

THE QUEER ISSUE: BEEFCAKE'S GOLDEN AGE

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Ezra Clayton Daniels

Scott Herman is hanging out at the Belvedere, the campy, turreted guesthouse in Cherry Grove that is so over-the-top it's been called the Capitol of Gay America. The hunky breakout star of MTV's *The Real World: Brooklyn* looks right at home lounging poolside with four other models. They're on Fire Island for a location shoot for the underwear and swimsuit maker Baskit.

Herman isn't gay, but he's willing and able to display his buffed-up body to further his career. "It keeps me in the mainstream," the 25-year-old says of his appearances in magazines like *Men's Health*. "I think of myself as a businessperson. If I'm going to be 'the guy with the body,' that's OK. I'm using it as a launchpad."

Welcome to the Golden Age of Beefcake. There was a time when it was considered unseemly for men to show off their physique in various states of undress. "Men weren't supposed to be looked at," notes Rick Day, a photographer whose most recent book, *Players*, features gorgeous male bodies posed in sports gear. "Most of the guys I shoot are straight," he says. "It's a little strange for them to be

the object of attention. But, hey, guys used to think it was feminine or egotistical. Now, guys can't wait to take their shirt off."

Today, everyone in Hollywood and beyond is posing in the male version of those pin-up calendars once ubiquitous in auto-repair shops. "The biggest challenge in the 21st century is dodging Obama's nipples," jokes Toby Miller, the author of two books about the commodification of the male body. It's not only *our* President strutting on the beach; former Russian President Vladimir Putin was photographed on vacation as well, flexing his massive pecs.

Some consider this payback for the years during which women were judged more by the curves on their bodies than by their minds. "If you look back at advertising campaigns from as early as the '30s and '40s, you'd always see women being objectified. That's changed," notes Eric Schwerts, the owner of Baskit. "The trend now is to see men in various states of undress. It's not only in print media; it's what you see on TV, in movies, all over the culture."

A Harvard study of ads—which shows that, in recent years, men's bodies have become more prevalent in advertisements than women's—bears out Schwerts's observation. Ads for home-electronic equipment, condo apartments, tires, furniture, and even baby food all feature shirtless or naked men. "Men are getting a taste of what women went through," Day says. An ad for Dolce & Gabbana epitomizes this new aesthetic: A naked man lies down, as a roomful of clothed people stare at him.

It's true that actors used to do beefcake shots: Robert Mitchum, Marlon Brando, and Rock Hudson are among the men who furthered their careers when they took off their shirts. But back then, such photographs were the exception rather than the rule. Even when Burt Reynolds posed seductively on a bearskin rug as a *Cosmo* centerfold in 1972, it was more in the spirit of parody than of *Playgirl*. If there was a tipping point for when it became the norm to ogle male flesh, it had to be 1981, when Bruce Weber's mammoth portrait of Olympic pole vaulter Tom Hintnaus towered over Times Square. The viewer's gaze immediately went to Hintnaus's larger-than-life crotch, barely covered by a thin strip of white cloth.

After that, posing in Calvin's tighty-whities became a gateway to stardom: Antonio Sabato Jr., Travis Fimmel, and, most famously, Marky Mark all made the leap from crotch shots to speaking parts.

Even the hyper-masculine world of professional sports has become a fertile ground for beefcake. In 2001, a calendar called *Dieux du Stade* showed nude French rugby players. It has since grown into a mini-industry of its own, with books, DVDs, and TV specials. Along the way, it's also helped popularize the sport.

Gabe Kapler, who helped the Red Sox win a World Series and now plays for the Tampa Bay Rays, is almost as well known for the rippled muscles he's been proud to show off in workout magazines. It's a far cry from the days when the chain-smoking, pot-bellied

Babe Ruth embodied baseball greatness. Still, Kapler got so much grief for becoming a gay icon that he now refuses to take his shirt off for the camera.

"The shit he got from his teammates made him never want to talk about it and never do it again," says Cyd Zeigler Jr., founder and partner of Outsports.com. Citing "the culture of the locker room," Zeigler compares athletes in the U.S. unfavorably to those in Europe and Australia, where it has become accepted—even expected—for sports stars like David Beckham, the face (and crotch) of Armani Underwear, to bare all. "We're still really prudish," Zeigler says.

NFL quarterback Mark Sanchez is reportedly getting razed by his Jets teammates for posing in sexy swimming trunks for a recent issue of *GQ*. (A well-known predecessor of Sanchez's, Joe Namath, caused similar chuckles when he posed in pantyhose for a commercial back in 1974.)

Looking at the ever-rising rate of obesity in America, you'd conclude that most men are not too intimidated by all this exposed flesh. Toby Miller, among others, counters that men are feeling the same pressure as women do to appear fit. He cites skyrocketing rates of eating disorders among men, as well as the rise in use of hair dye, Botox shots, and gym memberships.

Then there is the use of steroids by men, and even teenagers. Books like *Looking Good: Male Body Image in Modern America* and *The Adonis Complex* discuss the beefing up of icons like Batman and G.I. Joe as examples of how society is sending out the message that beefier is better. "There's increasing pressure on the average middle-class man to obsess about his personal appearance," Miller says. "It's not just their saying, 'I want to look good,' but 'The boss says I have to lose weight.' "

Not so long ago, medical companies looked for beauty queens to call on doctors and hospitals. So I was surprised recently when, doing a profile for *Crain's New York Business* on a company that sells surgical equipment, its president told me that he recruits among college athletes. The male sales force routinely works out or plays sports together. Even if they have never seen the photo layout of super-cut-up men working in a machine shop in a recent issue of the (now-defunct) gay magazine *Genre*, these men have fallen under the influence of our pervasive celebration of beefcake.

Meanwhile, gay men—the ones blamed for the whole muscle obsession in the first place—are apparently slimming down. On those same Fire Island boardwalks from which Guy Trebay decried the triumph of the "muscle fascists" in a celebrated *Voice* article back in 1999, the men appear noticeably skinnier. Nate Silver, a brilliant young statistician with a pencil-thin build, has become the new gay icon. Popular gay blog AfterElton calls him "adorkable," while Queerty teased him about his status as a sex symbol. Another

website, Hipster or Gay (hipsterorgay.tumblr.com), equates
Williamsburg geeks with gay chic.

Who knows? Maybe a future photo shoot at the Belvedere will
feature regular guys lounging around the baroque pool in their
BVDs.

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