

Jack Fritscher's American Men by Edward Lucie-Smith

Jack Fritscher has been many things: tenured university professor, novelist, writer of short stories, biographer, magazine editor, maker of more than two hundred erotic videos, chronicler and critic of American pop culture—also (as this book demonstrates) skilled photographer. Many of these activities have been linked to an exploration of eroticism, which is, for Fritscher, an arena of masculine-identified sexuality. His approach is twofold. On the one hand he is the formally trained critic and ethnologist, curious about all aspects of human behaviour. On the other, he is the writer-artist dramatizing a personal vision—the vision expressed for example in his ambitious novel, *Some Dance to Remember*. There, as here in these photographs, his focus is on what he calls “homomascularity”—less the act of sex itself, more a complete state of being.

He sees in the very male males who attract him—bodybuilders, cowboys, cops, men in various kinds of sports gear, men wearing military uniform—ritualized totems of the potent American Dream, taken from his own dream visions, as well as from the dreams of the intense cult following whose tastes he has recorded and reflected for many years on page and screen. He believes that, just as some women now legitimately investigate their own gender, so too many men have become increasingly curious about their own gender identification. In his view, true homomascularity, far from cancelling out the female principle, offers the valid gender balance of male animus that the female anima demands and deserves. He notes that there is in male-to-male sex an underlying current of violence—that sexual relationships between grown-up men, the bulls of the herd, often veer towards displays of brute strength, and even beyond this, to episodes of direct physical competition. He also perceives that this kind of physical competition, these outbursts of destructive energy, are all intrinsic to the nature of American life—part and parcel of what was once, and not so very long ago, a lawless frontier society.

Though Fritscher was in fact one of the early generation of social humanists working on various frontiers of the American conscience—the Civil Rights Movement (beginning in 1961), the Peace Movement (1965), Gay Liberation (1967), these perceptions, feelings and preferences have increasingly tended to get him into hot water with the “politically correct.” The politically correct point of view is that feelings of the kind he

Excerpt source: [Jack Fritscher](#), *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, San Francisco: [Palm Drive Publishing](#), 2008

reflects may, regrettably, exist, but ought not to be represented. Failure to represent such things will eventually, so current doctrine has it, lead to the abolition of what is deplored. There is a sad irony in the fact that the “gay” world, the realm of the queer or homosexual, has no sooner achieved recognition and to a certain extent legitimate status, than it begins to designate forbidden areas within its own territory. Fritscher’s images may be all the more threatening to a certain type of gay puritan because we immediately understand that to him they are familiar territory, not things encountered for the first time and recorded chiefly because they seem bizarre and startling. The late Robert Mapplethorpe once said that there was nothing shown in his own photographs that he hadn’t done himself. Fritscher can say the same, though with a subtly different nuance. A reminder of this is the more relevant because Fritscher and Mapplethorpe were once so closely linked personally, not only as friends but as lovers, protagonists in a stormy bicoastal affair conducted just at the *noir* moment when Mapplethorpe was rising to the first peak of his reputation. It was Fritscher who commissioned Mapplethorpe to produce his first magazine cover, and who at the same time introduced him to the West Coast leather scene. This cover was done in 1977 for the San Francisco-based leather magazine *Drummer*, which Fritscher was then editing. Fritscher not only drew the design for it, but provided the model, Elliot Siegal, who then became a frequent model for Mapplethorpe.

Knowing this, one might look at Fritscher’s photographs expecting to find some trace of Mapplethorpe’s influence, though his own early photographic images were published when he was just eighteen, twenty years before he and Mapplethorpe encountered one another. In fact their approach is very different. Mapplethorpe’s most typical photographs are calculated, coolly staged, Deco artifacts where the subjects become objects, deprived of nearly all personality, frozen by the icy stare of the lens. Fritscher’s work is, by contrast, informal, candid, a product of the desire to seize and fix some epiphany, some magic moment, rather than to construct a particular pattern which already pre-exists in the photographer’s imagination. Some images are the result of Fritscher’s involvement with gay magazines and with video. These portray men who one time or another have been gay icons, and often show them at their most overtly sexual. Thus, there is a fine series of nudes of Donnie Russo, the ultra-macho star of a whole series of recent erotic videos, among them four made by Fritscher himself in collaboration with his partner Mark Hemry. Russo has a sexual electricity. Fritscher speaks of Russo’s “priapism” — which accounts for his impacting still photographs as well as video. Photographing this phenomenon (the kind of fully independent personality Mapplethorpe usually seems to have avoided in his sexually

Excerpt source: [Jack Fritscher, *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 2008](#)

oriented work) Fritscher seems to regard himself, not as someone who is imposing a stereotype, but as a collaborator with his subject. They are working together one behind the camera, and one in front of it, to focus a particular set of qualities and characteristics, and give them their full effect. The same can be said of another photograph, which is a full-length nude of Val Martin, star of the mid-70s S&M classic, *Born to Raise Hell*. “We’re all motor-driven hacks compared with Robert as a photographer,” Fritscher has said, “but at least I’m not going to end up photographing lilies and leaves because I’m afraid, as Robert grew to be, of having somebody look back at me from the other side of the lens.”

Many of his photographs, in fact, are true candid, shot in public places, where the model or subject’s sexual preference remains deliberately indeterminate. Fritscher often shoots on location, from the hip, and on the run. “I dare to stalk public events,” he claims, “lying in wait for that magic moment when some man in a crowd looks directly at my raised camera and focuses on my lens with a “look,” a precise narrowing of the eyes, a look of bonding, superiority, surrender, even contempt. Any passion will do! Sexual inferences are drawn only because of my attitudes, as expressed in the photographs, and because of my gender. If I signed a woman’s name to these images they would be regarded very differently.” With Fritscher there is in fact no absolutely impermeable barrier between reality and erotic fantasy. There are certain kinds of activity which obsess him—bodybuilding, weightlifting, boxing, wrestling—because they seem to sum up the essence of masculinity, and also because they allow free rein to the kind of male narcissism which attracts him. He is always aware that the voyeur, in this case the man with the still camera or the video camera, often fulfills the needs of the one who is observed, that the transaction, far from being one sided, is fully reciprocal. He feels that many of the photographs taken in these circumstances—those of bodybuilders posing in contests or on the boardwalk at Venice Beach are just as erotically charged as those which are more overtly sexual. Even more charged, he might claim, because the relationship between the one who views and the one who is viewed is more complex and ambiguous than it is in circumstances where the sexual element is fully spelt out.

Fritscher admits, however, that the men he stalks in public invariably carry with them a strong sexual aura—and that this is the very aura which he is also trying to project when he photographs models in his studio. A case in point is the image of celebrated American bodybuilder Chris Duffy wearing a tartan necktie. Here the model, far from being unaware of the camera, is working in collaboration with the photographer to project a particular image of himself. Even here, however, there are things the model cannot fully know. From start to finish of a shoot of

Excerpt source: [Jack Fritscher, *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer, San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 2008*](#)

this type, Fritscher is trying to peel away the masks his subject wears. The masculine self is revealed as well as the carefully constructed masculine image which both reinforces and partly conceals it. This unveiled process of co-creation is especially evident in Fritscher's photographs of his long-time collaborator, the multi-titled bodybuilder Jim Enger. Enger takes on many guises—he is seen laughing disarmingly, but also as the straight Mr. Iron Man which he was on the physique contest stage. Fritscher here, as in much of his work, both fictional and photographic, exerts a certain suspension of disbelief from the reader or viewer. There is a narrative present, but is it real or is it made up? Another case in point, but this time coming from the other, or “documentary” direction, is the superb image of a shirtless cowboy climbing a fence. Is this pure documentary, or posed erotic choreography? One's imagination is led by the startled look on the face of the young man behind and to the left of the subject.

The narrative element in the photographs is reinforced in some cases by the fact that many were originally shot as stills during video features cast and directed by Fritscher, and produced and distributed by Mark Hemry, for their boutique studio, Palm Drive Video, founded in 1984. Some scenes are obvious fantasies, but the images nevertheless remain portraits to the same extent as the fantasy shots of celebrities made by Annie Leibowitz. They look, just as Leibowitz's portraits do, in two directions: towards the fantasies of the subjects themselves, and towards the expectations (therefore also the fantasies) of the audience. Examples are the goggled truck mechanic in “Hand Gun,” the cowboy in “Last Cigar,” with hangman's noose around his neck, and the prison bondage, and medical fantasies. These resemble Leibowitz's work, but also have a kinship with the operatic extremism of Joel-Peter Witkin. In photographs of this type one is conscious that the line is blurred between fact and fiction, just as it is in Truman Capote's “faction,” *In Cold Blood*, and in Woody Allen's film, *Zelig*. On occasion, the boundary between art and life dissolves altogether. “Bound and Hooded,” taken in August 1979, is a vérité play shot of Larry Hunt, obviously made with the model's consent and cooperation. Hunt later modelled formally for Robert Mapplethorpe. Later, in the 1980s, he was abducted from a Los Angeles leather bar. His fate was deduced from a single relic: a human jawbone, identifiable from dental records, which turned up long after his disappearance in Griffith Park in L.A. Fritscher's photograph perhaps prophesies some aspects of fate regarding the vulnerability of the subject, but artists are hardly causally responsible for any coincidence of murderous events which take place after their images were made.

In a broader sense, the fact/fiction blur is one of the most important aspects of Fritscher's work, and part of his truly original contribution

Excerpt source: [Jack Fritscher](#), *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, San Francisco: [Palm Drive Publishing](#), 2008

to gay photography. With him, there is no absolutely impermeable barrier between asexual reality and erotic fantasy. There are pictures here where there is no specific element of sexual display not even of the rather generalized sort which can be found in images of bodybuilders posing for the camera. Examples are the power-lifter, a competitor in the Police Olympics, or the men in a kilt throwing the hammer. Here the element of collaboration with the photographer may be presumed to be missing. The image is, in each case, the product of a single, fortunate never-to-be-repeated moment. It tells us nothing about the sexuality of the subject, but much about the image-maker's own reactions to the world which surrounds him—the things he is attuned to, and is likely to notice and record. In "Butch: Hell's Angels," for instance, Fritscher makes masculinity itself a fetish. There are pictures which revel in the ordinary sweat of life which is, by some twist of photographic magic, made special and extraordinary. Fritscher's eye constantly perceives the world erotically. Guided by that eye, his camera picks out the ripe erotic sub-text which might otherwise remain unnoticed.

This, therefore, can be thought of as a book whose images are held together by an argument, or rather by a whole series of arguments, expressed through images rather than through words, about the nature of masculinity, and of male sexuality, within the wider framework of American society. It is, for example, about the way in which men present themselves sexually to the camera when they know they are being observed. Over the years, a whole series of conventions have been created, which are used when women present themselves in this fashion. The tendency in gay male photography has often been to adapt these for use with the male body—hence innumerable versions of the *Playgirl* male nude, languorous and passively provocative. Fritscher knows that this pictorial grammar runs contrary to his purposes. He knows, too, that poses and pictorial conventions taken over from Greco-Roman statuary, beloved by quite a number of photographers working in this field, have a distancing effect, when what he wants to give is the *closeness* of the male, the scent and presence of masculinity, like a hunter stumbling upon a tiger in its jungle lair. There are photographs here which go well beyond the boundaries of established conventions of male eroticism—frames captured from the flux of time, single never-to-be-repeated moments: a boxer taking a punch, a young father who drove his car off the road, a biker bloodied in a skid. Again, such photos tell us nothing about the sexuality of the subject, but much about the image-maker, especially when placed within this particular context. It is Fritscher's overall vision which makes them erotically charged.

Excerpt source: [Jack Fritscher, *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 2008](#)

“My portraits,” Fritscher once wrote, “define a certain kind of man in stasis and motion, in joy and pain, in the mutuality of sports and sex. Each is a single frame from an otherwise invisible movie. These are traditionally masculine men. Period. If one insists on politics, they are culturally traditional men surviving gender abuse in an age that trashes the legitimate male ethos. Found mostly on the streets, at construction sites, and at athletic events, these men—that is, their images—are presented without apology to provide comfort and joy to men and women who prefer masculine men in the best sense where power is not power over others, but is power in the disciplined control of oneself. Let me be quite clear. None of these images is pornographic. Pornography is wanting to control the object. Erotic art is loving the subject you want to behold, not possess. I’m very clear with these guys about keeping things pure. Few of these men actually ‘posed’ for the camera. Even when they were fully aware of its presence, they maintained their integrity without acting. That is precisely what I strive for. These are simply men, hopefully archetypic, celebrating masculine rites—of sport or sensuality, often mano-a-mano, offering themselves declaratively as athletes, adventurers, icons, saints, victims, survivors, and heroes, with the frailties and strengths to which all humans, regardless of gender, are heir.”

His work is not about men having sex with other men. It is about men exhibiting a sense of their masculine selves. Just for a moment, they are releasing the full power of their masculine natures. For Fritscher, a born observer and (as perhaps he would admit) a born voyeur, these images are irrefutable evidence of things which are latent in most men, and which, when the right moment comes, can he made to imprint themselves indelibly on a photographic negative, for everyone to see.

Edward Lucie-Smith is a British writer, poet, art critic, photographer, curator, and author of international exhibition catalogues who has served in the Royal Air Force (RAF) and as a member of the art and literature panels of the Arts Council of Great Britain. Known from his broadcasting on the BBC and for his more than one hundred books on art, he is the world’s most prolific and best-selling writer on art, art history, and sexuality and art. His major books may be represented by *Movements in Art Since 1945*, *Sexuality in Western Art*, *20th Century Latin American Art*, *Ars Erotica*, and *Race, Sex, and Gender*. His photography, as published in his solo coffee-table book, *Flesh and Stone*, is currently in exhibitions around the world, and his book of poems, *Changing Shape*, was published in 2002. In 2006, the Tom of Finland Foundation acknowledged him as writer and photographer with its “Lifetime Achievement Award.” During

Excerpt source: [Jack Fritscher](#), *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, San Francisco: [Palm Drive Publishing](#), 2008

his forays to the United States, where he frequently resides in the New Mexico salon of painter Delmas Howe, he has written the introductory essays to two homomasculine photography books, Chris Nelson's *The Bear Cult* (1992) and *Jack Fritscher's American Men* (1996) from which the introduction is reprinted. In 1992, he was interviewed as an eyewitness by Jack Fritscher for the book *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera*. Living internationally on planes, between galleries and lecture halls in Boston and Beirut, Dubai and Beijing, he calls London home.

"Edward Lucie-Smith," Fritscher-Hemry House, 2001. Photograph by Jack Fritscher.
©Jack Fritscher.

Eyewitness
Illustration

Three book covers of Lucie-Smith titles: *Flesh & Stone*, *Race, Sex and Gender*, and *Sexuality in Western Art*.



Cover, *Jack Fritscher's American Men*, 55 photographs, 1995, Gay Men's Press, London. The collection in *American Men* reveals Fritscher's depth-perception of *Drummer*. The British publisher originally planned to print a full-color cover dramatizing the model "Goliath" in his red-and-white wrestling tights against the blue sky, wearing boxing gear to characterize American aggression astride the world. In the 1990s when former *Drummer* editor Joseph W. Bean, and Alex Wagner, were editors creating various "Virtual *Drummer*" magazines at Brush Creek Media, they did justice to the original color of this photograph on the cover of *Powerplay* 10 (May 1996). One of Fritscher's most frequent models over a period of twelve years, "Goliath" also appeared twice in *Drummer* 140 (June 1990), as the centerfold in *Drummer* 148 (April 1991), and, favorited, on the cover of *Drummer* publisher Anthony DeBlase's "Virtual *Drummer*," *Dungeon-Master* 47 (January 1994), and Harold Cox's *Checkmate Incorporating DungeonMaster* 18 (February 1997). Photograph by Jack Fritscher. ©Jack Fritscher

Excerpt source: [Jack Fritscher](#), *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, San Francisco: [Palm Drive Publishing](#), 2008

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“Donnie Russo,” Palm Drive Video, 1993. Jack Fritscher shot three feature videos of Donnie Russo and photographed him as “I, Priapus” for *American Men* as well as for the cover and centerfold of *Drummer* 170 (December 1993), for the cover of the first issue of Dave Rhodes’ spinoff magazine from *The Leather Journal, Eagle* (July 1996), and for Scott O’Hara’s *Steam* magazine (1996). Photograph by Jack Fritscher. ©Jack Fritscher

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“Mickey Squires, Roadside Diner,” Palm Drive Video, 1992. Jack Fritscher shot Colt model Mickey Squires (Richard Bernstein) in a Palm Drive Video feature, and posed him for this *American Men* photograph at the San Francisco home of Bob Cato who was sent to prison for crashing his van into the taxi carrying elderly actresses Mary Martin and Janet Gaynor. In the zero degrees of incestuous separation in eyewitness Fritscher’s *Drummer* salon, Squires was also lensed in Super-8 footage by LA photographer and bodybuilding champion Jim Enger who in the mid-1970s (before Enger partnered with Fritscher) was the partner of the wildly famous Colt model and former LAPD cop Clint Lockner who several times co-starred in front of a camera with Squires. Mickey Squires was a favorite cover and centerfold in *Drummer* publications and in magazines imitating *Drummer*. Photograph by Jack Fritscher. ©Jack Fritscher

Excerpt source: [Jack Fritscher](#), *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, San Francisco: [Palm Drive Publishing](#), 2008

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“Chris Duffy aka Bull Stanton,” Palm Drive Video, 1995. Jack Fritscher and Mark Henry used three cameras filming international bodybuilding superstar Chris Duffy in the video feature, *Sunset Bull*. In a series of photographs, Jack Fritscher shot Chris Duffy for *American Men*, for the three covers of *Thrust* (November 1996), *International Leatherman* (March 1997), and *Bear 62* (September 2000), and for the cover of the third edition of *Corporal in Charge of Taking Care of Captain O'Malley and Other Stories* (2000). Former *Drummer* publisher John Embry also chose eight of the Fritscher shots of Chris Duffy for interior display in his “Virtual *Drummer*” magazine *Manhood Rituals 2* (1998), and *Manhood Rituals 3* (1999). Photograph by Jack Fritscher. ©Jack Fritscher

Excerpt source: [Jack Fritscher](#), *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, San Francisco: [Palm Drive Publishing](#), 2008

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“Steve Thrasher,” Palm Drive Video, 1987. Jack Fritscher photographed the straight construction worker, actually named Steve Thrasher, for two video features. Thrasher was an ongoing favorite of Fritscher who shot him for two photographs in *American Men* and for the cover of *Drummer* publisher Anthony DeBlase’s *DungeonMaster 47* (January 1994), as well as for the cover of the James Purdy novel, *Empty Rooms*. In the salon around *Drummer*, Anthony DeBlase who became publisher of *Drummer* on August 22, 1986, retained Fritscher as an ongoing advisor and contributor listed on the masthead. Photograph by Jack Fritscher. ©Jack Fritscher

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“Road Warrior: Bob Hayn,” Palm Drive Video, 1987. Published in *American Men* and as one of a portfolio of potential *Drummer* covers. Photograph by Jack Fritscher. ©Jack Fritscher

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“Steve Thrasher,” Palm Drive Video, 1987. Cover photograph of Steve Thrasher cast as the Appalachian “Renderer” for the Gay Men’s Press British edition of James Purdy’s novel *Empty Rooms* which dying director Derek Jarman had planned to film. Photograph by Jack Fritscher. ©Jack Fritscher

“Mike Jacob,” Palm Drive Video, 1995. Shot during the filming of *My Nephew, My Lover* at Palm Drive Video. Mike Jacob of Germany appeared in Fritscher photographs in Joseph W. Bean’s book *International Mr. Leather: 25 Years of Champions* published by the Leather Archives & Museum, Chicago, and in *American Men*. Photograph by Jack Fritscher. ©Jack Fritscher. When Fritscher began importing national and international leather culture into *Drummer*, he chose Chuck Renslow’s Chicago leather values over Los Angeles leather-bar culture where publisher John Embry had started up *Drummer*.

Excerpt source: [Jack Fritscher, *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 2008](#)