

# The Sexploitater Was Rather Proper

By DEBORAH BACH

**A**RTISTS have been inspired by everything from seascapes to skyscrapers. For Russ Meyer, it was breasts.

As a child in Oakland, Calif., he whiled away classroom hours fantasizing about his busty schoolteacher. At home he browsed through Al Capp's comic strips, particularly those featuring Daisy Mae, Li'l Abner's generously endowed sweetheart.

Mr. Meyer eventually parlayed his youthful obsession into a career making exploitation films, 24 of them, with titles like "Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!," "Supervixens" and "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls," all featuring large-breasted women. The director, now 80, reached cult status, attracting many devotees for his wanton, over-the-top soap operas. At least three rock bands — Vixen, Faster Pussycat and Mudhoney — named themselves after his movies.

Yet it is not his films but an exhibition of his still photographs at Feigen Contemporary in Manhattan that brings Mr. Meyer back into the limelight now.

Few people know Mr. Meyer as a photographer, and indeed, he started out in film, shooting home movies at 14, with a camera purchased with \$9.95 his mother got by pawning an engagement ring. He was a combat cameraman from 1941 to 1945, spending most of World War II filming Army advances in Germany and France, years he has described as the greatest experience of his life.

"As a young soldier in France, I met Ernest Hemingway and he took me to my first whorehouse, where I lost my virginity," recalled Mr. Meyer, who no longer

**In his photos from the 50's and 60's, Russ Meyer recalls an era of pinups who suggested more than they showed.**

grants interviews and responded to questions through his press representative.

After the war, Mr. Meyer returned to Oakland and began shooting stills for nude magazines, becoming a Playboy photographer in 1955. His photos were shown for the first time in a Santa Monica, Calif., gallery two years ago. The images being shown at Feigen, in black and white and in color, were taken in the 1950's and 1960's, an era when sex and sexuality in popular culture still had a sense of decorum.

"Meyer's films and his photos seem to represent a more innocent time, when sex was portrayed in a more fun, playful and wholesome manner," said Lance Kinz, a director of Feigen Contemporary. "From supervixen to empowered heroine, he was instrumental in establishing a genre of sexual iconography."

Mr. Meyer's photographs will be shown alongside works by four other provocative artists: Robert Crumb, the underground cartoonist whose best-known creations include Fritz the Cat and Mr. Natural; Tom of Finland, whose finely detailed homoerotic drawings celebrate the macho aesthetic later associated with the disco band Village People; Annie Sprinkle, the porn star and former prostitute whose "Bosom Ballet" features a series of photographs of a woman



Feigen Contemporary

*In 1959 Russ Meyer photographed his wife on a beach for "Eve in Red Lingerie."*

kneading her bare breasts with gloved hands; and Ellen Cantor, who creates illustrations of love and lust sometimes centered on Disney characters and fairy tales.

Despite Mr. Meyer's reputation as the

father of soft-core, his 18 works in the Feigen show look rather modest today. Most of the models are clothed, posed in quintessential pinup style. There is an image of Mr. Meyer's first wife, Eve, kneeling on a beach

## Russ Meyer Photographs

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in black and red lingerie, her bright smile and platinum hair reminiscent of Marilyn Monroe. Some bare breasts are shown, but full nudity is avoided. Other images depict women as commanding and powerful, as they are frequently characterized in Mr. Meyer's films. In one, the three stars of "Faster Pussycat, Kill! Kill!" stand in front of a Porsche, looking as if they could make Charlie's Angels quake in their platforms. Like the images shot by Bunny Yeager, who in the 1950's helped establish Bettie Page as a pinup queen and was herself a Playboy model, Mr. Meyer's works depict women flirtatiously embracing their sexuality. They are in control, their sexual potency a weapon to be wielded over hapless men.

The film critic Roger Ebert, author of the screenplay for "Beyond the Valley of the Dolls," wrote in 1995 that Mr. Meyer, "from the beginning of his career and almost without exception, has filmed only situations in which women wreak their will upon men."

Mr. Meyer, who has lived in Hollywood for more than four decades, said that as far as he is concerned nudity was not fully eroticized in photographs when he began taking pictures. "They were just photographs of flabby nudists," he said. "I started photographing the female body so it was sexually alluring. I try to capture the sensual eroticism of the female form, the sexual tone." Mr. Meyer said he chose his models for their beauty and their "protuberant qualities." Today, he said, photographers leave too little to the imagination and use cosmetically enhanced models who wouldn't have interested him.

That is not to say that Mr. Meyer believes the pinup girl is a relic of the past. "The pinup girls will never cease to exist," he said. "You have many new pin-up girls now, naturally not like a Russ Meyer girl, but they are still around."