

## ONE WORLD

What else to say about the captivating world in which Henning von Berg creates male nude images?

“Henning von Berg?” asked a friend, “isn't he the one who captures those incredibly endowed men?” Something I could hardly deny. After all, the men in Henning's photographs appear ready to deliver at any moment – a feat this volume's title seems to confirm.

*Alpha Males* is a biological term applied to the male pack leader, one to whom others willingly submit. It is an excellent title, which calls to mind myriad variations on possible instincts of domination and submission, though there is definitely more to offer here.

Any successful author or publisher hopes to stimulate sales when selecting a title for a published work. *Alpha Males* is therefore distinctive and, in this connection, a brilliant title. It works, and the light application of deception has never done any real harm, so anyone ordering the book by merit of its title alone won't be disappointed, either. It aptly describes this remarkable collection of von Berg's photographic creativity, and captures the interest of all connoisseurs of male nude imagery.

The name Henning von Berg, however, stands for not only well-defined muscles and macho poseurs. On the contrary, sifting through the panorama this book has to offer, you discover that the usual collegiate types and magazine cover beauties are in a minority. The artist peers into a male cosmos that includes a wide variety of physical types, ethnic backgrounds, and age groups spanning more than forty years. If your conception of sexual, physical and visual pleasure is one of eclectic discernment, the title *Alpha Males*, like the content of this collection, is perfectly valid. This transpires increasingly the more you glance through von Berg's selection of images. *Alpha Males* is therefore a perfect projection screen for role-play, juggling clichés with an often-humorous look at seemingly irrefutable conventional aesthetic standards. Be aware of his programmatic and ironic connotations as you ponder this work, because they seep into your conscience, amplifying the erotic impact.

Henning von Berg does not dwell on heavy intellectual content. The immediate force source of his reflection lies in the sensual appeal of what you see. As a visual person with a love of people, and as a philanthropist, he was fortuitously destined to discover the power of the photographic image at some stage in his life. This volume demonstrates the many unusual, down-to-earth perspectives that continue to be discovered in the male body – though it remains one of the oldest motifs in art history.

Of course we are also presented with smooth mainstream figures in factory floor settings, images that could well grace sleek ads for scents such as *Egoïste*, *Kouros*, or *Fleur du Mâle*. Henning von Berg is also quite capable of providing the prerequisite consumer-friendly surface polish if demanded.

And he gave free reign to his predilection for adventurous photographic investigations into the bounds of mental freedom and physical liberation in big metropolises in his 'Naked City' series (Berlin and Sydney). For example, in *Naked Berlin* he presented his uninhibited models in birthday suits against a number of landmarks, including the *Brandenburg Gate* and the parliament building *Reichstag*, amongst others. Here, he is concerned with the vestiges of a nudist culture that took hold of Germany in the 1920's, and still speaks to him personally: the nude represents ideals of liberty and crumbling hierarchies of conventional dress codes.

In all his dealings with the nude, Henning von Berg entertains a sense of mischief without ever being offensive. Look at his two rather endearingly chubby body builders, posing in front of the gigantic Soviet war memorial in East Berlin. Ultimately, their stance exposes the grotesque nature of the heroic and it is the monument that, in turn, becomes the target of ridicule.

For his settings, Henning von Berg favors monumental buildings or imposing landscapes that are visual marks of the forces of nature. Hence, his love of the USA, and of particularly working in the deserts and at beaches around Los Angeles. But he is ambivalent about the current state of North American society and says: "Two hundred twenty years ago, they were so far ahead of Europe, and even in the 1960's they definitely provided much inspiration for advancement of civil liberties. But now, the people there are generally prudish. And behind this facade of respectability flourishes the world's most prolific porn industry. Clearly, pornography and prudishness are each conditions of the other."

In spite of the nudity controversy in the United States, men queue up for their moments to be immortalized by Henning von Berg's art. Photographing them nude in public, as he does in Germany or Australia, is of course unthinkable, even in liberal-thinking California. Ubiquitous private security and CCTV surveillance make his creativity more difficult each year. Consequently Henning von Berg takes his models and his camera into the American deserts, where he can work in wild open space, far from the watchful eye of authority and the so-called guardians of public respectability.

Henning also likes to give ample space in his photographs to his models. Nothing offends him more than eager editors cutting in to give closer exposure to these attractive bodies. He considers undue proximity a disrespectful intrusion.

Using modish close-up effects on faces and bodies, or atmospheric soft-focuses, or angled or pseudo-dynamic camera inclinations is alien to von Berg. He refutes avant-garde posturing with well-conceived convention. He respects his models' individual personalities, refusing to submerge them in superfluous stylistic nonsense. Nor is he deceived by superficial impressions. He often finds the exuberance he seeks in handicapped people, as well as the weathered faces of the elderly, who elicit his great admiration. He disdains the sensuality of carefully modulated musculature, which often masks asceticism and blind ambition. "Rather than vitality, I associate those awful narcissistic obsessions with fitness and diet!" says Henning von Berg.

Henning von Berg enjoys methodically and successfully breaking the rules. He exercises subtle transgressions, which take him beyond a narrow repertoire of poses inherent in conventional pin-up boy affectations. Pumped-up bodies acquire the willowy grace of dancers, a defined bodybuilder's torso gets stuck in a ballet tutu, and an athlete plays the double bass by a swimming pool. Most of his models are not professional, which may explain their readiness to be infected by Henning von Berg's enthusiasm, and captivated by easy charm. In many of these images you can almost physically sense how photographer and the model collude in the adventure – not a sexual one, but certainly one that is fused with erotic power.

Author: Boris von Brauchitsch (Berlin, Germany, August 2007)  
Corresponding translation into English: Jörg von Stein (Berlin)

[www.BorisVonBrauchitsch.de](http://www.BorisVonBrauchitsch.de)

Dr Boris von Brauchitsch (\*1963) is a German photographer, curator, and author. Special studies on the history of photography. Publications about art, photography, art history and art exhibitions.