

Time Out New York Magazine

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Art

Art review

Martin Schoeller, "Female Bodybuilders"

Schoeller's images of female bodybuilders out-muscle his celebrity portraits. By Merrily Kerr

Hasted Hunt Kraeutler, through Aug 27



Can photos of babes in bikinis with big biceps be more than gratuitous? Martin Schoeller's portraits of women bodybuilders pander to the inherent sensationalism of their topic, but also manage to transcend it, playing up deeply disconcerting contrasts between traits typically considered female (makeup, hair) and male (bulging muscles). He puts his subjects on pedestals as goddesses of discipline and self-control. By contrast, a second body of work largely deglamorizes the faces of celebrities who've agreed to pose for his flaw-baring lens.

In the former series, Schoeller magnifies his sitters' bulk, framing them from the waist up in enormous 61.5" x 50" photos. The same women (e.g., Christine Roth, Carmella Cureton) appear on bodybuilding blogs and websites in more feminine—and, perhaps, objectifying—poses, but Schoeller's gender-bending emphasis on pumped-up arms and abs showcases hard-won physiques that rebuff mainstream ideals of the female physique. Valerie Belin's images of bodybuilders (who look so shiny as to seem practically chromed) come to mind, but Schoeller's subjects are proud and unique.

In an ironic reversal, the best photos in the second series are of women with normal features and inflated personalities: an ethereal and unrecognizably dignified Paris Hilton; Sarah Palin, captured as a cipher constructed out of makeup. Most of these other portraits, however, are about as compelling as a driver's-license picture. Marina Abramovic shows no trace of the pain and drive she's poured into her career, while deadpan studies of Chris Rock and Jerry Seinfeld, clinical takes on Bill Murray and a dozy Kobe Bryant beg for something to make us take notice—be it brawn, beauty or brains.