Bodies of Work

To HIV positive lensperson David Morgan, a good guffaw is the best medicine

May 1, 1997 By Stephen Greco

David Morgan's photographs have often been used to sell things. First it was actors--with lively, unphony head shots that Morgan started shooting for friends back in the 1970s, while still an actor himself. Then it was parties--after New York City club promoter Dallas got Morgan to snap some jumping, booted muscleboys for the invitation to a 1990 White Party at the Saint. These days Morgan shoots ads for clients such as Dial-A-Mattress and popular underwear maker 2(x)ist.

But what his work really advertises is the idea that men are beautiful, as is our obsession with their appearance. Other photographers use beefcase to get at ideas like "American manhood," but to Morgan there is no bigger idea that the geniality of our desire to look and be looked at. He lets you cruise his models to your heart's content--and makes it OK for them to cruise you back.

Stephen Greco: The last time we spoke, you were telling me how your experience onstage has helped you in the studio.

David Morgan: I work like a director. When I work with models who are in front of the camera for the first time, I rehearse them with an empty camera or make them act out the picture and verbalize--screaming, laughing, talking--so the image takes on a kind of life.

Is that how you're able to produce all these terrific pictures we want to keep looking at?

I make them act. Often I will show them what I want. If it's a private thought, I kind of act it out for them, because they pick up on the mood. And when I want them to jump and scream, I don't say, "OK, jump and scream." I'll go over and show them jumping and screaming. Or I show them laughter and say, "Make that noise." Laugher creates wonderful abs, for instance, so when I shoot the underwear jobs, I make them laugh. Thats's a manipulation technique to make the stomach rippled. But it also bring a sense of joy to the picture.

Your models must love working that way.

I light them, we switch places, and they get to watch me through the camera. It's probably the most anxiety-relieving approach I've ever tried. It happened on day when I was working with a

model-actor who was just doing the whole pose-y thing. I said, “Just don’t do anything.” Some of them think they’re supposed to be still and silent, and you can see them saying “click” in their brains, self-observing. And if they’re watching themselves make the picture, we lose this thing where they’re looking at us.

Is your work meant to function as a kind of antidote to all the damage we know can befall the body, especially now that we are living with AIDS?

Those elements of camaraderie and decency I try to bring to men with men is my antidote to more than AIDS. I did feel compelled to create images that would give a sense of comfort and relief--it’s OK to be gay, it’s OK to put your arms around a man, to kiss him or hold him. You know, I didn’t start shooting these “boy” things until the late ’80s--well into the crisis, right near the end when my own lover was dying and all my friends had died.

Does the awareness of your HIV status affect your work?

Sure. It’s affected every part of my life--how I make decisions about everything. I have a new favorite phrase: “You’re gonna be dead a long time.” Why cheat yourself out of a moment of joy, a moment of beauty, a moment of extravagance?

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