

# BOOK REVIEW

BY DANIEL KITCHEN & JAY BODA

## *Uncovered: Rare Vintage Male Nudes*

by Reed Massengill

Foreword by Victor Skrebeneski

Universe, 2009



ABOVE  
Book Jacket:  
Vulcan Studios,  
*Three Graces*, n.d.,  
B/W photograph

PAGE 9  
Clockwise  
from top left:

Al Urban,  
*Untitled*, n.d.,  
B/W photograph

Earle Forbes,  
*Barton Mumaw*, n.d.,  
B/W photograph

Antonio Arabia,  
*Unidentified Model*,  
n.d., B/W photograph

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In the title of Reed Massengill's tenth and latest book, the word "uncovered" refers to two of his life's passions: collecting photographs of muscular, nude men and rescuing any of those images that might be hidden in an attic or a basement corner saving them from oblivion as rubbish or pornography.

This book focuses on ten artists, who worked during the Golden Age of physique photography from the 1940s to the mid-60s and in many cases longer. This courageous group's work was once considered obscene and criminal. Photog-

raphers and their customers were harassed and arrested, even ruined, such as Newton Arvin, a renowned English professor at Smith College and mentor of Truman Capote, who, in a high profile case, was arrested by the postal authorities for receiving obscene material in the mail. For this volume, Massengill, who has played a key role in locating numerous endangered images, has selected mostly works that have heretofore been unpublished.

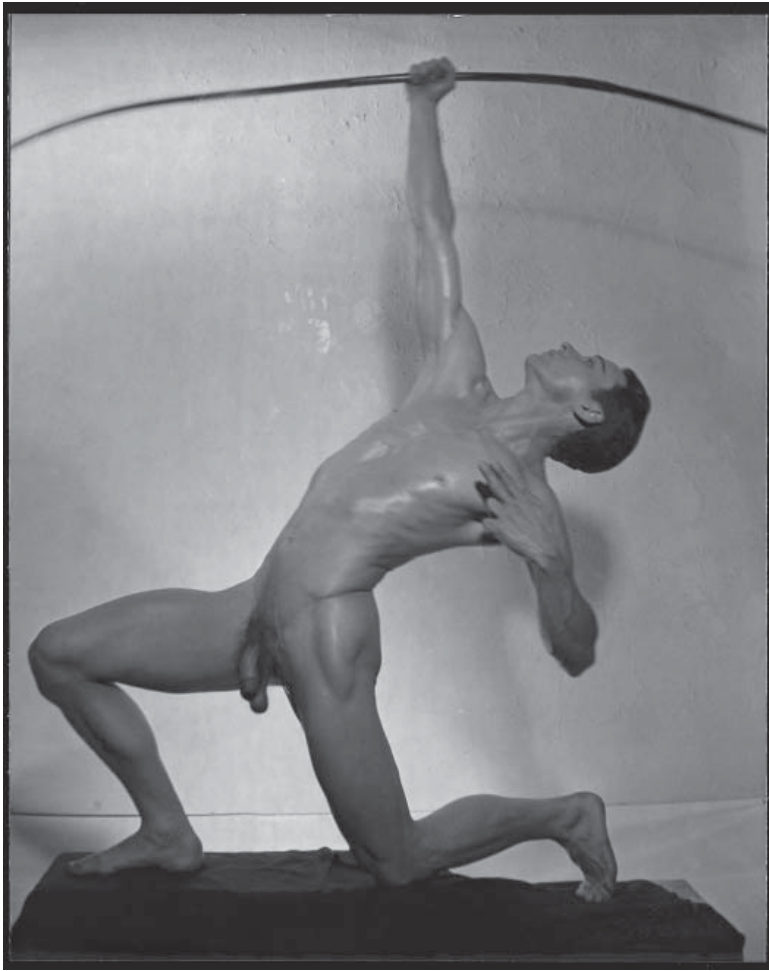
The book is divided into ten parts, one for each photographer with a brief, often witty, sometimes poignant summary of their careers and how their works were uncovered. The artists are: Al Urban (1917-1992), Frederick Kovert (1901-1949), Earle Forbes (1897-1970), Don Whitman (1916-1998), George Platt Lynes (1907-1955), Plato [George Haimsohn] (1920-2003), John Shreeve Barrington (1920-1991), Antonio Arabia (1931-1993), Vulcan [name withheld] (b.1921), and Robert Galster (1923-

1991).

The life and death and progeny (his work) of Antonio Arabia illustrates Massengill's concern of how difficult, and sometimes impossible, it is to both find and preserve a collection of great artistic worth.

Arabia was an unknown photographer who lived in eastern Pennsylvania and whose work is published in this book for the first time. A few years after his death, the entire corpus of "6,000 photographic prints, negatives, slides, and all rights related to the material" was auctioned on eBay. Their beauty and importance was immediately recognized by collectors and experts. There was a fear, though, that someone would buy the collection and break it up to sell piecemeal and destroy the cohesion of the work. A West Coast collector finally bought it for \$10,000 and plans to keep the collection intact. For a perspective, a single George Platt Lynes vintage photograph would sell for twice that sum.

This book is a handsome, mouth-watering production. It has been carefully thought out to make the



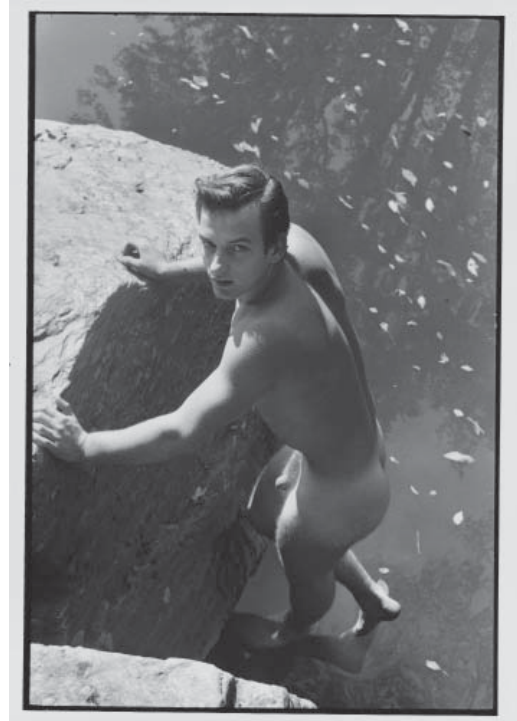
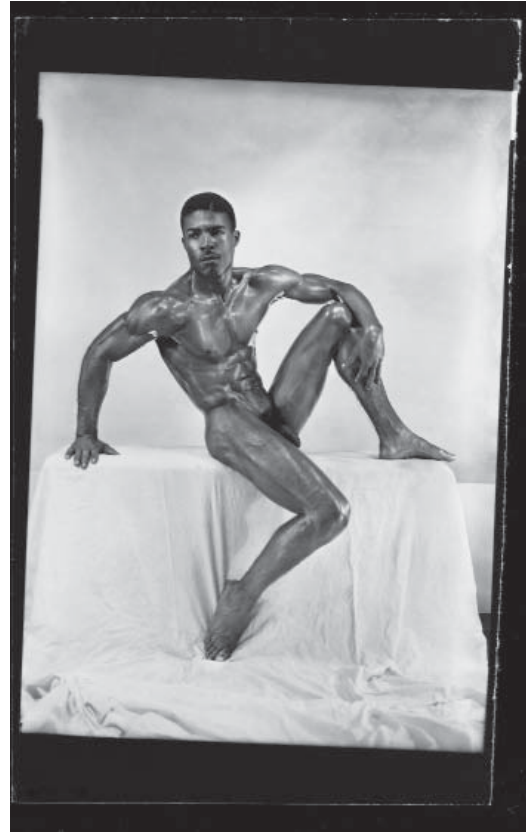
strongest visual impact and gives the reader the rush of the erotic stimulation of this once illicit venue.

Massengill's introduction, *Rescued Nudes*, is a succinct, factual, and beautifully written history of collecting vintage male nudes. Today, eBay is the prime method of ferreting out these images by collectors. The bidders sit anonymously behind the protective shield of a computer screen as opposed to exposure in high profile bidding at an auction house. Massengill ends with a passionate clarion call for the collection, preservation, and exhibition "of gay, lesbian, and transgender art" as a critical component to understanding the magnificence

and beauty of our community's esthetic heritage. These goals have a strong resonance with the mission of the Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation.

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NOTE: Arabia often used young men from a local commune as models and used the wilderness as his backdrop. These young, blond men, attempting to live on the land, have come equipped with perfect plows, handsome faces, and muscular bodies as Adams in paradise (if they were all James Dean) before Eves. This photograph was first published in Massengill's book, and he has graciously given us to permission to use it in our journal. Another first.