Finding Aid to the Colt Studio Photographs Coll2014-122

Michael C. Oliveira
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Title: Colt Studio photographs
creator: Colt Studio
creator: French, Jim
Identifier/Call Number: Coll2014-122
Physical Description: 2.3 Linear Feet9 binder boxes, 2308 photographic prints
Date (inclusive): 1970-2000
Storage Unit: 1

Historical Note
Jim French is an American illustrator and photographer who created the male erotic photography studio Colt Studio, as well as its two predecessors, Arion Studio and The Lüger Studio. French was born on July 14, 1932, and quickly developed a taste for the fine arts. He attended the Philadelphia Museum School of Art from 1950 to 1954 with an eye towards a career in fashion illustration along the lines of J.C. Leyendecker. Following college, he enlisted in the Army, serving for two years and earning an honorable discharge. With photography quickly taking the place of fashion illustration advertising, French became a freelance advertising illustrator.

In his spare time, French began creating romantic homoerotic illustrations under the pseudonym Arion, largely in the period from 1964-65. In early-1966, French's illustrations under the Arion name were first offered via mail order by Arion Studio, based in New York City. It is unknown if this was a solo venture run by French or a precursor to The Lüger Studio, but the venture was short-lived, resulting in only one mailing. French's Arion drawings were also offered in 1966 via Ed Wild's Times Square Studio.

In mid-1966, French was approached by an old Army friend Saul Stollman, who was aware of French's Arion drawings, to create a physique studio, again operated out of New York City. The two went into business as The Lüger Studio. For this business venture, French adopted a new pseudonym Kurt Luger, and his new illustrations exhibited a more masculine aesthetic, featuring cowboys, leathermen, wrestlers and other similar archetypes. Indeed, the name Lüger, sans the superfluous umlaut that French added as an artistic flourish, was selected to evoke the German pistol. The illustrations French produced in this time were largely based on Polaroid reference photos he took of male nude models, and this led him to also venture into photography. The Lüger Studio quickly experienced success after being featured on the cover and in the pages of Kris Studios' Mars and other physique magazines. French quickly became suspicious of Stollman's failure to handle the business end of the studio, however, and hired his friend Lou Thomas on August 8, 1967 to look into the business side. By October 1967, Thomas was so frustrated by the mess that he left Colt Studio, and within a month French and Stollman had agreed that Stollman should buy out French and lead Lüger forward on his own. Stollman would make a final buyout payment to French in February 1968, but carried on briefly on his own, featuring at least one illustration photo set by himself and a few photographs and 8mm films created by other substandard producers. No further reference to Lüger is known beyond 1968.

On December 1, 1967, Jim French and Lou Thomas discussed starting their own studio together and on December 5, 1967, the pair took out a business license to form Colt Studio. Like Lüger, Colt Studio was named to evoke the image of a pistol, but very quickly the studio morphed its Colt image into the model of a young stallion. For the Colt venture, French assumed the new pseudonym Rip Colt, with the Rip portion of the name being inspired by the physique photographer Rip Searby. The first several years of the studio saw Colt sticking to the model of releasing French's illustrations under the Rip Colt name, photo sets featuring masculine male models, and eventually 8mm short films, magazines and calendars. For its first six years, Colt Studio was based out of New York City, but French traveled so frequently to Southern California that he eventually relocated Colt Studio City, California in 1974. Concurrent with this change, French bought out Lou Thomas' share in the company, freeing Thomas to branch out on his own and form Target Studios.

Colt Studio would eventually grow into one of the most successful gay erotic photography studios of its time. The company was famed not only for its stable of male models, but for its long-running magazine brands which included Manpower, Colt Men, Spurs, and Colt Studio Presents, as well as its calendars. Jim French continued to run the company until 2003, when former Falcon Studios director John Rutherford and his business partner Tom Settle purchased the Colt name and rebranded the company the Colt Studio Group. For a few years after his sale of the company, French continued to privately sell salon prints of his photographs, but he has since settled into a quiet retirement. The Colt Studio Group continues to feature much of French's work on their website, but the company's focus now is more on creating hardcore homoerotic...
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Preferred Citation

Processing Information
The collection was processed by Brad Bradley, Steve Fritch, Robert Graves, David Hensley, Christian Morales, and Michael C. Oliveira, November 2014.

Scope and Contents
The collection consists of Colt Studio photographic prints.

Conditions Governing Access
The collection is open to researchers. There are no access restrictions.

Related Materials
Colt Studio, Studios and Distributors Marketing Materials Collection, Coll2012-170, ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.

Arrangement
The images are arranged chronologically.

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Photographs
Photography of men
Gay erotic photography
Colt Studio
French, Jim

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