



Making a statement? Jurg by Christian Vogt (1969)

Sex is hard to come by in a new exhibition that fails to challenge the male ideal, writes **Sacha Craddock**

The men's room

DESPITE the public health warning at the entrance to the current exhibition at the Photographers' Gallery, there is little you will find offensive or shocking. Behold the Man — the Male Nude in Photography has filled all available space with torsos, buttocks, backs and thighs. Almost half the population owns something resembling these bodies and the other half may have seen one. Consisting mainly of images, not Art, this is an historical survey that just shows that history can't help repeating itself.

In real life the male body is capable of giving terror and love, smell and sperm; it is both image maker and clothes horse. Here you don't get much indication of that. Apart from some deliberate horrors, the show centres around the Pose. The overall impression is of self-important men, with pretty solid physiques, that stay still and engage with confident stares.

The exhibition is divided into categories; each section is accompanied by text. They range from fitness magazines to famous people; record covers to medical records; demi-gods and limbless; fashion and nature. Alasdair Foster has included quite so much in order to be fair to his subject. This wide sweep intends to give dignity to the male nude and deflect censure and bigotry. The question is why

was it thought necessary at this time?

Any survey will show changes in attitude and fashion. There is a noticeable difference between Charles Atlas on a Thirties' Muscle magazine cover and long-haired Jim Morrison with underdeveloped chest and beads on the sixties' Doors record cover. But whether more or less feminine, history is full of these shifts; a comprehensive account of the shoe would tell you the same things.

The male nude is being used more frequently in advertising these days, but this is not an indication of a real shift in power, from man to woman. It reflects, more, that self-love and adornment is out in the open.

Stripped of their clothes the famous men are not weakened, they still have their identity. Klaus Kinski holds his baby daughter Nanoi in Jean-Francois Bauret's portrait taken in 1979. The juxtaposition of young and old flesh, male and female, can only be sweet.

This show is so respectable and there is only so much you can achieve if you miss out the main ingredient: sex. By avoiding turn-on, you cater for the prudes. Suburban naughtiness doesn't need censure exactly because it continues the one-to-one objectification of the ideal body. Despite talk of the New Man, your caring sharing co-

operative person such as "Rusty" in Gypsy P. Ray's portrait still stares up from the bedspread with as much smugness as any Beefcake.

Although it may be upsetting, sexuality also lies in imbalance of power, the caught moment of voyeurism. The problem with posing is that it is complicit and therefore complacent. The photograph of Marines at Boot Camp by Volker Corell is really good because something is happening. Their nakedness is glimpsed, they are being lectured to by a clothed officer, they have become vulnerable and sexy.

Men photograph differently from women. There is a power and strength in their decision to take off their clothes. Only the Sicilian youths snapped by Wilhelm von Gloeden at the turn of the century seem used in the way women normally are. Pornography is absent, the freak show is not. By mounting this show, the male ideal has been continued and not challenged.

Just as books titled Erotic Art are neither erotic nor contain much art, this exhibition for all its liberal scope is inadequate. These are difficult times for which we need different attitudes; the reinforcement of the assertion of the male is not necessary.

● Behold The Man at the Photographers' Gallery, Great Newport St, London WC2, to September 10.