

Up close and personal

Chris Komater's
'Allegory' at
Patricia Sweetow Gallery

by Steven Jenkins

The annals of fine-art photography are overflowing with images of female nudes - women unadorned, adored, and scorned as muses, goddesses, formal abstractions, and sex objects. While accomplished photographers of both genders have focused their lenses on the naked female form since the inception of their medium nearly 160 years ago, in general they have been less apt to explore the male nude as rewarding subject matter. There have been exceptions, of course, such as Pictorialist pioneer F. Holland Day, sensual portraitist George Platt Lynes, and borderline pornographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Still, you weren't too likely to encounter a full-fledged male nude photograph in a museum or gallery until gay culture entered the mainstream and made its mark on postmodern aesthetics in the 1980's and 90's.

Now we have a plethora of such images, though in this case (as in most), quantity

is an inadequate measure of quality. Within the space of two decades, the male nude has been rescued from neglect as a conceptually and stylistically legitimate genre, yet just as quickly it has proven all-too-susceptible to visual cliches. Whether rendered on slick color or poetic black-and-white, these ubiquitous male nudes letting it all hang out begin to look alarmingly alike. Perhaps it's also the predominance of near-nude men in fashion spreads and celebrity shoots that has removed the verve and gusto from this photographic tradition.

Feeling a bit nudged out, I was relieved to come across Chris Komater's recent installation at Patricia Sweetow Gallery. Komater's approach to the male nude is refreshingly unique, emphasizing details of the body rather than the whole enchilada.

The central piece in Komater's "Allegory" is "Every Inch of Jacek," a dazzling grid of 80 close-up images, each 7-by-7 inches, that pull apart and reassemble Jacek's body in a self-contained swirl of arms,

legs, and desires. The artist considers his ambitious work "a portrait of a gay body, with its particular excitements and perils."

Komater has always been fascinated with how masculinity is defined by culture. His previous work includes "Personals," a sound installation in which he played back messages he received in response to an ad he placed describing himself as "slim, smooth, and blonde." He's also superimposed his likeness in a series of doctored film noir publicity stills, such as "Robert Mitchum Seduces Chris Komater With a Show of Paternal Affection." Having been active for years in the Bay Area as an artist and curator, Komater was justifiably annoyed when a local critic mistook him for a female artist on the basis of his "Personals" installation. "Reports of my femininity have been greatly exaggerated," he wrote in response. "Wake up and smell the testosterone."

The musky scent lingers throughout "Allegory," with its grid of polymorphous pleasures. "I wanted to display my attraction, and to make an homage to a body type that gets little attention outside of the bear movement," Komater writes of his hirsute model, aroused and deconstructed in all his hairy splendor.

Gazing at the puzzle pieces of Jacek, viewers can fixate on their favorite erogenous

zones: a blurred nipple, a closed eye, stubble on his upper lip, the palm of his hand, the sole of his foot, the erect penis, the smooth testicles, the belly button, the patches of unidentifiable regions of white skin. Komater reveals much here (as does Jacek!) yet somehow avoids objectifying his model. "Nakedness hides more than it reveals," Komater writes, and for once this paradox rings true.

Elsewhere in the installation, Komater links the gay male body to emblems of nature and culture with similar photographs of body parts, foliage, and an old dial telephone. Only two images don't quite work; one is a color photo of blue curtains that contrasts too obviously with the uncovered body on display, and the second is a gratuitous money shot (and I don't mean wads of cash).

Komater has reinvigorated the male nude tradition and made me want to verify up close that every inch of the enticing Jacek indeed has been perused by his camera. I might be able to spot a few he missed.

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“Every Inch of Jacek,” 1997, by Chris Komater, 80 framed toned gelatin-silver prints, hung one inch apart, 63”x99”