

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.

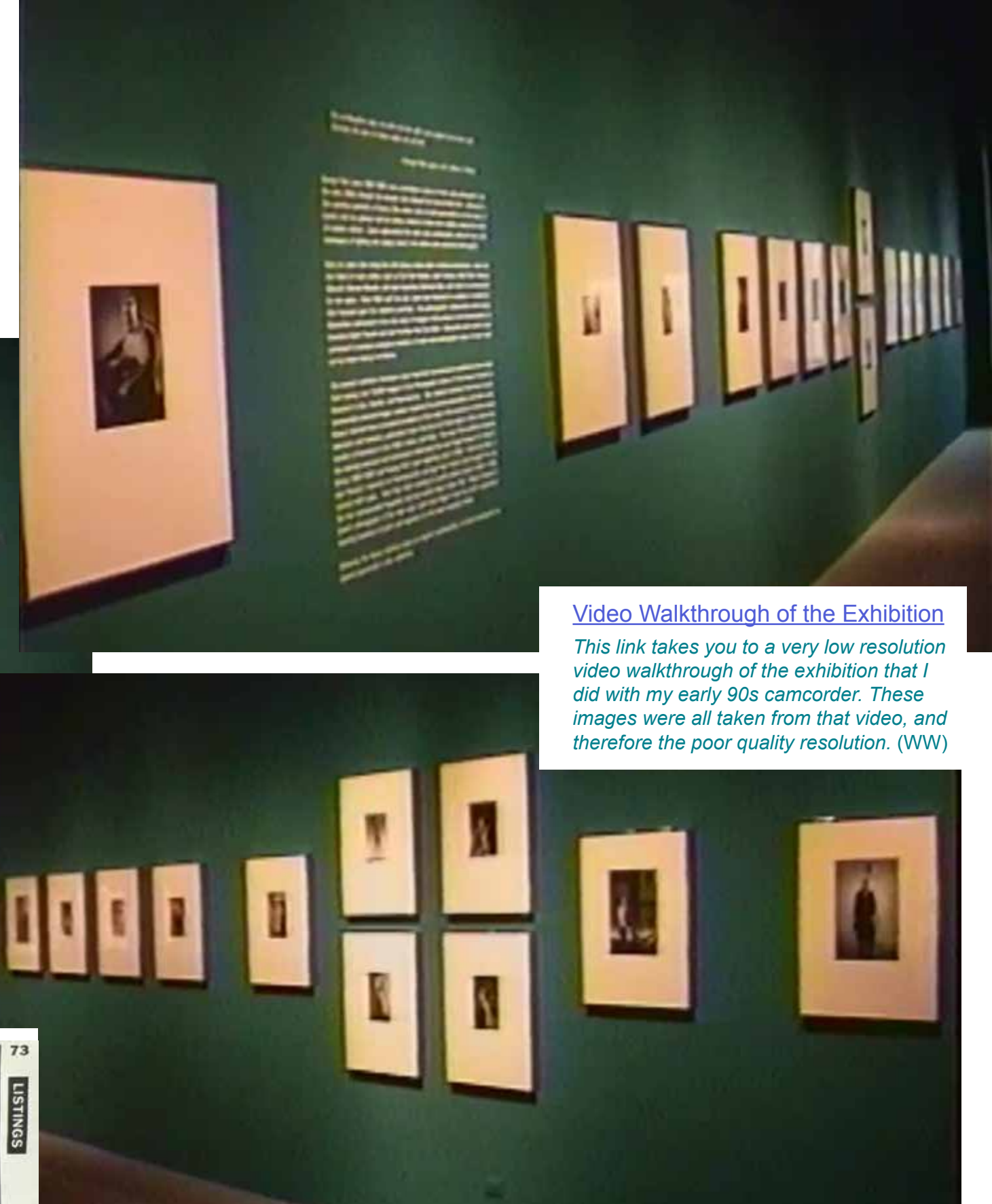
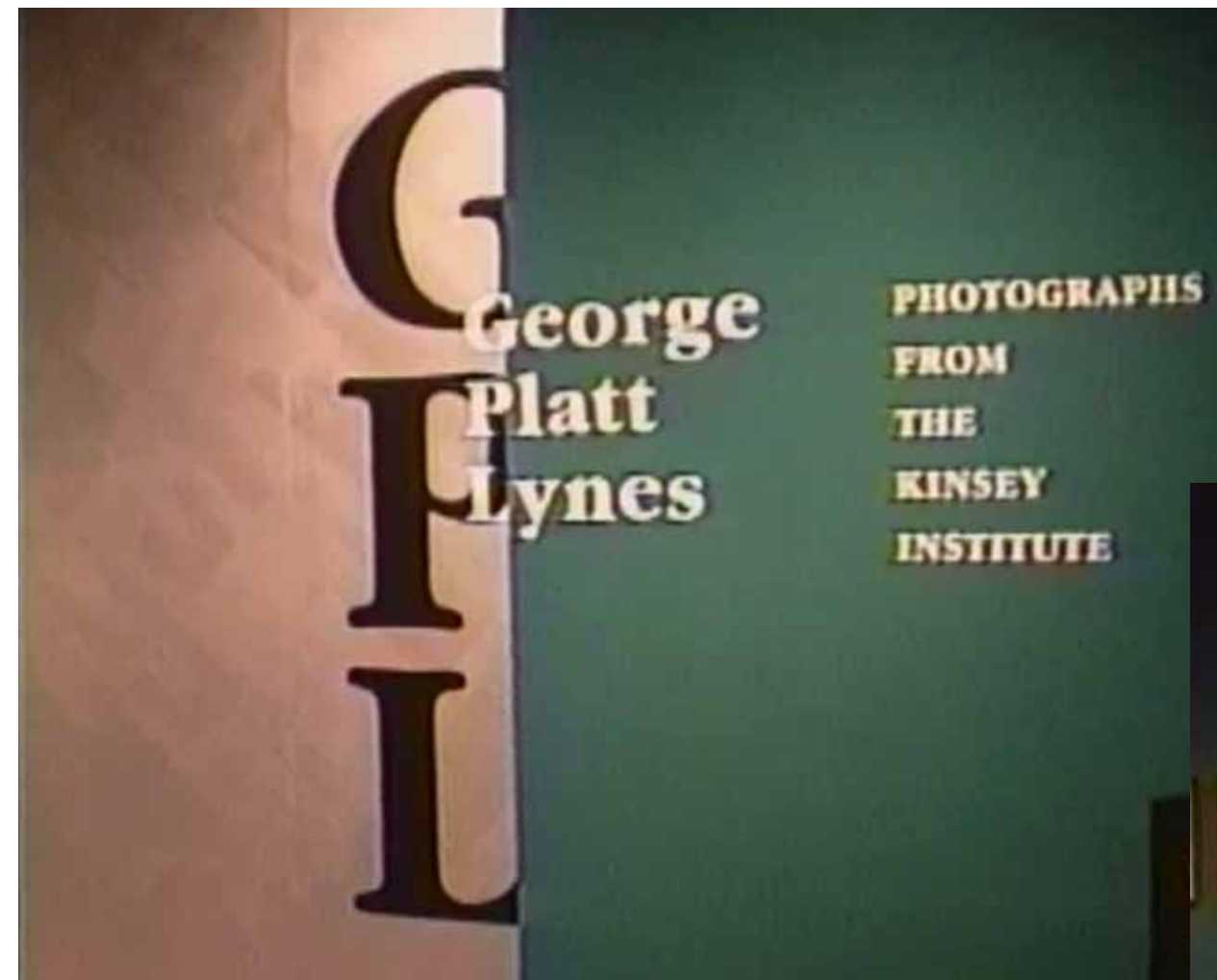
I was very accustomed to working with Tom (Sokolowski) on the installation of all the exhibitions at The Grey. Michelle Wong was the Registrar at that time, and we formed a solid team with a fast turnaround of some surprisingly complex installations. We did six shows every year, and I always worked closely 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 its 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!

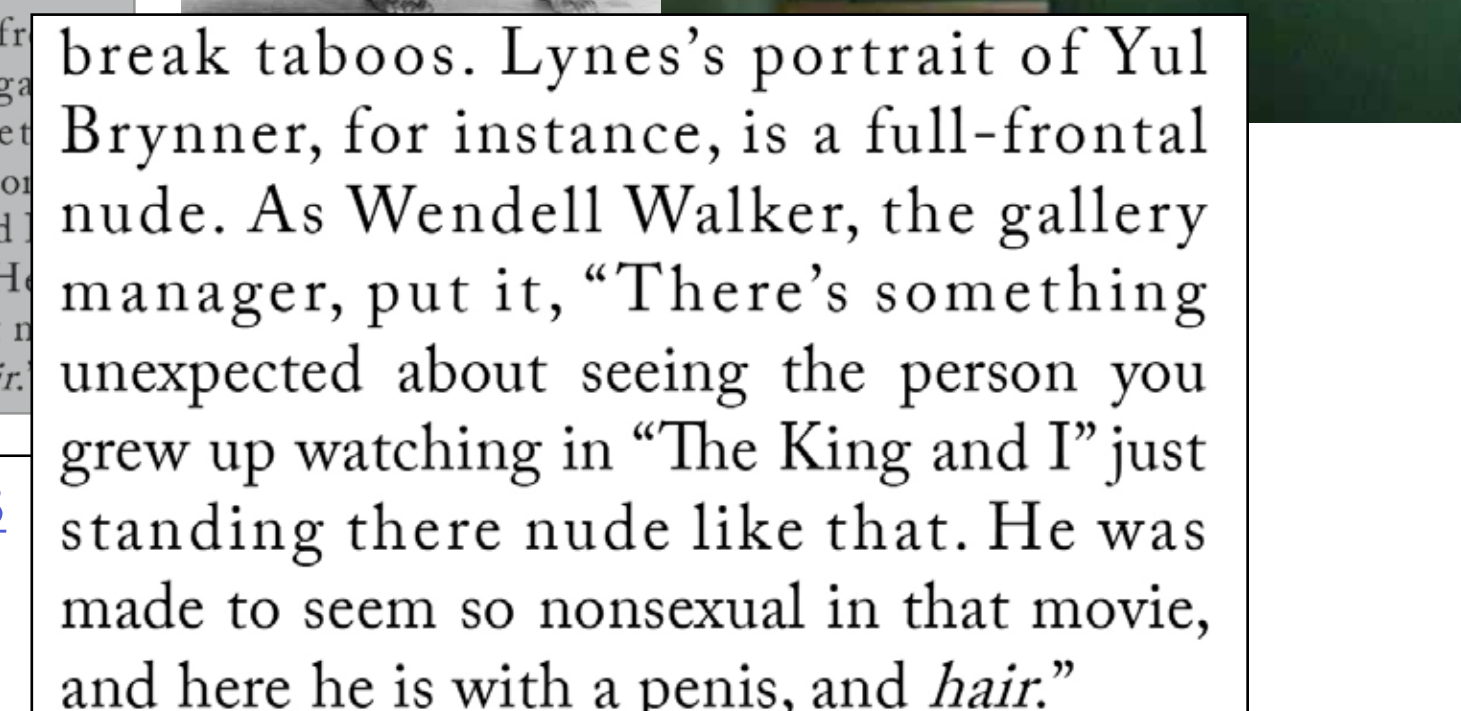
The Platt Lynes exhibition came right after this renovation, and I was able to take full advantage of the new sheetrock walls. Also, Tom was away during the entire instalation, so he left me totally in charge of all the final details... and in charge of the press preview leading up to the opening!

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.

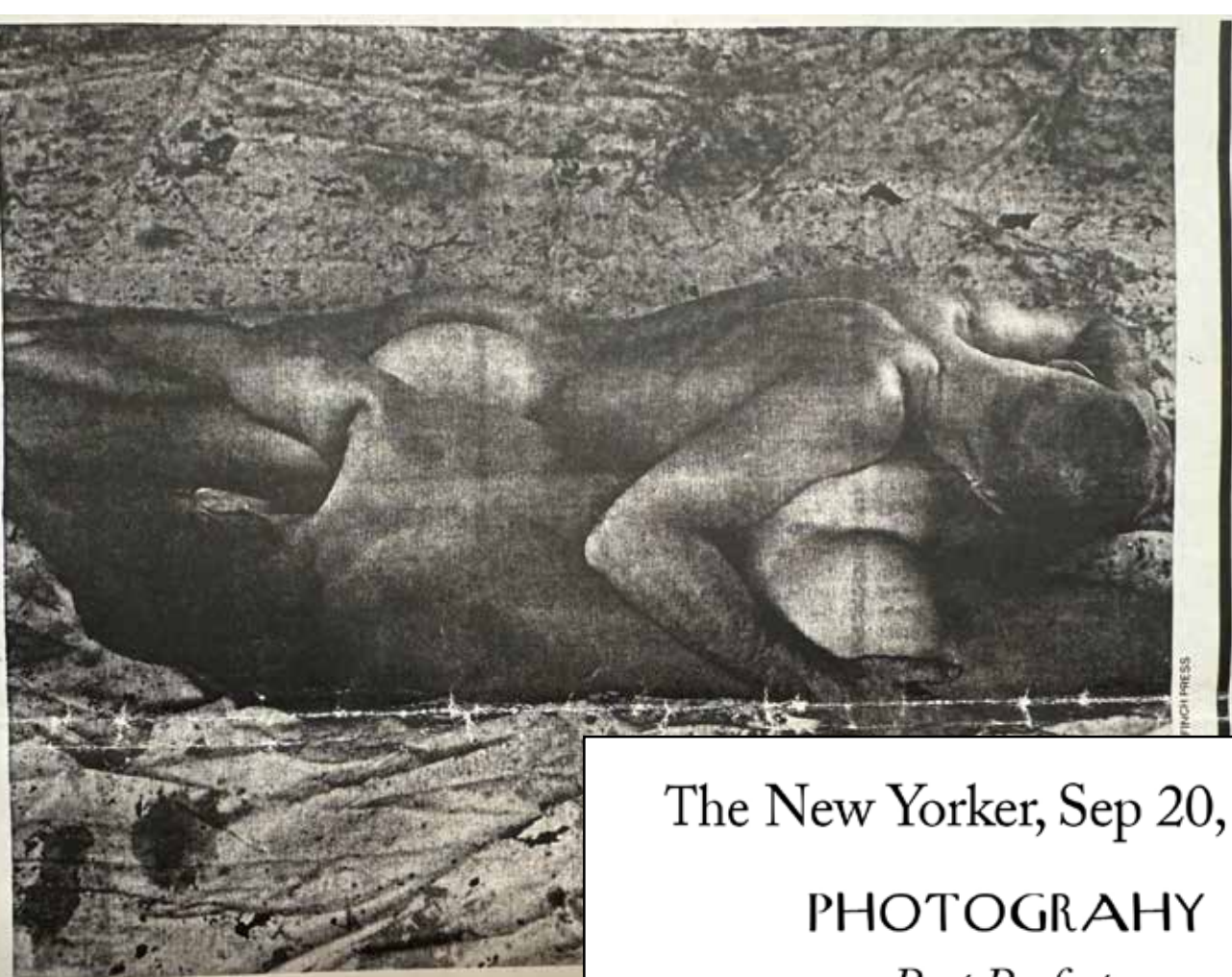
Because I had limited linear wall surface, I decided to do subtle groupings based on the compositions Platt Lynes used in the photographs versus the subject matter or activity depicted. The groupings allowed a certain pacing through the gallery, and helped with crowd control—which was a good thing with 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)



VOICES S G N I S L



GEORGE PLATT LYNES: This terrific show (even better than its fine companion book) selects 135 prints from the huge archive Platt Lynes left to the Kinsey Institute, so its emphasis is on the artist's nudes and homoerotic work, none of which were shown in his lifetime and little of which has been exhibited since. Ranging from the '30s to the '50s and including ballet dancers, fashion models, and smart celebs as well as a slew of naked men in unmade beds, the photos capture a gay sensibility in all its complexity. As the hidden link between Beaton and Mapplethorpe, Platt Lynes's images are both mannered and spare, kitsch and cool, repressed and way sexy. Through October 30, NYU's Grey Art Gallery, 33 Washington Place, 998-6780. (Aletti)

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CHRISTIAN

The New Yorker, Sep 20, 1993

PHOTOGRAPHY

Past Perfect

YET another exhibition dealing with the theme of sexuality opens this week, but it's a show whose origins and timing make it a kind of milestone of exchange between the social sciences and the arts. New York University's Grey Art Gallery (33 Washington Place; through October 30) is presenting a selection of the work of George Platt Lynes (1907-55), a successful fashion, dance, and portrait photographer who also created a large body of work related to his own homosexuality. This show owes its existence to an unusual source: all but one of the photographs are from the archives of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, whose founder recognized both the aesthetic and documentary value of Lynes's pictures.

This exhibition makes it clear that Lynes's daring and beauty-centered treatment of homosexuality has had an enormous, largely unacknowledged influence on contemporary photography. In his day, Lynes's frank eroticism and nudity made a portion of his work too shocking to be seen, and this show includes images that have never been on display before. (The photographer destroyed some of his own work near the end of his life, and it is speculated that a number of his negatives were burned after his death.) Even apart from the homosexuality, there are plenty of other pictures that 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 grew up watching in "The King and I" just standing there nude like that. He 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 1940 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 Dalí. 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



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.

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 in 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 lit. 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.

James Crump, the curator of the exhibition, reports that Kinsey was unaware of Lynes's reputation as a commercial photographer until five

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! The New Yorker, Sep 20, 1993

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)