

ART

Rough gods, tough trade

Photographer flexes his finger in Portland debut exhibit

BY ANDY MANGELS

Sweat. Muscles. Tattoos. Cigars. Jockstraps. While those ingredients might sound like the mix for a particularly hot night at the Eagle, it also describes the attributes of men captured by photographer Michael Alago.

Hailing from New York City, the 45-year-old worked for more than two decades in the recording industry as a producer and talent scout, discovering and signing acts ranging from Metallica, White Zombie and Johnny Rotten to Michael Feinstein and Nina Simone. "All the experiences with my artists were hands-on," Alago says.

Many people might expect heavy metal musicians to be homophobic, but that wasn't true in his experience. "There weren't any real issues about me being gay. I think once the artists started to get to know me and knew that I knew my business and was fun to work with, any barriers and questions about me faded away."

But even as he held the destiny of musicians in his hands, the photos he took in private gave him more of a thrill.

"I love photos and always took snapshots growing up," says Alago. "In my travels I would Polaroid the one-night stands and hustlers I picked up. I love the Polaroid format, so at the time that was my main camera. I started shooting digital about two to three years ago, and I love the instant image one gets from it, as well."

Alago even became friends with the king of gay erotic photography, Robert Mapplethorpe. "Back in the day, Robert became a friend. He was like the ultimate rock star to me. I was in awe of the work and just thought he was a master."

In 2002, Alago left the recording business and began concentrating on his photography. Although he shoots some still-life images, the majority of his work features rough-and-tumble men with muscles, facial and body hair, muscles, attitude and, oh yeah, muscles. The photographer admits he doesn't shoot models from agencies but rather finds men near gyms or on the street.

"I tend to find men in their 30s and 40s who look like they have life experiences and wear it well. The tattooed man and the image of the daddy-type and the bodybuilder jock have mostly been the types I go for. I just did a photo session with a redhead with an incredible athletic body who was serious and sweet and masculine and a real big turn-on to me, since I just love redheads."

His subjects' sexuality is of little concern to Alago.

"I never ask the models about their preferences. I go strictly by their magnetism," he says. "If a man has that masculine strong look that I look for, I approach them and usually direct them to my Web site so they can see the images. Then they usually call me and we set



Michael Alago found most of the models for *Rough Gods* near gyms or on the street.

up the shoot. Whether gay or straight, the shoots can be very sexy."

Rough Gods, the first book collection of Alago's photos, was published this year by Scatterbrain Press. Images of gorgeous men—many partially undressed and showing fierce attitude—are juxtaposed with statuary, grave-stones and flowers. The book will be sold at his first Portland gallery showing, along with his photo work.

"I am really excited to be...visiting Portland," he says. "It will be my first time there."

And for those who want to check the artist himself for muscles and tattoos, Alago admits



Before focusing on photography, Michael Alago worked in the recording industry, discovering and signing acts such as Metallica.

he has "one very large tattoo of a Tom of Finland image," but adds with a grin that he's "working on getting more." ■

MICHAEL ALAGO will sign books from 6 to 9 p.m. Aug. 5 at Brian Marki Fine Art, 2236 N.E. Broadway. The exhibit runs Aug. 2 to 31. Visit his site at www.roughgods.com.

ANDY MANGELS is a best-selling novelist and DVD documentary director who lives and creates in Portland. Visit his site at www.andymangels.com.

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