

**Man to Man: A History of Gay Photography.** PIERRE BORHAN. New York: The Vendome Press, 2007. 288 p. ISBN 0-8656-5-1868.

Covering over a century and a half, from the first daguerreotypes to the present, this book aims to chronicle photographs taken largely by, of, and for men sexually attracted to other males. To approach this ambitious goal, there should be many photographs and, indeed, there are: nearly 350. Despite the aphorism that one picture is worth many times that many words, there should also be an ample text. Although not extensive, the text in *Man to Man* is nonetheless provocative and insightful. This is the first book to seriously attempt its formidable task, reason enough to forgive some of its shortcomings. If only because no previous work has gathered such a range of imagery, these diverse photographs are worth our attention; to say that many questions remain unanswered or unasked is simply to affirm that this book's huge topic still needs more investigation. *Man to Man* is a worthy beginning.

The book is principally the work of Pierre Borhan, formerly co-editor of *Clichés* magazine and recently Director of Photographic Patrimony at France's Ministry of Culture. Borhan is also the author of several studies of individual European and American photographers, among them Dorothea Lange, Joel-Peter Witkin, and André Kertész. Olivier Saillard, curator, Musée de la Mode et du Textile in Paris, contributes a valuable essay on fashion photography. The book's editorial director is another curator and historian, Gilles Mora, credited by Borhan with having had the idea for the book and obliquely credited on the dust jacket with having gathered the photographs.

Crafted by biographers, the book concentrates on dozens of individual male photographers, interestingly linking their own sexual proclivities and identities to their art. With curators in charge, *Man to Man* has about it the air of the gallery show that tries to explain as much as possible about the historical and cultural setting in which its exhibited works were created. The linear narrative running through *Man to Man* postulates a gradual progression from repression to freedom, from secrecy and shame to openness and pride, from persecution to tolerance, from denial to acceptance. It is crucial to Borhan, sensibly so, to recall that the earlier photographs were produced when sexual activity between men was widely considered a crime and a sign of mental disorder, while the more recent images were made in a very different cultural climate. In Borhan's telling, as social scorn and constraints lessened, photographers became increasingly forthright about their own sexual selves, producing correspondingly bolder and more imaginative portrayals of male sexuality.

Any book casting such a wide net in topic and time must be highly selective in its sources, and readers deserve a comprehensive discussion of the criteria used to select evidence and themes. Unfortunately, such discussion is missing in *Man to Man*. It seems as if Borhan is unaware of the book's

particular slants or biases, especially its powerful European and American emphasis. Based on the portrayal of homosexuality in this book, it would appear that gay men, at least those who have been photographed, have been overwhelmingly white. And gayness seems to be represented as something one outgrows, since there are few men past their twenties in *Man to Man*. One is left to wonder whether the book's prevalent nudity, surely a means of enhancing its appeal for many readers today, mirrors the degree of attention that naked males actually received in the "history of gay photography."

*Man to Man* handsomely reproduces the work of an array of renowned and lesser known photographers: Fred Holland Day, Frank Eugene, Wilhelm von Gloeden, Edwin F. Townsend, Herbert List, Cecil Beaton, Minor White, Bob Mizer, George Platt Lynes, Robert Mapplethorpe, David LaChapelle, Tom Bianchi, and Bruce Davidson. Borhan notes without explanation the absence of works by other famous photographers, such as Bruce Weber and Greg Gorman; there are some unmentioned omissions that seem glaring as well, such as the lack of any images by contemporary photographer Howard Roffman. Further, attention to images by critically acclaimed photographers is inordinate; a thorough "history of gay photography" would pay more attention to "found photographs," images by anonymous amateurs or by professionals who never achieved fame.<sup>1</sup>

Examining its "Photographic Credits" locates the book's photographs, mostly in unsurprising places: dozens of private collections, among them bodybuilder images owned by David Chapman; the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division; Bibliothèque nationale de France; the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television of the Royal Photographic Society Picture Gallery; Fotomuseum im Münchner Stadtmuseum; the J. Paul Getty Museum; the Kinsey Institute; the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation; individual archives, such as the William Godney Photographs at Duke University and the Minor White Archive at Princeton; and private galleries, such as Stephen Cohen's in Los Angeles. There is another book, a long and interesting one, to be written about how, where, and whether such images get archived, and about how one might locate more of that "found" or vernacular imagery. Unfortunately, the relative absence of these subjects in *Man to Man* is one of this book's major flaws. Although Borhan notes that Alfred Kinsey acquired photo collections from some of the men he interviewed, and that this intriguing collection of vernacular imagery is now housed at the Kinsey Institute, such description of an archive's actual

1 On found photographs, see Thomas Waither, *Other Pictures: Anonymous Photographs from the Thomas Waither Collection* (Santa Fe, 2000); John Ibson, "Picturing Boys: Found Photographs and the Transformation of Boyhood in 1950s America," *THYMOS: Journal of Boyhood Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2007), pp. 68–83.

holdings is rare in the author's narrative.

For all the photographs brought together in *Man to Man* from the archives that Borhan and Mora perused, there is much territory left uncharted in the book's "Photographic Credits," a sketchy list that occupies little more than a page. A week watching eBay auctions of male imagery, combined with, for instance, a look at the number of private collections examined by David Deitcher for his important study, *Dear Friends*,<sup>2</sup> suggests how many photographs of men in intimate poses are today held by private collectors. For images more readily available to scholars, *Man to Man*'s citation of public archives and private galleries provides a place to begin, but it is not an exhaustive list.

The main shortcoming of this book is its lack of historical context. If it seeks to be a history and not merely a meditation on present-day concerns, any work addressing sexual involvements in the past must carefully consider whether today's sexual attitudes, practices, and meanings were equally relevant, or even existent, in earlier times. And if a work studies visual representation, it should assess what an image might have meant to its original creators, subjects, and observers, perhaps something quite different from what the same image would mean today. Borhan at least shows an elementary awareness of these issues in some of the eleven essays that precede sections within his book's three divisions: "1840–1918: The Slow Emergence of Homosexuality in Photography"; "1918–1969: The Photographer's Choice: Suppression of Emancipation"; and "1969–2006: Art Photographers Declare Their Homosexuality."

The attention to chronology notwithstanding, there is an anachronistic assumption pervading this book: the notion that one may speak without equivocation of "gay men" or at least of "homosexuals" in 1848 as readily as one may talk about such persons in 1948 or 2008. Borhan is not necessarily to be faulted for this unqualified embrace of essentialism, but his book would surely have been strengthened had he at least briefly addressed the alternative view that human sexuality is constructed, sometimes quite differently, in different times and places. Borhan seems to believe that his use of "homosexual" instead of "gay" in the text (but not the title) is adequate recognition of historical change; however, more than shifts in wording are involved. Not only was "gay" not in use in the 1840s, "homosexual" had not yet been coined. Furthermore, the binary notion of sexuality is not universally found throughout the world or throughout history; and the very idea that a person has a distinct sexual orientation and identity, a widespread idea to be sure nowadays, was not in common currency when many of the images in this

2 See David Deitcher, *Dear Friends: American Photographs of Men Together, 1840–1918* (New York, 2001).

book were produced.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, whether all of the men portrayed in *Man to Man* were sexually involved is uncertain, an untidy complexity that Borhan largely ignores. An image of one man holding another's erect penis, for instance, is clearly meant to portray sexual activity, but an image of one man holding another's hand, even with apparent tenderness, is another matter.<sup>4</sup> What made a photograph or photographer eligible for inclusion in *Man to Man* is intriguing; sadly, the question remains unanswered.

Undoubtedly, *Man to Man* will appeal to readers interested in certain aspects of gayness today, but the book tends to read history backward, applying current concerns – and only a selective, idiosyncratic serving of them – to past situations. We need to know much more about whether, when the men in this book's photographs had their pictures taken, their images meant the same thing to them and to their photographers and viewers that they meant to those who put this book together.

**John Ibson**  
**California State University, Fullerton**

3 See, for example, Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York, 1995).

4 For an argument that many photographs of men together might more meaningfully be read as part of the history of intimacy, not the history of sexuality, see John Ibson, *Picturing Men: A Century of Male Relationships in Everyday American Photography* (Chicago, 2006).