

California College of the Arts

**The Male Nude During the Cold War:**

**An essay on Minor White**

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Bachelor of Arts in Visual Studies

By

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## ABSTRACT

While a student at Evergreen in Olympia, Washington, I learned about the female nude from an art history program. Upon leaving Evergreen, I began to wonder what the male nude's place was in the Western world, as well as how it compared and contrasted to the female counterpart.

While the female nude has a striking presence in art, advertising, and media, I began to notice that the male version is loud and often seen as an aggressive object. This thesis takes the broad subject of the male nude and narrows it down to photographer Minor White. White produced a series of nude photographs of a male model named Tom Murphy. In the photographs, Murphy appears tender. However, there is an unsettling quality to Murphy's appearance that is magnified by White's secrecy of both his work and homosexuality. The first Murphy photographs did not make it into an exhibition until over a decade after White's death. This thesis attempts to uncover the secrecy through visual analysis and questioning what White could have become if the Murphy photographs were made public sooner. This thesis is also an attempt to scrutinize the social conventions of the United States that influence human sexuality and their presence in fine art.

The United States is a nation with a man problem. The ways in which men assume, hold, and power has become the subject of debate, scorn, and relentless polarization. In an era in which “toxic masculinity” and “patriarchy” have become a buzz-phrases, we must deeply examine as a society where and how this type of behavior is overtly and covertly allowed. Although the art world has shed light on the detrimental effects of patriarchy on women and the LGBTQ community, very little is often discussed by men — including male-identifying persons — regarding how men can hurt other men. What is more, the male body has historically been an object of war, rather than an object of tenderness. In other words, certain discourses of the male body hold sway and priority over others. Discourses that glorify men as invincible, and thus dispensable, are rewarded, whereas discourses that show tenderness and reflection are culturally dismissed and discouraged. One way of understanding this phenomenon is to examine the work of Minor White. White produced a series of nude photographs during the early years of the Cold War that were not made public and shown in exhibitions until after his death. I believe this because patriarchy and the concept of “toxic masculinity” would have greatly impacted White during his lifetime.

The Getty Center in 2014 mounted a retrospective titled *Manifestations of the Spirit* that featured the work of White. Although White was well-known enough to have a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art twenty-five-years prior, one subject wasn't seen in great detail in New York, compared to the later exhibition in Los Angeles. From the early the 40s, White photographed a series of men nude. One of those men was a fellow by the name of Tom Murphy, whom White met during employment with the California School of Fine Arts, now San

Francisco Art Institute.<sup>1</sup> By the time White began to teach at CSFA, World War II had ended, while the Cold War was heating up. In this period, White took photographs of Tom Murphy and compiled them into a series titled *The Temptation of St. Anthony Is Mirrors*. The reason he gave the series a name with a saint is elusive, as White held an ambivalent relationship with religion. The reason for the word “temptation,” as noted by Martineau, likely stems from that the photos of Murphy evoking complex feelings for White.<sup>2</sup> The “mirrors” came from the fact that White believed that photographs he took were mirrors of himself.

Paul Martineau, in the catalog accompanying the 2014 retrospective at the Getty, notes that White believed that the photographs he took were reflections of himself.<sup>3</sup> White would not have been able to show how a nude male was a reflection of himself publicly during his lifetime. However, White did explain the significance of the photograph he took of natural and found subjects. He wrote, “Photographs of rocks, water, hands, peeling paint or weathered fences consent to mirror my own inner occasions. Hence, in photographing things for what else they are, I can go either towards myself or away from myself.”<sup>4</sup> Photographing objects such as rocks (fig. 1) and water (fig. 2) became the prints that gave White his trademark. Even though the nudes were not exhibited until after his death, it is apparent that White considered the male body to be beautiful in the way rocks or water are. The nude male form is a more complex subject, with a much greater degree of symbolism. Furthermore, spectators’ preconceptions of men and masculinity can determine how the nude will be interpreted. This can be extended to other men,

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Martineau, *Minor White: Manifestations of the Spirit* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2014), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Martineau, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Martineau, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Bunnell, *Minor White: The Eye That Shapes* (Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1989), 36.

nude or clothed, that White photographed. All of these issues apply to the *St. Anthony* series. The Getty museum catalog also states that with the *St. Anthony Is Mirrors* series, White drew upon the inspiration of the Ancient Greeks.<sup>5</sup> Given that his work mimics sculpture by Michelangelo, he also drew from artists of the Florentine Renaissance. Upon examination of the *St. Anthony* series, he did so by mimicking the gestures and stances of works from the eras of respective works. Examples include Michelangelo's *David* and Polykleitos the Elder's *Doryphoros from Pompeii*. Both sculptures have specific gestures that include a tilted abdomen and head, and a bent knee and arm.

A photograph not included in the nude series, but offering an introduction to White's project, is titled *Tom Murphy, San Mateo County* (fig. 3). This photograph is likely the first in which White shows his affection for Murphy. In this image, Murphy is looking off into an area outside the frame. The contrast of the image is extremely high, with all subjects in full focus, with Murphy no exception. Murphy is looking away from the spectator. Murphy is sited in a landscape, a natural setting. Murphy's expression in the photograph is perplexing. He appears relaxed, on one hand. However, his two thumbs against the belt buckles give the impression that he is tense. Fascinatingly enough, the tire tracks in the background leading upwards toward the moon create a form of photographic drama. There is something about Murphy's posture that's difficult to understand and resolve, though it is not apparent at first glance. The dirt road that leads off into the horizon signifies creates the suspense that someone may intrude upon the poignant moment that White is trying to build. There is a difference between the affection that White is attempting to convey, versus the tension in the gestures that Murphy makes. Murphy looks extremely delicate and well-choreographed. Murphy's blank stare and posture suggest he

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<sup>5</sup> Martineau, 8.

is already functioning as a “mirror” of White’s feelings, but it does not offer much insight into the intimate way they would go on to work together, creating the sequence of nudes that would follow.

The first *Tom Murphy* photograph in *The Temptation of St. Anthony Is Mirrors* series (fig. 4) is of Murphy nude. There are two driftwood logs, one of which he is standing on with his right foot. The head to hip, including the genitals, are well lit. The legs are partially lit, with prominent shadows on the right calf and left thigh. As with the *San Mateo County* photograph, Murphy appears well-defined. When considering the *San Mateo County* photograph to the first image of the *St. Anthony* series, White appears to steer his work in an extreme direction. In a short period of time, Murphy goes from being clothed on a landscape to nude in a studio.

When viewing the complete set of the Murphy photographs, it is apparent that White was holding what appears to be an intense secret: his homosexuality. He created a psychic retreat within his work and studio. This psychic retreat can be thought of as a means of working out his reality, or reflection, in his work. For White, the psychic retreat is within the closet. Just as closets hide clothes —objects of personal expression — and are tucked away in corners of rooms and living spaces, White hid away his own gifts of expression. In this way, the spectator can think of the work as expressing a subject with mystical qualities, rather than as a symptom of oppressive social conventions on sexuality. The mystical qualities, as Murphy shows us, derive from White’s exploration of the Ancient Roman and Florentine Renaissance artistic techniques that greatly influenced him. One quality in particular that is apparent in his work is *contrapposto*, which is an art history term that translates from Italian to English as ‘counterpoise.’ Defining the term in his book *100 Ideas that Changed Art*, British art historian Michael Bird writes, “The development of classic *contrapposto* revolutionized the way

sculptures could represent the human figure.”<sup>6</sup> *Contrapposto* can famously be seen in Michelangelo’s *David* (fig. 5) or in Polykleitos’ *Doryphoros* sculpture (fig. 6). Fascinatingly enough, at the end of his life, White was disillusioned with Catholicism. He speaks of the Catholicism, “When I got home, I went to a Catholic church ... and I kind of wondered what happened to what’s supposed to go on here. I couldn’t make contact with the essence of it. So I just stopped going.”<sup>7</sup> Although he may have stopped going to Catholic mass, he deliberately developed other avenues for spiritual contact and expression through his photography.

When interpreting White’s use of classical devices in the nude photographs of Murphy, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* by postmodern critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau offers a useful insight. Solomon-Godeau argues, “The classical [era] codes regulating the depiction of the male body as they were codified by the end of the eighteenth century insistently suggest a repressive operation marshalled to keep at bay the body’s Other; the leaking, excessive, boundary-breaking specter of the grotesque.”<sup>8</sup> This repressive operation has been passed down through the ages, also shaping works of the twentieth century. The reason for this goes back to the description Solomon-Godeau gives on the Other. Similar to how White was himself the Other as a homosexual, works of the male nude were also held in low esteem in the United States at the time. Martineau writes that it was illegal to publish or exhibit works of the male nude in the United States during the time that the Murphy photographs were taken.<sup>9</sup> White appears to have appropriated the nude and *contrapposto* as a means of self-discovery, while also working

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Bird, *100 Ideas that Changed Art* (London: Lawrence King Publishing, 2012), 28.

<sup>7</sup> James Danziger and Burnaby Conrad III, *Interviews with Master Photographers* (New York: Paddington Press Limited, 1977), 19-20.

<sup>8</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 192.

<sup>9</sup> Martineau, 8.

with ideas that would have held little interest with the public, given the cultural meaning of sensuality at the time. Solomon-Godeau's argument of the "boundary-breaking specter of the grotesque" is how the spectator of the 40s and 50s would have reacted to White's work. She continues to argue further,

Within the homosocial and homosexual (visual) codes of the fifth-century Athenian culture, for example, the ideal male nude was an acknowledged object of sensual desire and pleasure, whereas in post-classical culture and within the constraints and proscriptions of post-classical morality, masculine sexual investment in the body was necessarily disavowed.<sup>10</sup>

"Post-classical morality" was deeply apart of the cohort that White was apart of. Consequently, the nudes of Murphy are a means of discovering sensual desire and pleasure, as described by Solomon-Godeau, in a world where sex itself is seen as a grotesque act. Since White's photographs will be misconstrued as grotesque, his work becomes closeted much in the same manner that he is.

In understanding how White drew on the classical ideal of the male nude to resist discourses of degeneracy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ways in which White bends the meaning of the closet become even more apparent. The closet, as a metaphorical site where White composes his risqué photographs, isn't a place to hide in the name of shame. The closet, as the spectator sees it, can be thought of as a means of cultivation. The museum catalogue for the Getty Center's

*Manifestations of the Spirit* exhibition confirms this. Paul Martineau writes,

In a particularly intense period of creative activity between 1948 and 1950, White produced three sequences expressing his love and sexual feelings for men. Intent on using the camera as a tool for self-discovery, White believed that all his pictures were mirrors of himself; hence the unusual title of the first sequence, *The Temptation of St. Anthony is Mirrors*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Solomon-Godeau, 193.

<sup>11</sup> Martineau, 8.

Number 23 of the *St. Anthony* series (fig. 7) is an example of a photograph where White both discovers the self, and paradigmatically adorns the closet in counterpoint to the sexually-repressed narratives of the time. This is evident in the birdlike gesture in the number 23 photo that Murphy makes with his arms, as well as his physique. In an interview with James Danziger and Burnaby Conrad III in 1976, White stressed the importance of slowing down when both taking and viewing photographs. White argued, “You just get everything else out of the way of your concentration, and you come into it as free as possible of all the things you were just thinking about.”<sup>12</sup> When examining *The Temptation of St. Anthony* series, with the backdrop of how he concentrates, it is impossible to turn attention away from the fact Murphy is a dense signifier of contemplation for White. Although White spent his whole life in the closet, he also, on the other hand, had a deep understanding of art history and nature. Murphy thus appears, not only as an object of desire that White cannot have but also as the personification of nature and history. White channeled that silence was through a theory he called “Equivalence.”<sup>13</sup> In particular, White describes how the photographs of master photographer Alfred Stieglitz pioneered the theory. White describes Stieglitz’s photographic style by explaining,

In the early 1920’s pictures by Stieglitz began to appear that were the forerunners of what he later entitled “equivalents” ... When serious laymen asked what he meant by the term he would illustrate, for example, how he materialized his feelings about a person with a photograph of a cloud. An accurate photographic rendering of a certain cloud, he would say, could be a portrait—an Expressionistic portrait in which the features could not be identified yet which would still be evocative of the person’s uniqueness as known by Stieglitz—not precisely, because a cloud is not a person—but equivalent.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Danziger and Conrad, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Danziger and Conrad, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Minor White, “The Light Sensitive Image, in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, ed. Vicki Goldberg (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 395.

Like Stieglitz (fig. 8), White composed photographs in which he took an idea — a swan or other species of bird in this case — and choreographed Murphy to appear as its equivalent. Yet there is more to Murphy than appearing as a bird. In interpreting how he appears, the spectator *feels* him doing so.

How the spectator receives the appearance of Murphy, as well as the feelings and emotions which White articulated the photographs, is dependent on how the spectator views homosexuality. There is an edgy quality of the Murphy photographs given that White puts himself at risk and could easily find himself dealing with a calamitous circumstance from outside the protected confines of the closet. This risk is portrayed deeply in the nineteenth image of the series. In the image, Murphy touches the upper part of his chest with his left hand. While with his right hand, he touches his abdomen. When viewing number 19 from *St. Anthony* (fig. 9), in comparison with number 23, it becomes obvious that the allegory of the swan is just one manner in which White choreographs Murphy as a sensual and sentient being. When taken literally, number 19 can be interpreted as sexually explicit. However, in a mythological sense, the image can be thought as rebellious, particularly given the *contrapposto* and nudity. The era in which White lived was simply a time when men simply were not supposed to touch themselves, as Murphy does in number 19. White took the Murphy photographs at a time when his aesthetic style was too effeminate for a man of his time to portray. White may not have rebelled publicly with this work. However, in a subtle way, he makes clear that the legacy of the ancient Romans and Renaissance offer more expansive notions of sexuality, gender, and beauty than their narrow interpretation in the Cold War United States would have allowed.

The final image takes a detour from White's studio as a personified closet and Murphy as an object of sexual secrecy. In this image, Murphy is well dressed and smiling in a well-

composed photograph. His face fits within the top-and-middle-center of a rule of thirds grid. Though Murphy is looking down in this final image of *St. Anthony* series, as he does the *San Mateo County* image, he appears to become a stable and content subject. It is impossible to see calm in the *San Mateo County* photograph. Although White has choreographed Murphy to appear beautiful in the nudes, there is a tacit and unexplainable aura of discomfort that can be harrowing to look at. The uncomfortable aura somehow dissolves in number 32 (fig. 10).

Why did White hide these photos for so long? After all, if he could work alongside Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams — iconic, household names — why did he suppress his own best work to the grave? Although he was in the closet and the artistic conventions he appropriated were not necessarily “homosexual” ones, both the art world and spectators at a museum would have received a great deal of insight from his work.

Two factors must be considered. In the catalog accompanying *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, art historian Jonathan Katz writes about the artistic response that resulted from the stigmatization of homosexuality after World War II. He argues, “As the Cold War continued its chill, and ‘the homosexual’ was transformed from harmless aesthete or mannish invert into an increasingly dangerous security risk ... built-in deniability was increasingly instrumental.”<sup>15</sup> Since White was the poster child for the Cold War-era security risk, he was shunted from presenting work that he was passionate about. Since his work would have been risky to show for “straight” persons with strong morals, there was no way to exhibit, much less discuss his interests. Why did these spectators with impenetrable morals need “protection” from a nude, natural, and arguably harmless male form? The answer comes down

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan D. Katz and David C. Ward, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington, District of Columbia: Smithsonian Institution, 2010), 33-34.

to how patriarchy played out during White's time, as well as our time today. There are many ways to define patriarchy. Focusing specifically, Jungian psychologists Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette — in the introduction to their book *King, Magician, Warrior, Lover* — discuss what patriarchy means beyond the clichés and sarcasm that are typically associated with the word. They argue that patriarchy is an equal attack on the totalities of both masculinity and femininity. Most importantly, they argue, “Patriarchy is based on fear—the boy’s fear, the immature masculine’s fear—of women, to be sure, but also fear of men. Boys fear women. They also fear real men.”<sup>16</sup> Patriarchy is the reason Minor White, though he had so much potential in this field, suppressed his work from being made public. The fear of being seen a “dangerous security risk” kept him from exhibiting a point of view about manhood that the United States during the Cold War era desperately needed to witness. What’s more, even if White did exhibit this kind of work, as Moore and Gillette suggest, he would have been ostracized. This is not solely a gay or a straight issue, and it has real consequences beyond the art world. We can see this in how it took 13 years before one of White’s nude photos was shown publicly, in the MoMA exhibition. This was 13 years too long. If social conventions are continually perpetuated where the male body is seen as “dangerous,” then discourses that express men as tender and sensitive will be shut down. Given what’s in the news these days, discourses that encourage rethinking masculinity to include the tender and sensitive males are ones that desperately need just as much airtime — if not more — than the dangerous ones. No one is invincible and not every man is meant to fight. Therefore, it is important that the art world lead the way by creating work beyond the modes that confirm violence and contempt of the Other.

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, *King, Magician, Warrior, Lover* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), xvii.

## FIGURES

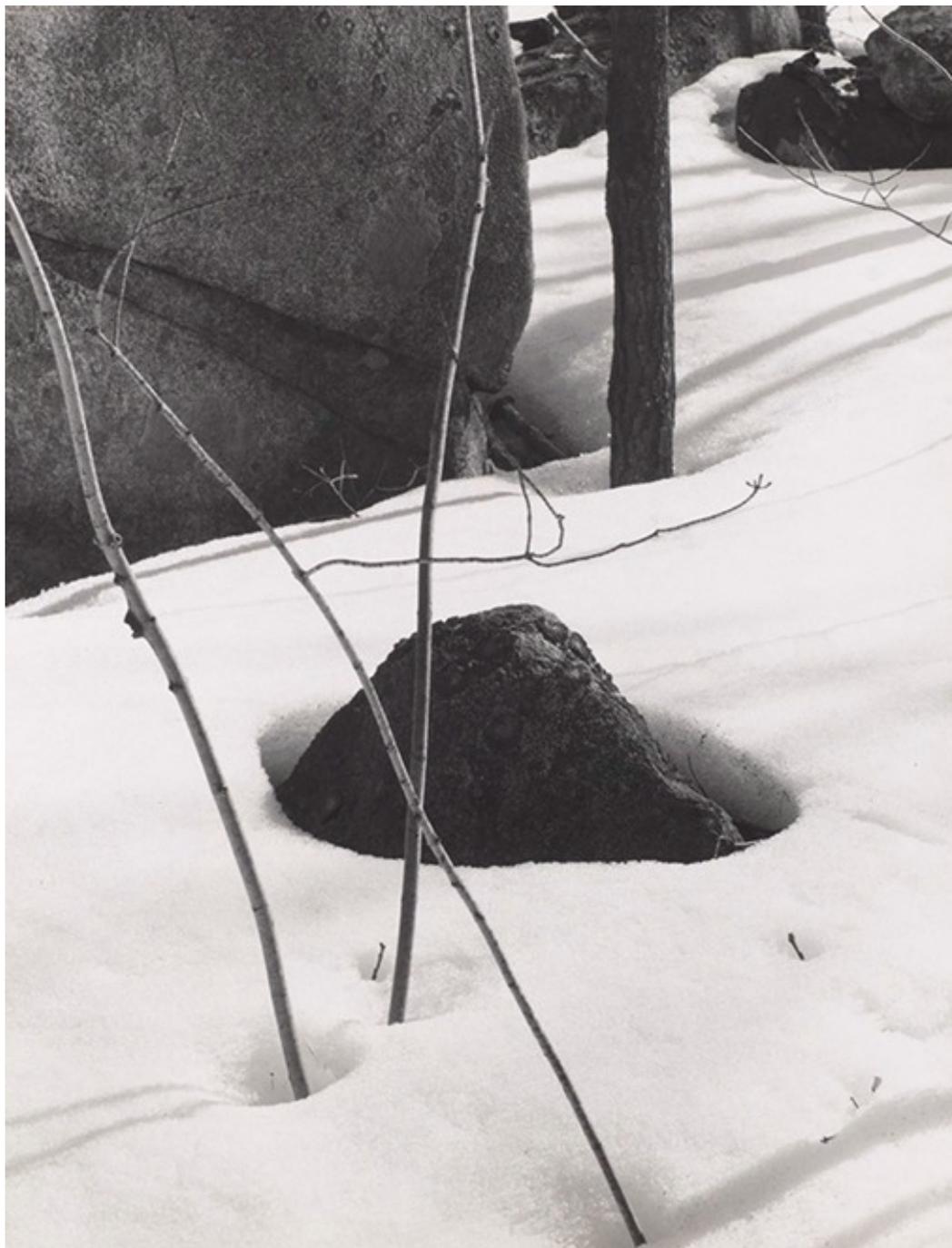


Figure 1. Minor White, *Gloucester, Massachusetts*, 1967



Figure 2. Minor White, *Lincoln, Vermont*, 1971



Figure 3. *Tom Murphy, San Mateo County, California, 1947*

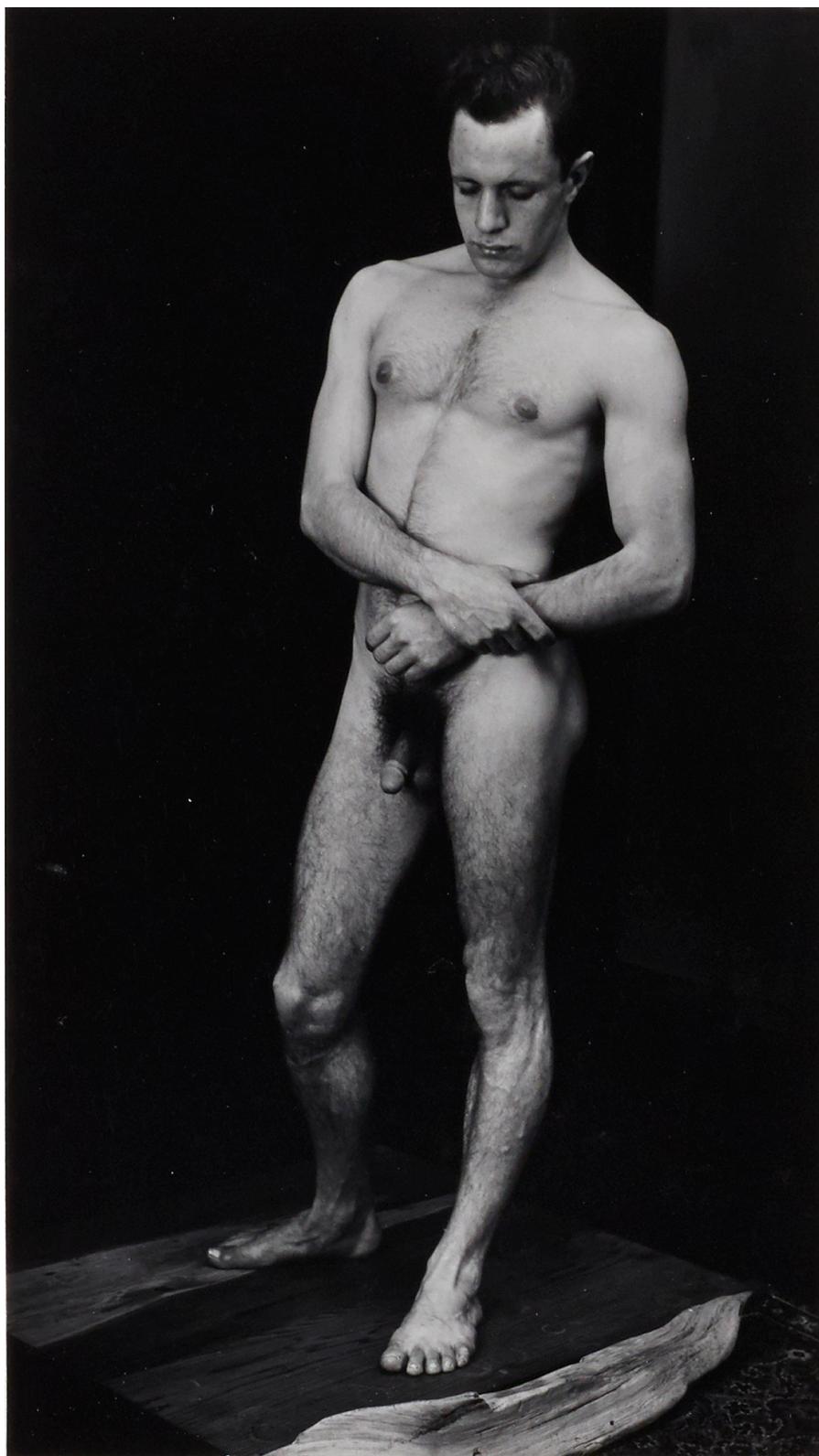


Figure 4. *Tom Murphy, San Francisco, 1947*  
No. 1 from *The Temptation of St. Anthony Is Mirrors*, sequenced 1948



Figure 5. Michelangelo, *David*, 1501-1504



Figure 6.  
Polykleitos the Elder, Copy of *Doryphoros from Pompeii*, 1<sup>st</sup> century BC — 1<sup>st</sup> century AD

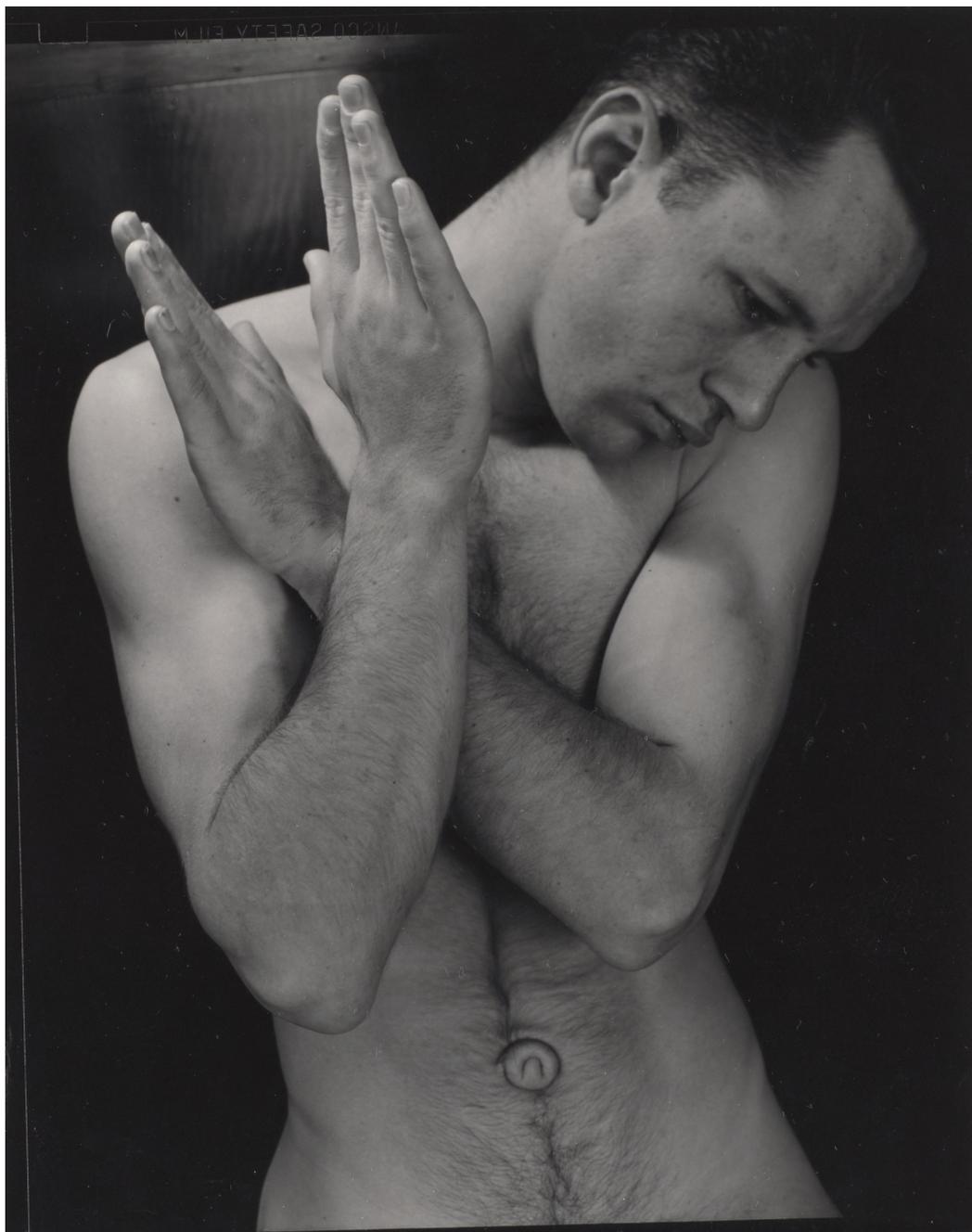


Figure 7. *Tom Murphy, San Francisco, 1948*  
No. 23 from *The Temptation of St. Anthony Is Mirrors*, sequenced 1948



Figure 8. Alfred Stieglitz, *Equivalent*, 1926



Figure 9. *Tom Murphy, San Francisco, 1948*  
No. 19 from *The Temptation of St. Anthony Is Mirrors*, sequenced 1948



Figure 10. *Tom Murphy, San Francisco, 1948*  
No. 32 from *The Temptation of St. Anthony Is Mirrors*, sequenced 1948

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