

# Bob Mizer

Selected Private Works 1942-1992







© Bob Mizer - Unknown (umping), Vintage color transparency 1975, Cibachrome print, 30x30 cm, Edition of 3, printed 2011



© Bob Mizer - Unknown (Marine), Vintage color transparency 1975, Cibachrome print, 30x30 cm, Edition of 3, printed 2011





© Bob Mizer - Kurt Kowig, Vintage color transparency Fall 1971, Cibachrome print, 30x30 cm, Edition of 3, printed 2011



© Bob Mizer - Tony Rome & Ron Nidole, Vintage color transparency 1971, Cibachrome print, 30x30 cm, Edition of 3, printed 2011





© Bob Mizer - Ron Sander, Vintage color transparency, April 1983, Cibachrome print, 30x20 cm, Edition of 3, printed 2011

© Bob Mizer - Mad Dog Males, Vintage color transparency, 1973, Cibachrome print, 30x20 cm, Edition of 3, printed 2011





## The Personal Works of Bob Mizer

‘I feel more strength now than ever before, but this strength, this driving energy, shall be carefully bridled and directed with wisdom [...] My ambition is everything, pleasure, physical sensations mean nothing compared to great accomplishments.’ (Bob Mizer in a letter to his mother, Delia Mizer, from a correctional work facility in Saugus, California, May 26, 1947)

The above quote comes from a series of letters written by American photographer Bob Mizer, following his arrest and subsequent imprisonment in the summer of 1947. He spent nearly nine months at a work camp in Saugus, California (now part of Santa Clarita) for the unlawful distribution of obscene material through the US mail. The material in question consisted of a series of black and white photographs, taken by Mizer, of young bodybuilders wearing what were then known as posing straps—a precursor to the G-string. At the time, the mere suggestion of male nudity was not only frowned upon, but also illegal. In spite of societal expectations and pressure from law enforcement, Mizer would go on to build a veritable empire on his beefcake photographs and films, with the establishment of his influential studio, the Athletic Model Guild (or A.M.G., as it was popularly known).

Mizer’s letters from prison, along with a handful of correspondences from a trip to Europe in the early 1950s, and his diaries, kept from the age of twelve, make up the most comprehensive firsthand account of the long and complicated life of one of America’s most unique and eccentric photographic voices. Perhaps the most informative portion of what remains of the Mizer estate however is a collection of personal photographs that have rarely been seen, even by those closest to the photographer. A special selection of these images is on display this February at Exile Gallery in Berlin, in a first-of-its-kind exhibition entitled *Bob Mizer: Selected Private Works 1942-1992*.

## The State of the Mizer Estate

At the time of his death, Bob Mizer was probably best known for his groundbreaking magazine *Physique Pictorial*: a publication that mixed photographs and illustrations (by Tom of Finland and others) with Mizer’s often vitriolic political rants. In the span of his near fifty-year career, he created a body of work that both reflected and skewed American ideals of masculinity. His work included everything from dramatically lit black and white beefcake to colourful imagery that sometimes included extreme close-ups of male genitalia... and even the occasional female model. From his home in Los Angeles, he photographed thousands of men, including actors, bodybuilders, soldiers, and hustlers. His portfolio, estimated at nearly one million different images and thousands of films and videotapes, features unique cultural figures, including actor and politician Arnold Schwarzenegger, Andy Warhol muse Joe Dallesandro, film and television star Glenn Corbett, and contemporary artist Jack Pierson. The Bob Mizer Foundation

now houses the majority of the collection. Following his death, however, a series of events unfolded that threatened to keep Mizer’s work out of the public arena forever.

He died at 6:15 p.m. on May 12, 1992. His older brother Joe, heir to Mizer’s estate, died just one month later on June 16, leaving everything to his second beneficiary: his live-in lawyer, Wayne Stanley. The Mizer estate consisted of four city lots, containing the Mizer family home, the photographer’s studio and archives, and a recently constructed dormitory for his models. Over the years, the compound played host to his family, the occasional boarder, a virtual zoo of barnyard animals, and a slew of models. In the days immediately following his death, a few remaining models disposed of much of Mizer’s possessions at Stanley’s request. He often recounted the occasion, saying that they filled anywhere between sixteen and thirty-three dumpsters full of junk. That ‘junk’ included crucial elements of the photographer’s process, his elaborate sets, costumes, equipment and props, and almost all of his personal belongings. Mizer’s friend, the American painter John Sonsini, salvaged some of these artefacts while other pieces of the estate were handed off to various friends and contemporaries.

Stanley attempted to keep the operation afloat, even taking photographs of popular A.M.G. models himself, but the most important part of the business was missing—Bob Mizer. In 1994, Stanley put the compound up for sale, sectioning it off into three parts. Eighteen months later, he sold the final property and relocated to Alameda, CA. Stanley kept Mizer’s black and white prints and negatives in his garage, and stacked his 35mm colour slides floor-to-ceiling in a nearby public storage unit. His films and videos remained in Los Angeles with documentary filmmaker Marvin Jones who sent the films to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and kept the videotapes on his back porch. Back issues of *Physique Pictorial* changed hands a few times before landing in a storage unit, also in Los Angeles.

In 2004, Stanley made his final sale to Dennis Bell, creator of the Bob Mizer Foundation. The transfer included all of the remaining photographs, 35mm and medium-format colour transparencies, large-format black and white negatives and Mizer’s original card catalogue that mapped out the collection in its entirety. Over time, Bell pieced the collection back together, relocating and acquiring all of Mizer’s remaining films and videotapes, and most of the props, equipment, and backdrops that John Sonsini rescued more than ten years earlier.

There is no way of knowing the entirety of what was lost in the days following Mizer’s death, but what remains of his estate paints a picture of a complicated and meticulous artist. He was a workhorse who shot obsessively, nearly everyday, often with multiple models, and even continuing to work as his body deteriorated from renal failure. His last known session took place just two months before he died. He kept and scrutinized every frame, some marked with the words



©Bob Mizer – Richard Johns (*Flying Bondage*), Vintage color transparency 1982, Cibachrome print, 20x30 cm, Edition of 3, printed 2011

‘do not print,’ others accompanied by notes about lighting or exposure.

Early on, Mizer made a habit of photographing outdoors, occasionally on location, but often on the rooftop or by the pool at the compound. When he worked in the studio, he is rumoured to have shot with a series of cameras, constantly shifting between 35mm, medium format, and large format, in both colour and black and white, thus producing an array of formats of each and every pose. Later videos of his sessions, kept almost religiously from the early 1960s on, reveal a different approach. As his health waned, he stopped shooting outdoors, and rarely moved from his post directly next to a constantly recording camcorder. Mizer can be heard on these videos coaching his models, with the flash from his Contaflex SLR popping in the background.

He was an extremely successful commercial photographer (no small feat, considering his subject matter)

and he knew exactly what his customers wanted. Nonetheless, he steadily produced images that stand out from the standard beefcake that made him famous. In the cardboard boxes that housed his transparencies and negatives, right alongside the posing and preening, are images that Mizer himself never presented to the public, perhaps out of fear that they would be misunderstood. Even the many posthumous gallery exhibits and coffee table books have overlooked these—perhaps the most intriguing of his photographs.

He had a keen understanding of composition and lighting from the beginning, and was early to adopt advances in photography—his earliest colour work dates as far back as the mid-1940s, decades before colour photography was accepted as a fine art form. The images, referred to here as his personal works, show a truly unique vision of masculine identity. From the time he started documenting bodybuilding com-

petitions on Venice Beach, Mizer trained his lens on portrayals of masculinity, and as the years progressed, his work turned from standard representations—bodybuilder, policeman, sailor—to multi-layered constructions. A black lumberjack, set against a desert sunset sports a Gucci t-shirt and skin-tight jeans. A dishevelled Jesus-figure, arms open wide against a fabric-draped cross, stands with pelvis thrust forward, fully erect.

These images present a new impression of Mizer. He is neither restrained as in his early photographs, nor explicit as in his later work. Here he exhibits the strength he once spoke of: the ‘driving energy [...] carefully bridled and directed with wisdom.’ Despite his obvious impact on visual culture, and proclamations of his influence from renowned art world figures like David Hockney, he has, until now, been relegated to the world of outsider art or, at best, commercial photographer. He may not have received

the acclaim he is due, but then his artistic legacy is only now given its debut.

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