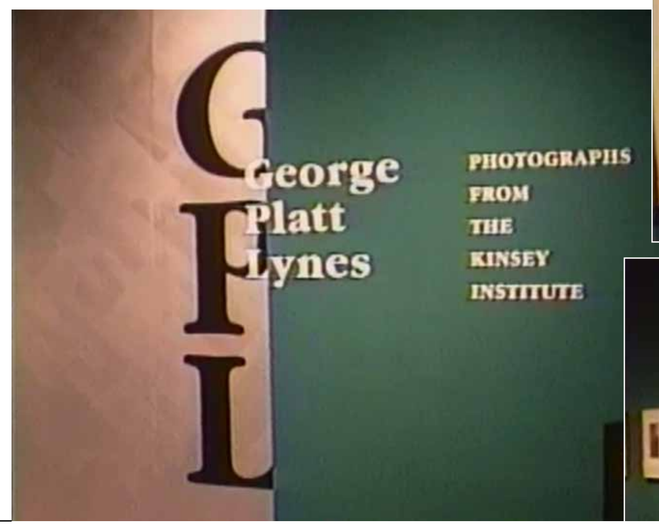
George Platt Lynes: Photographs from the Kinsey Institute
Grey Art Gallery & Study Center, New York University
New York, NY, 1993

George Platt Lynes: Photographs from the Kinsey Institute was a traveling exhibition that the Grey Art Gallery hosted. Walker served in his usual capacity as designer and manager of the installation, and managed the exhibition's press preview.

I was very accoustomed to working with Tom (Sokolowski) on the installation of all the exhibitions at The Grey. Michelle Wong was the Registrar at that time, and we formed a solid team with a fast turnaround of some surprisingly complex installations. We did six shows every year, and I always worked closely with Tom in determining the layout and design details for each exhibition. In my early days at The Grey, we had a fabric covered wall system with mirrors on some walls, and a lot of molding details that I always found annoying. I came up with many different arrangements over the years that I'm very proud of, but I hated the gallery's interior with all it's limitations and worn look. In 1993, I overhauled the mobile wall system alongside getting the gallery carpet replaced, and we covered all the mirrors and "architectural details" with new sheetrock wall surfaces. It was quite a transformation of the space, and quite an adventure—which I videotaped!

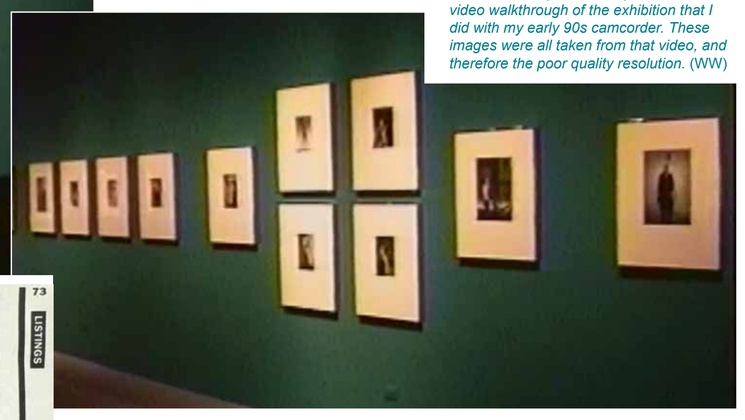
The Platt Lynes exhibition came right after this renovation, and I was able to take full advantage of the new sheetrock walls. Also, Tom was away during the entire instalaltion, so he left me totally in charge of all the final details... and in charge of the press preview leading up to the opening!

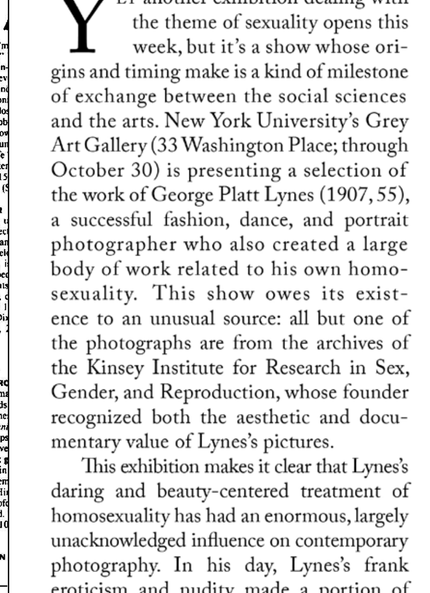
I chose a deep teal color for the walls, and was obsessive about painting every detail. Moldings, conduit... everything was painted teal except the silver leaf entry wall with the exhibition title signage. The photographs were installed in black frames, most the same size—and in a way that presented the biggest challenge. Avoiding monotony, even with the subject matter. Because I had limited linear wall surface, I decided to do subtle groupings based on the compositions Platt Lynes used in the photographs versus the subject matter or activity depicted. The groupings allowed a certain pacing through the gallery, and helped with crowd control—which was a good thing with record breaking attendance following the various reviews.



Video Walkthrough of the Exhibition

This link takes you to a very low resolution video walkthrough of the exhibition that I did with my early 90s camcorder. These images were all taken from that video, and therefore the poor quality resolution. (WW)





My favorite moment, of course, was getting quoted in New York Magazine. Lucy Lippard did the review, and I had walked through part of the exhibitoin with her talking about the installation process and the groupings I had created. I was very surprised to see my comment about Yul Brynner in her exhibition review! Tom loved it, of course, so all was good and it's always been a great story to tell about a project I'm very proud of. (WW)

The New Yorker, Sep 20, 1993

break taboos. Lynes's portrait of Yul Brynner, for instance, is a full-frontal nude. As Wendell Walker, the gallery manager, put it, "There's something unexpected about seeing the person you grew up watching in "The King and I" just standing there nude like that. He was made to seem so nonsexual in that movie, and here he is with a penis, and *hair*."

Review/Photography — The New York Times — FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 1993

Another Side of a Life's Work, Elegantly Revealed

By CHARLES HAGEN

In the 1930's and 40's, George Platt Lynes achieved both fame and commercial success with cool, Surrealist-influenced photographs of fashion and dance, as well as portraits of such artists and writers as Jean Cocteau, E. M. Forster and Dorothy Parker. But it was another side of Lynes's work that attracted the attention of Dr. Alfred E. Kinsey, the pioneering sexologist: his sensuous male nudes.

Between 1949 and 1955, when Lynes died at the age of 48, Kinsey collected more than 600 prints and several hundred original negatives by Lynes. A provocative exhibition now at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University presents an extensive selection of those pictures, including not only nudes, both male and female, but also portraits, fashion shots and dance images.

During travels in France, Lynes met many of the leading Surrealists, and the style he used in all his work reveals a clear debt to the movement. He posed his subjects against simple backgrounds that he transformed with lights into the kind of nebulous but suggestive space beloved of painters like Dali. Lynes's portraits and fashion images have a dreamy theatricality that is both attractive and unsettling.

It is the male nudes, though, that are of the greatest historical interest here. Lynes's nudes have long been considered an important, if secondary, aspect of his work. But this show, and the accompanying catalogue published by Bulfinch Press, suggests that these images played a more important role in Lynes's career than has previously been acknowledged.

Lynes's nudes, which make up half of the show, have the same elegant simplicity that characterizes his other work. Few of the pictures are explicitly sexual; instead, Lynes presented the male body bathed in light, seen from behind or the side. Usually he would pose his subjects against plain backgrounds, and only rarely would he use props.

The figures in these pictures have the chilly perfection of classical sculpture. The monumentality of these figures can also be seen in photographs Lynes made for the New York City Ballet and other companies. For these images, he would often pose dancers nude, in static poses that gain a sense of drama from Lynes's use of strongly directional lighting.

In the 1940's, Lynes grew bored with his commercial work and concentrated increasingly on nudes. Toward the end of his life, his career fell apart, and his sales to Kinsey became an important source of income.

Many of the pictures from this later period are overtly sexual, with models' genitals presented openly and in some cases spotlighted. But Lynes seldom photographed explicit sexual activity; he wrote Kinsey that he considered the term "erotic" to be inadequate for his best images.

Whatever the merits of these photographs as art, it is impossible to assess them without considering the sexual climate in which they were made. Lynes was a gay artist at a time when laws prohibited homosexual activity and expression; an important subtext of the exhibition is the fact that his pictures were made against this social backdrop of public condemnation and legal strictures.

By the same token, the pictures take on added resonance today, when art that features sexual subject matter is under attack from both the right and the left, and at a time of increased gay self-awareness. Most pointedly, Lynes's images throw a different light on the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, who used a remarkably similar style in his portraits and fashion photographs, and who also made emotionally charged erotic images.

James Crump, the curator of the exhibition, reports that Kinsey was unaware of Lynes's reputation as a commercial photographer until five years after he had begun to collect the nudes. For Kinsey, Lynes's photographs were important not as art, but as evidence of contemporary sexual behavior and fantasies.

This points to a serious flaw of this show: it is unclear how Lynes himself regarded many of the pictures here. Some seem to be little more than snapshots, intended for personal use, while others are carefully staged and lighted. A few pictures refer explicitly to traditional images of male nudes in art, particularly to Baroque images of Christ on the Cross. But many others suggest stereotypes of gay pornography.

All of these pictures may have been equally well suited to Kinsey's purposes, but their seemingly indiscriminate presentation here does little to support Lynes's own belief in the artistic importance of his male nudes. Too many of the pictures are well made but unremarkable.

The show also distorts the shape of Lynes's career. His portraits are more consistently inventive than his nudes, but they are relegated to a minor place in this exhibition. In the end, the show is more interesting for what it suggests about Lynes's life as a gay artist in the 1940's and 50's than it is as art.

"George Platt Lynes: Photographs From the Kinsey Institute" is to remain at the Grey Art Gallery, 33 Washington Place, at Washington Square, Greenwich Village, through Oct. 30.

Sarah Wells/Grey Art Gallery

Untitled 1952 work by George Platt Lynes, part of "Photographs From the Kinsey Institute" at Grey Art Gallery of New York University.

Amid George Platt Lynes's images of fashion and dance, intriguing nudes.