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# "I was a nigger, still": Black and White Bodies in the Gay Art of the Twentieth Century

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# Psi Sigma Siren

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## *“I was a nigger, still”: Black and White Bodies in the Gay Art of the Twentieth Century - Franklin Howard*

“It’s amazing to me that even the rampant homophobia in the South doesn’t put a dent in the sense of racial privilege presumed by the white gay men who patronize this clear example of racism and misogyny disguised as entertainment.”<sup>1</sup> Lecia Brooks, the education director for the Civil Rights Memorial Center in Montgomery, Alabama, gave this statement to *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2007 to explain her protests against comedian Charles Knipp, known on stage as Shirley Q. Liquor. While Knipp’s jokes are racist, the major issue with his performances, as Brooks tells us, is his use of blackface minstrelsy as his act. Knipp, a white gay man, dons a large muumuu and masquerades as “a welfare mother with nineteen kids who guzzles malt liquor, drives a Caddy and says in an ‘ignunt’ Gulf Coast black dialect, ‘I’m gonna burn me up some chitlins and put some ketchup on there and aks [sic] Jesus to forgive my sins.’”<sup>2</sup>

The racism inherent to contemporary gay male society stems from practices of the previous century. Artists and audiences engaged the male nude, in both pornography and “high art,” differently for white and black men during the 1900s. At the beginning of the century, though a racial hierarchy can be seen, a feminist critique of the works reveals that both white and black men could be used as sexual objects. White men, however, moved beyond this point by becoming sexual actors, but black men remained a fetishized object through the 1980s. American homoerotic media of the twentieth century protected a racial hierarchy by reducing the black male body to, first, an exotic other and, later, a phallic symbol.

For some men, exposure to these images connected them to the homosexual world. Kenneth Krauss, author of *Male Beauty*, remembers how finding a collection of physique magazines helped him realize that he “wasn’t the only male in the world... who came to appreciate the beauty of males and that there were obviously a sufficient number of such males that magazines were published for them.”<sup>3</sup> James M. Saslow explains this phenomenon in *Pictures and Passions* where he explains that the “dynamic interplay of sex, art, and society is

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<sup>1</sup> David Holthouse, “The Most Dangerous Comedian in America,” *Rolling Stone*, May 31, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Krauss, *Male Beauty: Postwar Masculinity in Theater, Film, and Physique Magazines* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 4.



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nowhere more visible than in images related to homosexual experience.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, these images could serve more than one purpose. Richard Meyer argues that homoerotic visual media contested heteronormativity in the late twentieth century by “restaging” the negative representation of homosexuality.<sup>5</sup> This draws upon arguments made by philosopher and historian Michel Foucault who posited that gay men utilized medical language in a “reverse dialogue” to assert the legitimacy of their identity.<sup>6</sup>

We can examine the dialogue between homosexuality and race throughout the twentieth century by applying racial and feminist frameworks to an interpretation of art. Here, it is important to note the potential variation in interpretive scholarship for the described images that follow. Though not an image, *per se*, Knipp’s performances are an example. He contends that his work draws attention to the critical issues of black womanhood through humor. Others in society, like Brooks and other scholars of race, see the acts as an extension of white privilege in the gay world. To avoid the controversy of absolute claims, this work suggests a series of “relevant counter-possibilities.”<sup>7</sup> In essence, pieces of visual media can be interpreted through the racial and feminist frameworks outlined in subsequent paragraphs without directly engaging a true/false claim. This form of analysis promotes multiplicity as a tool to complicate and problematize visual media and its messages.

While Meyer’s work can positively interpret the representation of homosexuality in gay art, scholars of race can also interpret such portrayals negatively. Both activists and historians have dissected the experiences of black gay men and found that their race conflicted with their sexual orientation both within themselves and within society at large. Historian Martin Duberman criticized the “endemic racism” that infected the gay rights movement as it shifted away from radicalism.<sup>8</sup> Other contemporaries joined him in their attack on racism in the gay rights movement of the 1980s. For example, Marlon Riggs produced *Tongues Untied* in 1989, which was a ground-breaking essay film that combined personal testimonies with spoken word

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<sup>4</sup> James M. Saslow, *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in The Visual Arts* (New York: Viking, 1999), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship & Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art, Ideologies of Desire* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 101-2. A similar argument is made in Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac: A New Documentary* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> A detailed description of this form of analysis can be found in Annette Barnes, *On Interpretation: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Martin Duberman, “Racism in the Gay Male World,” in *The Martin Duberman Reader: The Essential Historical, Biographical, and Autobiographical Writings* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 305–10.



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art to portray the black experience in the gay male world. During one of the testimonies, Riggs revealed that, after traveling to the Castro, a gay neighborhood in San Francisco, he realized that he was “a nigger, still.”<sup>9</sup> This statement speaks to the white agenda of the gay male world. Essex Hemphill, a black and gay poet, revealed that he was reduced from a person to a sexual object when visiting bathhouses in D.C.<sup>10</sup> Roderick A. Ferguson argues, however, that the separation of white and black gay men began several decades before the gay liberation movement.<sup>11</sup> In the early-twentieth century, whiteness was both the standard for race and gender in America and a tool of assimilation. As certain immigrants, like the Italians, transitioned from “non-white” to white, the gap between the races widened. Black clubs, called Black and Tans, became sources of non-normative racial and sexual behaviors.<sup>12</sup> In part, homosexuality obtained its non-normative status because of its connections to these non-white venues. White gay men established the racial hierarchy to bring themselves closer to the standards set by the dominant, white, heteronormative society.

Art helped white gay men accomplish their goal. Typically, conversations of the male gaze are restricted to an imbalance of power between men and women. In this instance, the power of the gaze takes a racialized perspective. Because the artist, the subject, and the audience are assumed male, the imbalance of power stems from the racial difference between the artist and the subject.<sup>13</sup> Art historian Carol Duncan argues that modern erotic art receives ideological protection because society teaches that “art, *qua* art, if it is ‘good’ art...never has anything to do with the oppression of the powerless, and never imposes on us values that are not universally beneficial.”<sup>14</sup> A close examination of some of the prominent pieces of gay art and the trends in American nude portraiture reveals that not all art is beneficial for all. Eldridge Cleaver best summarizes the imbalance of power between black and white men in the art discussed below. He

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<sup>9</sup> Marlon T. Riggs, *Tongues Untied: Malon T. Rigg’s Classic Documentary*, DVD, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Essex Hemphill in Martin Duberman, *Hold Tight Gently: Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill, and the Battlefield of AIDS* (New York: New Press, The, 2014), 81.

<sup>11</sup> Roderick A. Ferguson, “Race-Ing Homonormativity: Citizenship, Sociology, and Gay Identity,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 52–67.

<sup>12</sup> More information on Black and Tans can be found in Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (University Of Chicago Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Just Looking for Trouble: Robert Mapplethorpe and Fantasies of Race,” ed. Cornell, Drucilla, *Feminism and Pornography*, n.d., 460–76. This concept is discussed deeper on pg. X through a direct examination of Mapplethorpe’s work.

<sup>14</sup> Carol Duncan, “The Aesthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art,” in *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology*, ed. Arlene Raven, Cassandra L. Langer, and Joanna Frueh, *Studies in the Fine Arts, Criticism*, No. 27 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Press, 1988), 68.



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created an extended metaphor through which the audience can understand black/white relations. Cleaver argues that the white men cast themselves as an Omnipotent Administrator, an embodiment of the power to think and to rule. The black man became the Supermasculine Menial, which represents the physical power to work. He contends that the conflict between the two races of men stem from this:

The Omnipotent Administrator conceded to the Supermasculine Menial all of the attributes of masculinity associated with the Body: strength, brute power, muscle, even the beauty of the brute body. Except one. There was this single attribute of masculinity which he was unwilling to relinquish, even though this particular attribute is the essence and seat of masculinity: sex. The penis. The black man's penis was the monkey wrench in the white man's perfect machine.<sup>15</sup>

Using both of the frameworks for analysis above, the research reveals that the starting point for both the white and black male body was the same at the turn of the century. Both were sexualized under the gaze of other men. Over time, the white men transitioned into the Omnipotent Administrator and forced the black men into the role as a Supermasculine Menial. This does not mean, however, that white men disappeared from gay art and erotic visual media. Instead, they found a way to exert agency through conscious sexual acts. By the 1980s, the pictorial language of the racial hierarchy was firmly cemented in the works of prominent gay male artists.

## **The Black and White Male Bodies at the Turn of the Century**

At the end of the nineteenth century, the male nude reentered American artistic dialogues, and artists cited Classical themes. Over time, the men in these images became physical actors as they neglected ancient references and demonstrated a more physical masculinity. Thomas Eakins' *Swimming* in 1885 represents a watershed moment in male nudes.<sup>16</sup> In the work, six young men have removed their clothing for a swim. Their bodies are young, muscular, and healthy. The audience looks upon them from a distance. This image represents the sexualization of the white male form for several reasons. First, reflecting upon the previous dialogue about the power of gaze, because the audience can view unseen, they have the power. In essence, these

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<sup>15</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, "The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs," in *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968), 164.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Eakins, *Swimming*, 1885.



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young men have been dehumanized because the audience cannot see their faces – the viewer sees only young, attractive, bodies. The dehumanizing process allows the viewer to imagine these men in a sexual way because there are not any visual clues to help with the interpretation process. With Benjamin Falk’s photograph of Eugen Sandow, the famous bodybuilder, we can see the shift into a conscious observation.<sup>17</sup> In this image, Eugen reclines upon a table and engages the audience. The fact that he looks towards the camera begins to shift the power from the audience. Furthermore, the fig leaf and sandals give the audience some visual clues to help the interpretation process. At this time, American male nudes followed trends set in Europe and revitalized classical Greek themes.<sup>18</sup>

Other artists continued the movement. F. Holland Day’s 1907 piece carries heavy Greek themes and has the subject fully facing the audience.<sup>19</sup> By George Bellows’ *Stag at Sharkey’s* in 1909, white men had become animated in the artwork.<sup>20</sup> The men boxing in this image provide action and clues for the audience. Furthermore, they show the raw, physical power of masculinity. One man described Bellows’ work as the rejection of the “long-haired, dreamy-eyed, velvet-coated aesthetic” that appeared in the Greek-inspired images from a few years earlier.<sup>21</sup> Bellow’s boxing men represent the major shift the representation of white male bodies: over a few decades, they transitioned from unaware and static subjects to conscious, animated actors.

Running parallel to this transition was a separate pictorial narrative for the black male body. The first photographs of the nude black body, accredited to F. Holland Day, portrayed the subject as a racial other.<sup>22</sup> In his 1897 piece *Menelek*, the model, while addressing the camera, is decorated completely in tribal clothing and symbols.<sup>23</sup> His work two years later, *Ebony and Ivory*, shared similar themes.<sup>24</sup> In this photograph, the black male faces away from the camera to contemplate a small statue. While neither of these images depicts the black male as mentally

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<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Falk, *Eugen Sandow as the Dying Gaul*, 1894.

<sup>18</sup> For an article about classical Greek themes in Europe consult Jason Goldman, “‘The Golden Age of Gay Porn’: Nostalgia and the Photography of Wilhelm von Gloeden,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 237–58.

<sup>19</sup> F. Holland Day, *Nude Youth with Laurel Wreath and Lyre, Arm Raised by Rocks*, c. 1907.

<sup>20</sup> George Bellows, *Stag at Sharkey’s*, 1909.

<sup>21</sup> Guy Pene Du Bois, “Exhibitions by Independent Artists Attracts Immense Throngs,” *New York American*, April 4, 1910. Cited in Marianne Doezema, *George Bellow and Urban America* (New Haven: Yale University Books, 1992), 113.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Weinberg, *Male Desire: The Homoerotic in American Art*, ed. Howard W. Reeves (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2004), 31.

<sup>23</sup> F. Holland Day, *Menelek*, 1897.

<sup>24</sup> F. Holland Day, *Ebony and Ivory*, 1899.





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incompetent like other depictions did following the Civil War, they both stay true to the colonial narrative of the noble savage. Much like they did for white male bodies, visual cues helped the audience interpret Day's representation of the black male. The use of tribal clothing and symbolism turned the black male into a racial other that remained static as time passed. While white men were escaping the power of the gaze, gay artists held the black body in check.

## The Wars to End All Wars

Social understandings of masculinity and male sexuality changed because of the homosocial environments created during the two World Wars and the carnage of war itself. The artistic representation of the male body became more physical. Artists not only copied the new standard of manhood that embraced active participation in the war effort, both home and abroad, but they also gave new life to the image of the young male body. So many men were destroyed physically that a celebration of the healthy body seemed appropriate. Historian Paul Fussell argues that the constant threat of death and bodily harm helped the soldiers create "idealistic, passionate but non-physical 'crushes'."<sup>25</sup> The new-found emotional intimacy between men and the social realization of the vulnerability of the flesh proved inspirational for artists. John Singer Sargent's *Tommies Bathing* of 1918 illustrates this point.<sup>26</sup> Two soldiers lie naked in the sun, their heads touching. The audience glimpses a secret moment, one where the men are both emotionally intimate and vulnerable.

Race manifested itself in artistic fascination with the "common man" in the art of this period. Artists represented the black male in terms of his manual labor and the body he possessed from that line of work, especially during the Depression. At first, images of the black male fell into the celebration of the body after the war. Sargent emulated the style of his earlier work. Art historians contend that Sargent's experience in the war influenced his appreciation of the male body, in all of its forms. His *Nude Study of Thomas E. McKeller* represents an interesting development in nude art.<sup>27</sup> In the images previously discussed in this work, the artists hid the male genitalia. The fact that the first penis unveiled is of a black man is no surprise. If we consider Cleaver's assertion, moving the black penis into the feminizing and subjugating power of the gaze follows the establishment of the racial hierarchy. Other artists contributed to the separation between black and white men through an artistic fascination with the "common man."

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 272.

<sup>26</sup> John Singer Sargent, *Tommies Bathing*, Watercolor and graphite on white wove paper, 1918.

<sup>27</sup> John Singer Sargent, *Nude Study of Thomas E. McKeller*, c. 1917-1920.



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During the Depression and both World Wars, masculinity was represented through the power of work, be it military or labor. The black male body, the embodiment of masculine power as the Supermasculine Menial, finds itself frequently drawn in depictions of masculine labor during the 1930s. Artists on the political Left utilized their form to send messages of equality in the workforce. Hugo Gellert, for example, produced three works that included black men in labor in 1934: *The Working Day: The Greed for Surplus Labor*, *Cooperation*, and *The Working Day: Struggle for a Normal Working Day*.<sup>28</sup> While these pieces work toward the advancement of the laborer, they also make distinctions between the black and white male body. *The Greed for Surplus Labor* and *Cooperation* both utilize slave motifs to communicate their messages: in one, a white man is poised, ready to swing a whip across a black man's back; in the other, a group of nearly-naked black men work together to pull a rope.

One could argue that both of these images demonstrate the racist ramifications of industrialized capitalism and it appears that the author intended them to be interpreted as such. One could also have a conversation, however, about the power of these images. The continued use of images and themes reasserts their dominance in a larger discourse. In *Cooperation*, the message becomes more complicated: these black men are showing more of their bodies to the audience, but their faces are obscured. The artist clearly did not intend for the audience to spend time on their faces. The definition of the chest, torso, and thighs draw the audience's eyes toward the body, the symbol of the Supermasculine Menial. Even when the black body is clothed, like it is in *Struggle for a Normal Working Day*, the audience is not allowed to interact with it person-to-person. The angling of the two men places the black man farther away from the foreground, making him less important.

Racial tensions were a very real phenomenon in labor in the United States of America. Historian Matthew L. Basso argues in *Meet Joe Copper* that white masculinity dictated the racial demographics of Montana's copper mines during the Second World War.<sup>29</sup> Even though the company and its associated labor union officially held an integrated vision of labor, the miners certainly did not. The white masculinity exerted by the copper miners and smelters demonstrates the changing perceptions of masculinity during World War II.

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<sup>28</sup> Hugo Gellert, *The Working Day: The Greed for Surplus Labor*, 1934; Hugo Gellert, *Cooperation*, 1934; Hugo Gellert, *The Working Day: Struggle for a Normal Work Day Repercussions of the English Factory Acts on Other Countries*, 1934.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew L. Basso, *Meet Joe Copper: Masculinity and Race on Montana's World War II Home Front* (Chicago; London: University Of Chicago Press, 2013).





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Shell shock changed how the American military recruited its soldiers for war.<sup>30</sup> It implemented a more rigorous screening process that reduced the male body and its capabilities to the physical realm and defined patriotism through the lens of physical health. Psychological health also played a new role, which complicated the understanding of patriotic masculinity. Men who were physically healthy could be turned away from military service because of the nascent theories of the military psychologists. These new regulations impacted the homosexual community heavily: during World War I, gay men who entered the armed forces discovered a homosocial world of intimate male friendships that allowed them to explore their identity.<sup>31</sup> The new construction of masculinity affected male relationships during the war and restructured masculinity on the home front.

*Fantasia on a Theme by Dr.S* by Paul Cadmus is an excellent visual representation of this new conception of masculinity.<sup>32</sup> In this image, a young, physically fit man stretches while others look upon him. The four on-lookers are visibly not as healthy as this young man: two are very skinny and the other two are overweight. This image is a direct reference to *Varieties of Temperament* by Dr. William Herbert Sheldon. Sheldon's book creates a system for classifying the various body types men and women have and determining the character traits most closely related to physique. According to Sheldon, men with a muscular physique possessed the most positive traits.<sup>33</sup> Cadmus' work reflects these themes. Both pairs of spectators look unhealthy and representative of Sheldon's typology. Furthermore, if one compares Cadmus' model in *Fantasia* with the previous male nudes, the difference in musculature is striking. *Fantasia's* model represents the new emphasis on bodybuilding in the United States and the new importance of the male physique.

## Sex, Leather, and Physique

Alfred Kinsey published *Sexual Behavior of the Human Male* in 1948, which had a tremendous effect on gay men in post-war America. Neel Bate, a famous pornographic artist, attributes Kinsey's work to his success as an artist: "Dr. Kinsey took away the last shred of phony SHAME I ever have had about expressing myself, drawing DIRTY PICTURES, assuring me that they're art...insisting on having copies of everything to go into the archives at

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<sup>30</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II*, 20th anniversary ed. (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

<sup>31</sup> Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Paul Cadmus, *Fantasia on a Theme by Dr.S*, 1946.

<sup>33</sup> William Herbert Sheldon and Stanley Smith Stevens, *The Varieties of Temperament: A Psychology of Constitutional Differences* (New York: Harper, 1942).



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Bloomington, Indiana.”<sup>34</sup> Bates, more commonly known as Blade, created a series of twelve erotic gay male drawings between 1947 and 1948. In this pictorial story, a motorcyclist seduces a farmhand into having sex in a barn. Blade’s work, called *The Barn*, stands out in the evolution of the male body because of its highly erotic content and its international distribution.<sup>35</sup> In fact, many believe that his work inspired later and more famous gay pornographers and publications like the physique magazines and Tom of Finland.<sup>36</sup>

The physique magazine was an important development both for gay individuals and the greater community. Thinking back to Krauss’ comments at the beginning of this work, it becomes clear that physique magazines helped young gay men come into contact with their sexual orientation and explore their attraction to men. The consumer culture of the post-war era trumped political activism in terms of creating a gay male identity and making a social statement. Historian David K. Johnson argues that a national gay consumer culture based upon these physique magazines predated a national gay political culture.<sup>37</sup> His work is supported by Thomas Waugh who contends that the “most important political activity of the postwar decades...was not meeting and organizing or publicly demonstrating but consuming.”<sup>38</sup> The power of physique allowed gay men to communicate with each other through creative vehicles. Examinations of the classifieds from magazines like *Popular Mechanics* and *The Hobby Directory* reveal a tradition of connecting to gay men through mutual interests in “physical culture” and “art photography.”<sup>39</sup> Before the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that gay men could represent themselves and their culture in print, physique magazines offered them a way to explore clandestinely and come to understand their sexual desires.<sup>40</sup> These magazines did not, however, treat the black and white male bodies equally. *Physique Pictorial*, one of the most prominent physique magazines in print, did not have a solo black model until 1974. An analysis of race in the era of physique is best done through the work of two men: George Quaintance and Tom of Finland.

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<sup>34</sup> Blatte Neel, *The Barn 1948 and More Dirty Pictures by Blade* (New York: Leslie-Lohman Foundation, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> Weinberg, *Male Desire: The Homoerotic in American Art*, 99.

<sup>36</sup> For more information on this, consult the Leslie-Lohman Gallery of Gay and Lesbian Art’s exhibition page for: *From Under the Mattress to the Museum Walls*.

<sup>37</sup> David K. Johnson, “Physique Pioneers: The Politics of 1960s Gay Consumer Culture,” *Journal of Social History* 43, no. 4 (Summer 2010): 867–92.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York, 1996), 217-219.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 54.

<sup>40</sup> *MANual Enterprises v. Day*, 370 U.S. 478 (1962).



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George Quaintance started working for *Physique Pictorial* in its early days. Though he is not known for his drawings of black men, he did include a number of images with other non-white groups. He particularly enjoyed including images of the American Indian. He published *Aztec Sacrifice* and *Indian Savage* in the August 1952 edition of *Physique Pictorial*.<sup>41</sup> In one, the audience sees Quaintance's depiction of an Aztec ritual sacrifice. In the other, a white cowboy finds himself strapped to a wagon wheel while a towering Native man looms above him. The artist's understanding and use of the indigenous person may have been an attempt to add variety to the images, but they play upon racial stereotypes. Both images depict the native as savage, whether through a vicious religious ritual or through the threat of harm to a white person. Quaintance loved the cowboy-and-Indian theme in his work, usually with one subjugating the other in some form to create a narrative of aggression and forced submission.

No other artist managed to capture the beauty of aggression and submission quite like Tom of Finland, however. When Quaintance died of a heart attack in 1957, Tom of Finland stepped up as a prominent photographer for *Physique Pictorial*. Born as Touko Laaksonen in 1920, Tom would later become one of the signature artists in the burgeoning leather culture in America. Tom's work is known for its hyperrealist depictions of the human male and exaggeration of particular features like the chest and penis. While most of his work focused on sexual relationships, Tom managed to show a more diverse cast of characters and scenarios than Quaintance.

Tom had an interesting relationship with race over the course of his career. In *Daddy and the Muscle Academy*, a documentary about Tom's life and art, a friend told the interviewer that Tom once told a black man at a club that he could "peel the skin off an orange with those lips."<sup>42</sup> Coming from Finland, he did not quite understand the racial dynamics of the United States, but he was eager to explore the black body through art.<sup>43</sup> Before 1986, black men are largely underrepresented in Tom's work. He claims that his clients, the physique magazines, were to blame for their absence: "I worked for *Physique Pictorial* many years, and I was giving my works to be published in gay magazines, and in the 60s, for instance, still, they didn't want black people. And sometimes I wanted to draw some black guys, but they say no, they didn't want any, because they didn't sell."<sup>44</sup> Tom's earliest published drawing that featured a black man appeared

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<sup>41</sup> George Quaintance, *Aztec Sacrifice*, 1952; George Quaintance, *Indian Savage*, 1952.

<sup>42</sup> *Daddy and the Muscle Academy* (Zeitgeist Video, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Mica Ramakers, *Dirty Pictues: Tom of Finland, Masculinity, and Homosexuality* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 84.



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in 1962.<sup>45</sup> In this image, a black man has been stripped and bound to a pole by his arms by two half-naked white men. The scene carries the narrative of power that becomes one of the calling cards of Tom's artistic creations, but the racial implications of this dynamic are significant. Not only is the black man reduced to a sexual toy for the white men, but Tom chose to give him a smaller penis. Whether Tom intended it or not, he created a system of racial masculinity in his work. This image tells its audience that the black man is lesser. Earlier works established the black male as the Superhuman Menial by feminizing their image; Tom's representation shows that they could be repackaged as sexual visions for white gay men.

Even when they obtain the phalluses for which they are mythologized, the black men of Tom's world are still subservient to institutions of white authority, like the police. In one drawing produced in 1988, a black man rests, with his pants around his ankles, on the hood of a police car, held down by the hand of one of the officers. Both cops have pulled their erect penises out of their pants and one is preparing to penetrate their captive sexually.<sup>46</sup> Tom sexualized potential police brutality and visually represented the social imbalance of power in his erotic art. Black men cannot even pleasure each other without the presence of white man. In one instance, Tom tried to reverse the power dynamic in his erotica. Three black men find some police officers and proceed to tie them up and rape them. Tom contended that this represented a reversal of the racial power structure in the United States by showing the black male as penetrators with large genitalia. Unfortunately, the story of this image also reasserts the myth of the black rapist.<sup>47</sup> Isaac Julien, a filmmaker and cultural theorist, argued that Tom's depictions of black men stem from "white sexuality and white anxiety" and claims that sadism and masochism (S&M) in drawings of black men is distasteful given their past history with imperialism, slavery, and colonialism.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, some artists, like Bruce of Los Angeles, borrowed from Tom's style to influence their own art and exploration of the black male body. Furthermore, as controversial as Tom was, he gave the black men in his art some form of recognition as the symbolic representation of a person by allowing the audience to see their faces. These men had emotions to which the audience could respond and, on occasion, spoke. Tom's work had its problems, but it has not received nearly as much criticism as Robert Mapplethorpe's.

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<sup>45</sup> Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1962.

<sup>46</sup> Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1988.

<sup>47</sup> For more on the connection between sexual violence and race, see Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> *Daddy and the Muscle Academy*.



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## The Trouble with Mapplethorpe

Robert Mapplethorpe's work is well-known for its creativity, finesse, and controversy. Mapplethorpe's depiction of race exemplifies the complaints made by Essex Hemphill and Marlin Riggs. This artist took Tom of Finland's appreciation for the black male penis and combined it with the feminization techniques demonstrated in works of previous decades.<sup>49</sup> Within Mapplethorpe's work, the black male body is reduced to a phallic symbol, a symbol of the physical expression of sexuality. He then juxtaposes these images with others of white-on-white sexual S&M to create a visual racial dialogue that makes the black male inferior.

In many of Mapplethorpe's photographs of the nude black male, the model looks away from the camera.<sup>50</sup> Using Duncan's criticisms of female tropes in erotic art and Mulvey's description of the camera as an extension of the power of the gaze as a frame of analysis, Mapplethorpe's models succumb to the power of male gaze.<sup>51</sup> Not only does this dehumanize the model, but it gives the audience the power to sexualize the model. In addition to feminizing his models through the power of the gaze, Mapplethorpe's art has found other ways to dehumanize the black male.<sup>52</sup> By focusing the photo on particular body parts, usually the penis, Mapplethorpe removes all connection from the body to the person. The focus on the erect penis equates blackness to sex and sexuality. Take, for example, Mapplethorpe's *Man in Polyester Suit*.<sup>53</sup> The audience sees a man in a suit with his semi-erect penis hanging out of the fly of the pants. Without his hands or his penis, the audience would not know whether the man was white or black. Though the hands are included, the focal point and major visual cue is, in fact, the man's genitalia. For all of the men in these images, the audience can see and enjoy their sexual arousal but the models cannot, which creates a severe imbalance of power in the work. In essence, Mapplethorpe, as a white gay male artist, has determined how the audience should interact with the black body.

Mapplethorpe takes the conversation a step farther by including depictions of heterosexual couples.<sup>54</sup> In one image, a black man performs cunnilingus upon a white woman. In the other, an interracial couple dances. Both black men in these photographs look away from the camera, once again giving the audience power over them. Their inclusion in this manner could

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<sup>49</sup> Several of these pieces were discussed in the first section of this work.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Mapplethorpe, *Ajito*, 1981.

<sup>51</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (1975).

<sup>52</sup> Robert Mapplethorpe, *Cock*, 1985; Robert Mapplethorpe, *Christopher Holly*, 1980; Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self-Portrait*, 1981; Robert Mapplethorpe, *Man in Polyester Suit*, 1980.

<sup>53</sup> Mapplethorpe, *Man in Polyester Suit*.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Mapplethorpe, *Marty and Veronica*, 1982; Robert Mapplethorpe, *Thomas and Dovanna*, 1986.



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demonstrate the black male body is lesser, no matter the sexual orientation. The racial hierarchy presented in Mapplethorpe's work becomes more complicated when one considers the juxtaposition of S&M with these black male nudes.<sup>55</sup> All of the men in these photographs are white, which creates a visual conversation about race. The difference between the white men participating in S&M and the black nudes is agency. The white men have challenged the power of the gaze by becoming sexual actors. They choose how the audience sees and interprets their sexual behavior. *Self-Portrait* provides an excellent example to analyze this distinction.<sup>56</sup> In this photograph, Mapplethorpe sodomizes himself with the handle of a whip. He presents the audience with a very sexual image, but controls the interpretation by performing the action himself. Furthermore, he looks directly at the audience, challenging their power in this situation. Another layer of complexity is added with G.W. Levi Kamel's analysis of masculinity in gay sadomasochism. He concludes that, within this type of gay sexual relations, "maleness is understood not always in the terms of dominance; it can be submissive, too."<sup>57</sup> The white male submissive is not feminized by his submission, but occupies a position of lesser manhood, which is still above the position of the feminized black male.

Mapplethorpe's representation of the black male body has drawn debate over the years. Kobena Mercer describes his representations of blackness as "troublesome" because Mapplethorpe's "highly erotic treatment of the black male body seems to be supported by a whole range of racist myths about black sexuality."<sup>58</sup> He further argues that Mapplethorpe's "obsessive focus" with the black male penis "eroticizes the most visible aspect of racial difference- skin colour [sic] – but also lubricates the ideological reproduction of 'colonial fantasy', [sic] in which the white male subject is positioned at the centre [sic] of representation by a desire for mastery, power and control over the racialized and inferior black Other."<sup>59</sup>

While historians and activists are correct in their critique of the racism in the gay community of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, their discussion of it can be insular at times. An examination of art produced by gay men beginning in the 1880s reveals a long pattern of disenfranchisement. As the white male body transitioned from sexualized forms to sexual actors, the black male body became a sexualized trope of the Supermasculine Menial. Even with

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<sup>55</sup> Robert Mapplethorpe, *Ellittott and Dominick*, 1979; Robert Mapplethorpe, *Brian Ridlye and Lyle Heeter*, 1979; Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self-Portrait*, 1981.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self-Portrait*, 1981.

<sup>57</sup> G.W. Levi Kamel, "Leathersex: Meaningful Aspects of Gay Sadomasochism," in *S&M: Studies in Dominance and Submission* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1995), 232.

<sup>58</sup> Mercer, "Just Looking for Trouble: Robert Mapplethorpe and Fantasies of Race," 463.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.





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America's progress from the Civil Rights movement and powerful activism from groups like the Black Panther Party and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the gay male world remained highly segregated. Looking back over the pattern in these images, it is no wonder that the gay community stagnated in terms of racial inclusion.

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