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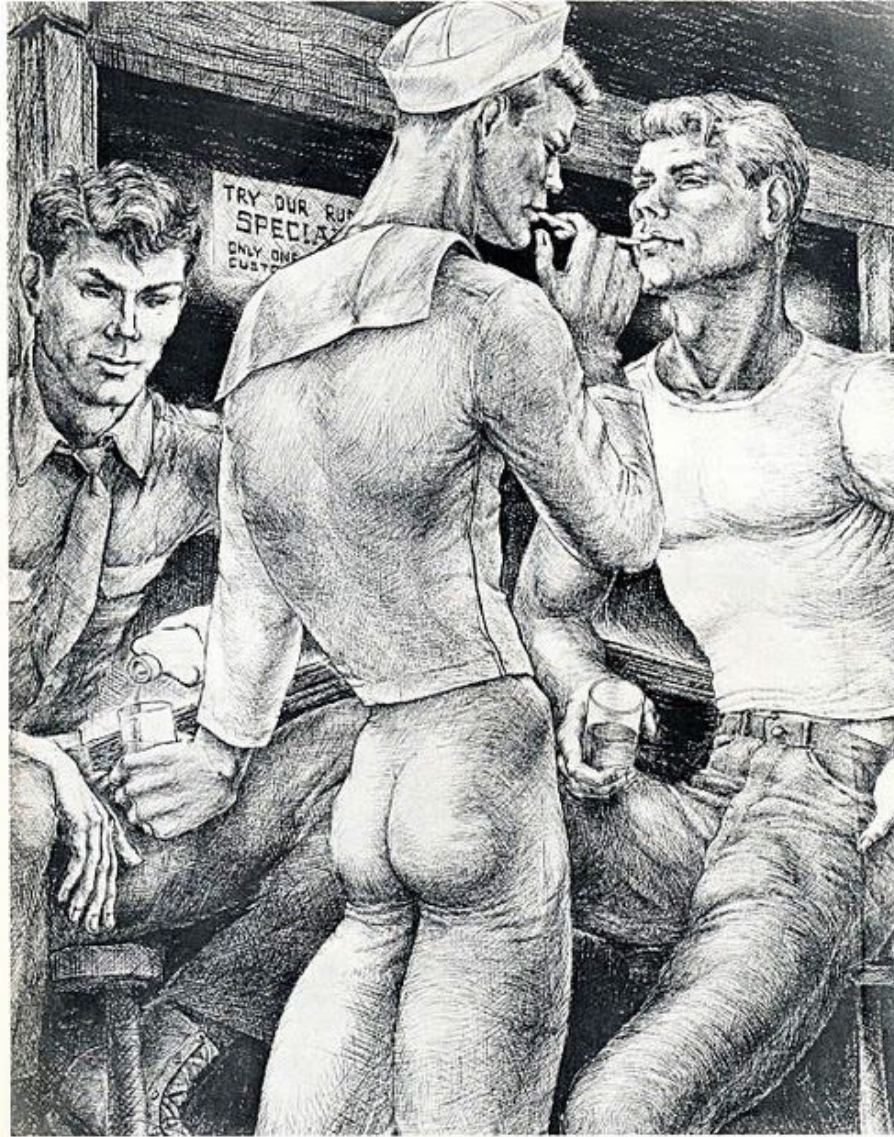
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Archival Practice and Gay Historical Access in the Work of Blade

Finley Freibert

The issue of access is key to archival practice and also to gay cultural history. In his seminal visual study of a century of gay cultural production, Thomas Waugh states, “In a society organized around the visible, any cultural minority denied *access* to the dominant discourses of power will *access* or invent image-making technology and will create its own alternative images” (31; emphasis added).

Waugh’s quote underscores how the production of images is facilitated by discursive and technological access but might also be read for its implications on the issue of access broadly construed. In short, the facilitation of access to cultural products (whether new or historical) is a key strategy in minority cultural production. The emphasis on access can be usefully extended to the preservation of gay cultural products; preservation demands not just a momentary facilitation of access, but the maintaining of perpetual access through processes of retrospective recirculation.

The archival practice of the gay artist Blade—born Carlyle Kneeland Bate (November 29, 1916—June 27, 1989)—can be recovered as a key example of the coordination of access to gay history. Blade’s most influential work, an anonymously authored pamphlet of erotic drawings and accompanying text entitled *The Barn* (1948), was originally intended for small scale clandestine circulation in gay bars with an edition of 12 copies. While this initial “official” run was intercepted by police before it could be distributed, pirated copies eventually circulated internationally.

During the coming decades, this anonymous authorship yet global access made Blade’s work arguably the most

internationally recognizable homoerotic images, beside those of Tom of Finland, before Stonewall. While Blade had no control over this pirate circulation, he kept archival negatives of *The Barn* that would eventually be reprinted in 1980 to accompany retrospectives of his work at the Stompers Gallery and the Leslie-Lohman Gallery.

Beyond his own work, Blade collected ephemera of anti-gay policing and early examples of gay public contestation that countered that policing, and in 1982 he was described by the gay newspaper *The Advocate* as an “inveterate archivist” (Saslow 38). At a young age Blade collected newspaper clippings from *Pasadena Independent* on a mid-1930s police crackdown on young hustlers and their clients in Pasadena, called the “Pasadena Purge” (39). This archival practice served to register the context against which Blade constructed his gay identity and developed his homoerotic drawing style.

Unfortunately, he destroyed both his collection of drawings and his gay historical ephemera upon entering Merchant Marines during World War II. However, in the 1982 interview with *The Advocate*, Blade discussed his renewed efforts to document the Pasadena Purge through ongoing archival initiatives, and his lecture series provided newfound community access (if fleeting) to the history he had reconstructed (38–40). Ultimately, Blade’s archival work can be understood as a career spanning parallel—yet interlocking—trajectory to his artistic praxis.

Blade’s explicit archival attentiveness can be brought into conversation with recent considerations of the archival function of gay historical artifacts. Jeffrey Escoffier has convincingly argued that gay male erotic media archived gay sexual cultures at the time they were created (88–113).

In an oral history interview from 1992, physique photography pioneer Bob Mizer—one of Blade’s contemporaries—reflected on the work of pre-Stonewall gay artists broadly and came to a similar conclusion. Mizer described the linking of context with cultural production as “the crucible” (5:13), the collection of contextual and relational factors “that forces you [the artist] to put some of that sensuality unconsciously into your [the artist’s] work” (5:16). While undoubtedly Blade’s art embodies such an archive, Blade’s artistic practice can be additionally understood as linked to an archival practice, the seemingly distinct effort to intentionally extend gay collective memory through the process of collecting and disseminating historical ephemera.

In interviews since the 1970s, Blade emphasized his interest in extending access to gay history by not only discussing his drawings specifically but also insisting on the relevance of his works’ situatedness within local gay cultural contexts. In such interviews, Blade drew on his historical memory to recirculate subcultural knowledge to the interviewers and the publication’s readers more broadly.

Besides *The Advocate*, Blade was also covered by numerous gay magazines including *In Touch*, *Queen’s Quarterly*, and *Stallion*. For example, in a *Stallion* interview he enumerated several pre-Stonewall points of reference including popular personalities in the Southern California underground gay scene as well as nearly forgotten gay establishments (“Our Gay Heritage” 52–55). Whenever interviewed Blade made it a point to situate his work within pre-Stonewall gay life by detailing various specifics of local gay cultures he encountered in his past. In this way, Blade provided access to an otherwise inaccessible local gay past, recirculating this

knowledge in tandem with the gay press coverage of his work.

Other than his art, a handful of gay press interviews, and reporting on his lecture series, the recollections of Blade's peers manifest an additional perspective on the cultural significance of Blade's work to gay history. The camaraderie between Blade and legendary physique photography entrepreneur Bob Mizer can be understood as accessible only through their mutual reflections on "the crucible," the previously referenced concept that Mizer used to describe the contextual backdrop out of which cultural products emerge.

Blade knew Mizer since the 1940s, when the two would visit Malibu and Venice Beach to recruit models to pose for Mizer ("Blade: 1964" 49). Condensing Blade's recollection to a brief profile, one publication summed up the contextual backdrop of Mizer and Blade's beach visits: "It was a different era. A time where sex between men was often just that. No sexual categorizing, no political agendas, no AIDS" (49). Mizer also fondly recalled his connection with the artist in an oral history interview after Blade passed away. Mizer's recollection of Blade—while not including any explicit factual revelations—facilitates for the listener what Lucas Hilderbrand has detailed in other contexts as affective access (304), the communicating of historically felt affects that are otherwise presently faded. In perhaps the most extensive interview with Mizer ever recorded, Mizer reflects on his life and work, and also more broadly on the history of gay art and entrepreneurship in which he was situated.

After being pressed about his early romantic and sexual relationships with other men, Mizer steered the conversation onto the question of whether the art of his

peers was substantively affected by the intensity of those artists' sex lives. The interviewers seemed particularly interested in debating this question in relation to the recently deceased Tom of Finland. Despite a relatively monotone engagement up and to this point in the interview, Mizer interrupted the interviewers' debate to elatedly insist they discuss Blade, Tom's contemporary. After acknowledging that the interviewers knew who Blade was, the conversation took the following turn on the subject of Blade:

Mizer: Of course, he... Did you ever talk to him?

Allen: No, he passed away. He was in New York. He passed away.

Mizer: Oh God, oh Jesus. [pause] Anyway, he had a wild life.

Allen: Did he?

Mizer: He had a wild, wild life. (6:02–6:15)

This brief moment in the oral history stands out for several reasons. In declining health, apparently having difficulty walking, and likely exhausted, Mizer's response is one of the few instances in the multi-day interview where his voice raises to a point of excitement. Mizer's initial eagerness to hear what had become of Blade conveys that he had momentarily recalled a forgotten comrade, perhaps a long-lost friend. Yet on hearing of Blade's passing, Mizer's tone plummets to utter despair, even to a seemingly audible sob as he exclaims, "Oh God, oh Jesus." While Blade's cause of death is not discussed in the interview, the pain in Mizer's timbre registers the historical context of 1992 and echoes an outrage resonant with contemporaneous queer organizing against a decade of homophobic government inertia that had nearly annihilated a generational cohort of gay and bisexual men. Perhaps perceiving the sensitivity of the subject, or possibly reflecting a lack of interest, the interviewers did

not press Mizer to further recall his peer. Yet the tonality of Mizer's responses provide unspoken insight into Blade's importance to the photographer.

In sum, Blade's cultural production of gay life was implemented with a dual emphasis on archiving the gay past and reflecting it in his present moment as (counter)public history. Yet despite his acknowledged cultural impact across both gay erotic art and the emergent gay comic scene (Mills 9), Blade seems increasingly obscure today given the recent lack of his images' circulation online or in print. Unlike Tom of Finland or Bob Mizer whose works are collected in several art books that remain in print, the only book that compiled Blade's work was published in 1980 and has long been out of print.

Blade's dedication to collecting ephemera and recirculating knowledge of the gay past reminds us that archival preservation is not only an issue of material protection and care but also requires the continuation of access to historical artifacts through their perpetual recirculation and recontextualization in the present.

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Finley Freibert recently completed a Ph.D. in Visual Studies at the University of California, Irvine, and researches at the intersection of queer visual culture, gay and bisexual history, and media industry studies. Finley has been published in peer-reviewed venues such as *Film Criticism*, has contributed by invitation to *Physique Pictorial: Official Quarterly of the Bob Mizer Foundation* and *Flow Journal*, and has written general audience articles

for *The Advocate* and *Washington Blade*.

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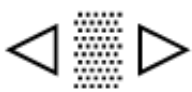
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