



By Jennifer Glickel  
DNAinfo Reporter/Producer

CHELSEA — One Chelsea gallery may have found just the thing to shock and intrigue even the most jaded New Yorkers — an exhibit featuring portraits of female bodybuilders, every curve of muscle defined and every inch of skin bronzed.

“Female Bodybuilders,” by photographer Martin Schoeller, which opens Thursday at the Hasted Hunt Kraeutler gallery, takes viewers on a visual exploration that challenges typical notions of beauty and femininity.

“I think the exhibit teaches you something about how identity is presented and what we expect to see in a photograph of a woman versus how these bodybuilders present themselves,” said gallery manager Elizabeth Denny. “These women are so confident in the way that they’re presenting themselves and their bodies, but to the everyday person they may seem grotesque or weird.”

Schoeller, who is best known for his close up, untouched portraits of everyone from Jerry Seinfeld to Barack Obama, began to photograph female bodybuilders while they were in competition in 2003 and continued for the next five years. “From the first Polaroid, I was struck by the multi-dimensional complexity of the portrait,” Schoeller wrote in his book, “Female Bodybuilders,” which accompanies the exhibition. “They challenge the boundaries of not only the shifting, maddening, and ruthless standards of the female beauty industry, but of what constitutes ‘(un)natural,’” the artist said. The exhibit is physically designed to accentuate how the women’s sculpted figures confront traditional notions of beauty. Schoeller’s photos of the bodybuilders line the walls of the gallery’s first two rooms, while the next two rooms are filled with portraits of public figures such as Paris Hilton, Sarah Palin, and Kobe Bryant. “There’s a really interesting contrast between the two sections of the gallery, and that was done purposefully” Denny told DNAinfo. “The way identity or persona is being presented is so different between the two areas.”

Schoeller writes that his goal with the “Female Bodybuilders” series was to challenge his viewers and their initial reactions to the photographs. He notes that all of us, including the bodybuilders themselves, function in an image-conscious society that reinforces ideals of “the good, the right, and the beautiful.” “The athletes presented here are no different in this regard, they are as vulnerable as any other person standing in front of a camera,” Schoeller writes. “So what is it that provokes our admiring, conforming, outraged, or confused response? If a subject is proud of the way she looks, whose discomfort are you feeling?”

“Female Bodybuilders” opens today at Hasted Hunt Kraeutler gallery and is on view through Aug. 27, 2010. The gallery is located at 537 West 24th Street.