

A Hard Man is Good to Find! 2 March – 11 June 2023

The Photographers' Gallery presents *A Hard Man is Good to Find!* - a bold new exhibition charting over 60 years of queer photography of the male physique, on display from 2 March to 11 June 2023.

Bringing together more than 100 works, the exhibition centres on queer photographs of men's bodies, produced in London in the twentieth century. While the 1955 Wolfenden Report and the 1967 Sexual Offences Act marked the partial decriminalisation of gay sexual activity, prompting gay liberation and the fight for social equality; any depiction of male nudity which suggested homosexuality remained subject to the 1857 Obscene Publications Act, which made making or distributing such images a criminal offence.

A clandestine visual culture emerged, regulated by laws which enforced homosexuality as invisible. In turn, it directly fed the defiant, overt visibility of gay men's bodies that emerged in the post-war period. The tension between invisibility and visibility was negotiated through ideas about the male body drawn from art, physical culturists, and pornography – both home-grown and imported.

Taking a novel approach, the exhibition highlights key areas of London which were a focus for men seeking out men to photograph. It maps out a territory of risk and possibility across Highgate, between Chelsea and Wellington Barracks, in Soho, Brixton, Portobello and Euston. Within each site it is possible to locate artists of all persuasions, creating work about queer sensibilities and men's bodies in radical ways. Catalogues, print ordering sheets, personal albums, magazines and publications are also included in the exhibition to explore how these photographs were circulated, exchanged and shared. Drawing together photographs produced for commercial, as well as creative and personal purposes, *A Hard Man is Good to Find!* dissolves hierarchies, creates non-linear historical narratives and brokers unlikely adjacencies.

Covering the 1930s to early 1990s, many works are exhibited here for the first-time including Keith Vaughan's Highgate Men's Pond album, a modernist photo collage made in 1933; 'The Portobello Boys', an anonymous and striking portfolio of young men taken in the late 1950s and early 1960s in North Kensington. A set of archetypes, 'The Londoners', documented in the late 1960s by Anthony C Burls (trading as Cain of London) and Martin Spenceley's street portraits of subcultural men photographed in Euston in the 1980s.

The hinge of this history is the posing pouch, a modest fabric covering for the male genitals developed by gay physique photographers to show as much of the

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male body as possible. Its origins lie in the US, in the Athletic Model Guild established by Bob Mizer in 1945, although there is evidence of it being worn for sunbathing in London in the early 1930s. An original 1950s posing pouch will on display in the exhibition. Employed to circumvent the ban on full nudity (which included the postal system), the pouch was also painted on mail order reproductions so that customers could rub them off once received in the post. The sighting and dematerialising of the posing pouch is key to thinking through how such images were consumed, and how queer erotics were discursively constructed from imaginative forms of resistance to power and oppression.

The exhibition includes works by: John S Barrington, Cecil Beaton, Guy Burch, Basil Clavering (trading as Royale), Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Bill Green (trading as Vince), David Gwinnutt, Paul Hawker, Angus McBean and Ajamu X.

A Hard Man is Good to Find! is curated by Alistair O'Neill, professor of Fashion History and Theory at Central Saint Martins (University of the Arts London).

The exhibition will be on show alongside the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize 2023.

-ENDS-

Press contacts

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Notes for Editors

The Photographers' Gallery

The Photographers' Gallery (TPG) champions photography for everyone. In the heart of central London and home to an international community of photographers, the Gallery explores photography in all its forms, with a diverse and critically acclaimed programme of exhibitions, events and courses. The UK's first independent gallery devoted to photography, TPG was first to exhibit many key names in international photography, including Juergen Teller, Helen Levitt, Rinko Kawauchi, Gordon Parks, Sebastião Salgado and Andreas Gursky. The Gallery has also been instrumental in establishing contemporary British photographers, including Martin Parr and Corinne Day. Over the past five decades TPG has helped to establish photography as a recognised art form, introducing new audiences to photography and celebrating its place at the heart of visual culture. Right outside TPG, Soho Photography Quarter (SPQ) is an exciting new permanent outdoor cultural space, presenting the very best of contemporary photography for free, day and night.

www.thephotographersgallery.org.uk

Alistair O'Neill

Alistair O'Neill is a writer, curator and professor of Fashion History and Theory at Central Saint Martins (University of the Arts London). He is the author of *London - After a Fashion*, and publishes widely on fashion and photography. His curated exhibitions include *Exploding Fashion: 2D-3D-3D Animation* and *Guy Bourdin: Image Maker*; and he consults for museums and galleries including the V&A, National Portrait Gallery, Somerset House and the Design Museum. O'Neill is a founding member of the UAL Photography and the Archive research centre, sits on the editorial board of *Fashion Theory*, *Film Fashion & Consumption*, *Dune*, and writes regularly for *Aperture* magazine.

Visitor information

A Hard Man is Good to Find!: 3 March – 11 June 2023

Opening times:

Monday - Wednesday 10am - 6pm

Thursday & Friday 10am - 8pm (Fridays free from 5pm)

Saturday 10am - 6pm

Sunday 10am - 6pm

Tickets

£8 / £5 concessions (members go free)

Advance online booking: £6.50 / £4 concessions

Ticket covers entry to all exhibitions on day of visit

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