pursuit of beauty, is left. Caughie writes, "It is not that we no longer perceive beauty in the natural world or in the written text, but that we no longer conceive beauty as an inherent quality of the thing itself. Beauty originates in representations; it is the image that mediates our desires."<sup>6</sup> The representation of desire as emblematic of the artist's psychological, spiritual, or socio-economic position in relationship to her sitter overshadows in contemporary society any notion of beauty as some noble physical absolute. The women who create images of men at the end of the twentieth century, such as those to be discussed in this chapter, think less about beauty in and of itself and more about their experience as spectators of men's bodies, and their work indicates the larger culture's emergent awareness of female desire. Yet their pictorial solutions play off of the classical understanding of beauty, not unlike how much of modern art did, only this time to expose classical form as a signifier of an established male position.

Besides a deep suspicion of beauty and a preference for abstraction there exists still another challenge regarding women artists' perspective on male beauty. Female artists seldom choose the male body as their central theme. No well-known male equivalent to Matisse's *Blue Nude* by a female artist exists, not even at the end of the twentieth century. Most feminist artists who address the nude are doing so to reclaim ownership over how the female body is presented, not to explore their views on the male one.<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Sleigh's harem of men, *The Turkish Bath*, 1973, which mocks Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' famous orgy of voluptuous female nudes, immediately comes to mind, along with her painting *Philip Golub Reclining*, 1971. But these works present themselves more like political indictments of an oppressive male gaze than a genuine inquiry into the female one. Except for a brief period during the late 1970s that parallels a surge in feminist debate, very few female artists have used their art to explore their desires for their male subjects. It is not insignificant that the equivalent studies, for example, of Matisse or Picasso and their models do not exist for any major female artist in twentieth-century art.<sup>8</sup> It is curious that heterosexual women artists were so slow to produce imagery of the male body once they had realized the glaring absence of a female gaze.

In her seminal feminist perspective on the development of modern art, Griselda Pollock poses the question, "If it is normal to see paintings of women's bodies as the territory across which men artists claim their modernity and compete for leadership of the avant-garde, can we expect to rediscover paintings by women in which they battled with their sexuality in the representation of the male nude?"<sup>9</sup> The answer is largely no. Women do not seem to want to paint men naked. There has been in the history of art a noticeable lack of drawings and paintings which place the female in the powerful position of gazing at a male model, allowing her to describe her particular vision of masculinity or male beauty onto canvas or paper. Perhaps women have resisted objectifying men in order to avoid repeating the pitfalls that such scrutiny has subjected women to for generations? Yet, how does one get a female artist's perspective when the male body is seldom at the receiving end of her eye?

An examination of a rare group of women who do draw male nudes, such as Alice Neel, Beth Van Hoesen, Jacqueline Morreau, Suzi Malin, or Martha Erlebacher, as well as a significant group of female photographers who explored the subject in the mid 1990s (such as Diane Baylis, Iona Fabian, Jane Ralley, Robin Shaw, Stephanie Vidal-Hall, and Tabitha Goode), will suggest that female artists evidently have no interest or belief in objectified beauty, whether or not the model is a man or a woman. Instead, these women create very personal, individualized reactions to the subjects at which they gaze. They seek to encapsulate a heretofore unknown vision of female desire that is uniquely their own, discovering that any single formulation of female desire in physical form is irrelevant. More significant is the privileged process of gazing itself and the uniqueness of the individual artist's vision. By holding this assumption, these women continue to embrace a modernist irreverence for classical canons of beauty.

### **Alice Neel Takes a Peek**

Arguably the only artist who came close to Matisse or Picasso in her regular depiction of bodies of the opposite sex was Alice Neel.<sup>10</sup> Since Neel's work remained fairly obscure until the 1960s, few realized that she was depicting male nude figures as early as 1932. The fact that she was an American figurative artist in a culture that was turning its attention more and more toward abstraction kept her from receiving the same critical notice as Picasso or Matisse. In retrospect, Neel's art predicted the concerns of both figurative and women artists working later in the century, although not many chose to depict the male nude with as much frequency

or candor. Women such as Beth Van Hoesen, Jacqueline Morreau, Suzi Malin, and Martha Erlebacher took up the subject, but none so early or with as much gusto as Neel.

Born in the year 1900, Neel led a notoriously bohemian lifestyle and was indiscriminate regarding whom she depicted nude. According to artist and critic John Perreault, she was always asking friends if they would pose nude for her.<sup>11</sup> She painted men, women, straight, gay, young, old, pregnant, even her own portrait at age eighty without clothes. Neel produced an unprecedented number of portraits of men, some nude, some not, largely personalities from the art world—curators, critics, and artists—but also friends and lovers.

Important influences on Neel's portraits included Edouard Manet, Paul Cézanne, Egon Shiele, Thomas Eakins, and Charles Demuth. What Neel would share with these artists is a flattened, tilted pictorial space, stark and forthright representations, and a lack of inhibition. These artistic sources, with the exception of Manet, also offered unheroic, even eroticized depictions of the male nude that broke from tradition. But critics largely ignored the complex and varied artistic intentions (often homoerotic) of this generation of male artists and instead limited discussion of their contributions to a larger, more formalist agenda whose goal, as these critics defined it, was to reject classical pictorial devices and replace them with abstract forms, all the while moving towards the pursuit of "art for art's sake."<sup>12</sup> Much of women's art was thought of as opposed to this resolute cause either because it was too political or too personal. Modernism and feminism were uneasy bedfellows. Ann Temkin's analysis of Neel's work is a typical feminist complaint of modernist criticism that still adheres to its basic assumption (that is, she still assumes that the central goal of all modern artists, especially men, was to achieve pure abstraction). She argues that, unlike her male precedents, who moved "in a direction leading art away from life, to the autonomous object glorified by modernism," Neel "explored how it might lead painting toward life, toward private meaning, and in her case, toward imagery directly connected to the life of a woman."<sup>13</sup> Temkin assumes that what differentiates female artists from male ones is the woman's preference for representing people rather than analyzing artistic form, despite the fact that not all men were interested in pure abstraction, and some women *were* interested in formalism. Modernist critics often ignored what did not easily fit the formalist agenda and this affected how both male and female artists were discussed and ultimately valued.

It can easily be argued, however, that Neel's work *was* highly personal. Indeed, she defined herself as a painter through the numerous portraits she



made of the people she liked. Their distinctive personalities, albeit filtered through her eye, were so integral to the content of her paintings that most of the books and articles on her life contain as many descriptions and interviews with her sitters as they do discussions of Neel's life and pictorial strategies. The catalogue accompanying the Philadelphia Museum of Art retrospective of her work in 2000, for example, was divided into essays with titles like "Self and Others," "People as Evidence," "Gentleman Callers," and "Sitting for Alice Neel."<sup>14</sup> The conversation around Neel's nude painting of Perreault (fig. 1-1, see Centerfold) centered so much around the sitter that it caused Perreault to wonder if he was not a player in the work's expression. "Was it my energy behind all those brushstrokes depicting my body hairs?" Perreault questioned, "Should I, as an artist, claim the painting as a collaboration?"<sup>15</sup>

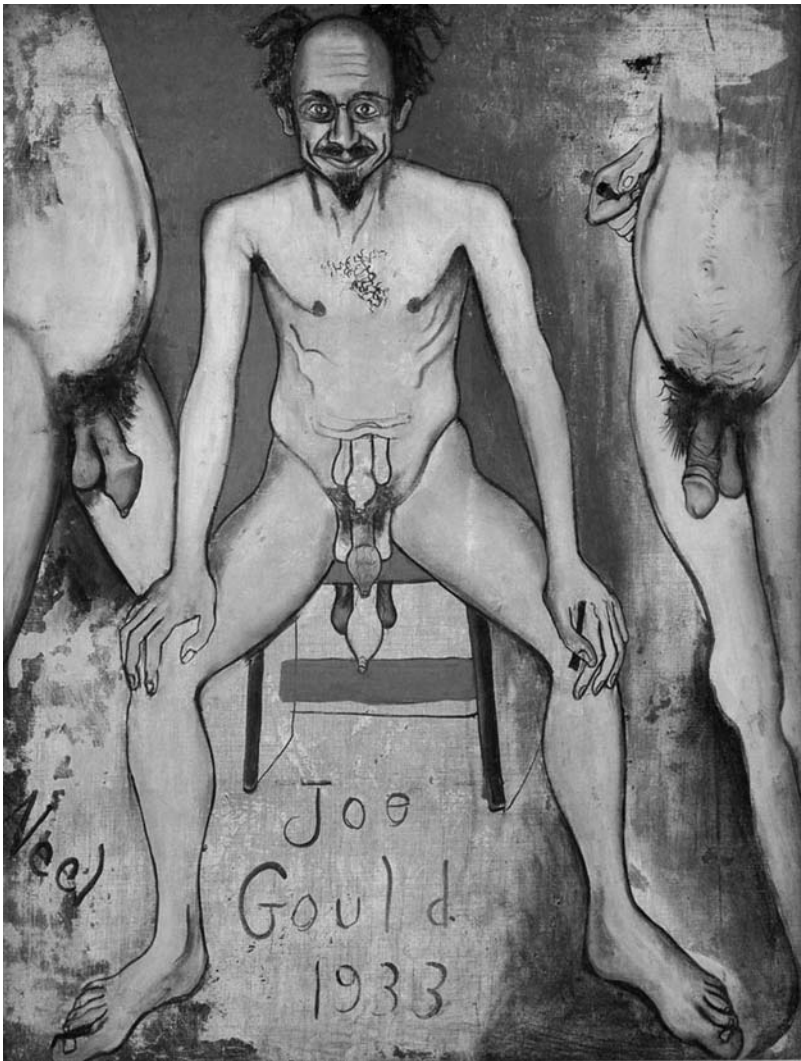
That the personalities of Neel's sitters occupy so much of her painting's content was in tension with modernism's supposed "art for art's sake" agenda which called for leaving personalities out of picture making. In the 1970s, feminist artists were often accused of abandoning "serious" formalist investigation in order to explore their relationship both personal and public with the men in their lives or their place as women in the art world. Such social or political agendas smacked of indifference to significant aesthetic exploration and innovation. Neel had first fallen victim to this bias nearly forty years earlier, yet she set aside pure formalist investigation, at the risk of critical suicide, to wrestle with her reality through her painting. This reality included a failed first marriage with the Cuban artist Carlos Enríquez, a loss of a child, and then a series of lovers, including a violent relationship with Kenneth Doolittle. Images of her difficult domestic life fill Neel's early work, including the sexual aspects of her relationships. She depicted both Doolittle (1932) and lover José Santiago (1938) asleep in bed, sometimes with her there with them, and sometimes alone.

These domestic images are at once tender and visceral. The images express the inevitable contradictions between youthful, fairy-tale desires and actual experience. Neel gives her own image an angelic idealization, but the context is often mundane, thus contrasting in formal terms her youthful self—full of fantasies—with the ordinary realities of her relationships. She depicts herself in one instance like a dreamy hourglass nymph as she and John Rothschild are together in their bathroom. The act of their urinating together suddenly shifts the scene into a casual moment that is familiar and far from sentimental. (Due to its controversial subject matter, this image would not be shown publicly until 1997.) Her imagery soon breaks completely from anything idyllic or beautiful in any classical

sense, and as it does so, it seems to parallel Neel's own emergent challenge to restrictive female roles of those days. Neel's early images disclose a matter-of-fact attitude towards conjugal life that carries over into her later work. It is this quality that will characterize the work of the women artists discussed later in this chapter who choose to explore the male body as subject.

One of Neel's most controversial male nudes was completed in 1933 and depicts the homeless would-be writer of an oral history of the world, Joe Gould, who was an eccentric fixture in Greenwich Village in the 1930s and 40s (fig. 1-2). Neel portrays Gould iconically seated on a stool, hands on his knees, unabashedly confronting the viewer with a strange grin on his face. Neel endows Gould with no less than three penises cascading down from his navel and from between his legs to the extent that their triple length outdistances that of his face. The appendages point to his name which is scrawled below along with the date of the painting. With his penises placed alongside of his name in this way, it is as if the male members are intricately connected to Gould's very identity. On either side of Gould stand additional men whose headless bellies (only their bottom halves are showing) flank him like gang buddies, their genitalia like protective thugs. Their bodies turn inward so that their penises, one circumcised while the other is not, also point down to Gould's name. It is this phallic row, like the Christ flanked by saints, that occupies center front, making virility the true subject (or joke?) of the painting. Yet nearby is Neel's own signature, clear evidence of her presence observing this spectacle. The artist stakes her equally potent claim to the scene. She defies anyone who would deny her a look, and to rub it in she makes sure all pictorial rules regarding classical deportment of the figure are thrown out the window. Her perspective on the male body is no-nonsense, representing not one, but three penises, so as to put the organ of controversy right out there before any woman or man willing to consider it and its significance for Neel as much as for Gould.

Neel's depiction of Gould with multiple penises was so shocking that the painting was seldom seen. According to Pamela Allara, "Neel violated the decorum of portraiture so violently that it was censored. The scrawny, pathetic physique was so transgressive of the tradition of the heroic male nude that the portrait could not be 'hung,' so to speak, before a viewing audience until 1973."<sup>16</sup> When art critic Raphael Rubinstein saw the piece for the first time in a New York show sixty years after it was painted, he said he could not believe how early in the century it had been done. Rubinstein claimed, "It still seems impossible that a painting which literally



**Fig. 1-2** Alice Neel, *Joe Gould*, 1933, Oil on canvas, 39 x 31 inches, Estate of Alice Neel.

let it ‘all hang out’ with such poetic excess could have been imagined and achieved before the 1960s, and even more impossible that it was shown in the 1930s.”<sup>17</sup> Countless breasts on sprawling females had adorned museum and gallery walls for generations, but no one was ready for this turning of the tables. Perhaps this is because implied in the background of the Gould painting is a woman with her brush measuring all that preoccupation with virility, all those many penises like holy angels, their female observer exaggerating and even mocking their phallic self-regard. As Allara writes, “Neel’s twist uncaps, Pandora-like, the female gaze, a gaze that undermines certain fundamental assumptions of patriarchal culture.”<sup>18</sup>

Neel’s *Joe Gould* would not be exhibited again until 1962 at Reed College, but even then it was so controversial that it had to be removed.<sup>19</sup> The painting was reproduced in an underground magazine called *Mother* in 1965, and by Linda Nochlin in her essay “Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art,” in 1972,<sup>20</sup> but it would not be widely known until 1973. This was when John Perreault asked Neel for the painting to hang alongside those by Philip Pearlstein, Sylvia Sleigh, Lowell Nesbitt, and John Button for an exhibition focusing on the male nude. Perreault described Neel as having to dig it out of the closet.<sup>21</sup> When she did so, Neel was concerned about her now forty-year-old painting being exhibited next to contemporary work, and so she wanted to create a new piece. This was when Perreault posed nude for Neel.

Neel’s depiction of Perreault was no less bold than that of Gould (fig. 1-1). Allara suggests that when making the painting Neel was aware of Thomas Eakins’ homoerotic platinum print, *Bill Duckett in the Rooms of the Philadelphia Art Students League*, 1887-1892.<sup>22</sup> Perreault’s pose bears a striking resemblance to that of Eakins’ sitter. Eakins is someone with whom Neel certainly shared an affinity. Like Eakins, Neel’s portraits were seldom commissioned, and Neel’s results are like those of Eakins’ in their penetrating and sometime ruthless portrayal of their sitters. Eakins’ depictions were criticized for their lack of idealization. Neel’s models discussed having to muster their courage before sitting for her for fear of how they might turn out. Neel’s friend Cindy Nemser, for example, stated “I was scared to be painted by her. I thought, ‘I’m going to come out looking like Dracula’s daughter.’”<sup>23</sup> Perreault was nervous too, proclaiming,

Part of me was terrified; Neel’s portraits are not exactly flattering. The term ‘merciless’ comes to mind. After all, she was a latter-day expressionist and, although she thought of herself as a soul-catcher, she was really after sociological truth more than personality or even likeness.”<sup>24</sup>

Neel knew her art history, as Perreault reminisces. His reclining pose, head propped up by one hand, derives from a long pictorial tradition of the classical reclining Venus (except, of course, Perreault as a gay man is now the “goddess”). But it is the fanciful description of body hair that causes the double-takes. As Perreault notes, “Most men have hair on their bodies, but never before in art.”<sup>25</sup> Such a remarkable display of a flaccid penis does not help either, nor is Perreault described as any kind of muscle man. What makes the painting so likeable in the end (especially to a woman?) is Perreault’s sharp blue eyes, which compete easily with the so very casual spectacle of his nude body. When art critic Edward J. Sozanski saw the Perreault painting, he loved it. Sozanski writes:

I longed to pose for her as art critic John Perreault had—frontally nude on a bed, like a hirsute version of Manet’s *Olympia*. I can’t speak for the accuracy of Perreault’s likeness, but I can state unequivocally that never before in Western art have I seen maleness portrayed with such uncompromising candor and sensitivity.<sup>26</sup>

Sozanski continues:

I had never felt the urge to pose for anyone. Yet in the instant of seeing Perreault’s portrait, I was prepared, like Max Lerner before me, to shed all my inhibitions, not in the hope that I would end up in the Whitney Museum, as Perreault had, but simply because I sensed that Neel would tell the truth. We all can stand a dose of that occasionally, especially about ourselves.<sup>27</sup>

Some men, at least, were intrigued by the prospect of a female gazing at them. In the end, despite their candor, Neel’s nudes were likeable.

Thanks to her painting of Perreault, Neel came out of obscurity. It is not insignificant that this moment corresponds with the very time that feminists were beginning to question why more products of a female gaze did not exist. Although neither the female gaze nor picturing female desire served as her central preoccupation, Neel was certainly aware of the ramifications of depicting men nude. Her own view of the male body inevitably was revealed, and that vision was stark and honest. While her chief pursuit was one of frank representation of the people she knew and cared for, nonetheless, the boldness with which she depicted the opposite sex rattled the status quo, not only in terms of its anti-classical representation of the body, but also in the male nude being an unprecedented subject for women. It would be up to later feminists, artists such as Jacqueline Morreau or Suzi Malin, who will be discussed later in

this chapter, to wonder why a woman rendering a man nude was so controversial.

### Looking on the West Coast: Beth Van Hoesen

One contemporary of Neel's who, since she was working on the West coast, received even less critical attention than Neel was Beth Van Hoesen. Van Hoesen was one of a number of San Francisco Bay Area artists who continued to work figuratively in spite of the critical craze surrounding Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. In comparison to Neel, Van Hoesen's style is more precious, largely because of the different nature of her preferred medium. She was a graduate of Stanford, but studied printmaking at the California School of Fine Arts between 1951 and 1960. Van Hoesen produced delicate etched drawings that are deceiving in their limited fine lines, maintaining a sense of candid spontaneity despite inevitably having been long labored over.

Van Hoesen described how she horrified her father when she published a portfolio of prints called *The Nude Man* in 1965.<sup>28</sup> The portfolio included twenty-five prints of men whose physiques Richard Lorenz describes as "unheroic and posed in decidedly nonclassical postures."<sup>29</sup> In one print, Van Hoesen renders a male nude so that his back is to the viewer (fig. 1-3). His hands rest on hips that break slightly as if a shrewd nod to classical *contrapposto*,<sup>30</sup> and while the use of thin line would make old advocates of academic *disegno* proud,<sup>31</sup> the described pose is more casual than ideal, the kind commonly taken by any studio model. The downward head is one of bored daydreaming rather than heroic motioning. Furthermore, each pristine form is dwarfed within a larger white frame of empty paper, their small scale subtracting further from the lack of grandeur.

Van Hoesen's subjects are not always the classic virile strong men either but instead are of varying proportion, age and race. A second print in the nude man series depicts a person of African descent who sits boorishly on a stool, looking indifferently at the viewer as he supports his head on the palm of his hand (fig. 1-4). The pristine outline that defines his shape is now filled using aquatint to achieve the man's dark skin tone. Freely described bits of hair found on the man's chest and under his right arm, as well as a healthy moustache, recall Neel's portrayal of Perreault, as does the man's matter-of-fact expression. However, Van Hoesen's character studies are decidedly more bookish, largely due to their lack of bold color, the work being executed in a medium more typically