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By Scott Ostler

Ostler: DiMaggio in the raw

Oh, the creepy media are at it again, opening yet another pop superstar's private life to public inspection. This time the person exposed is San Francisco's greatest baseball player.

No, not The Freak. And not Barry Bonds, nor Willie Mays.

It's Joe DiMaggio.

But it turns out the exposure is in the name of art, not titillation and trashification.

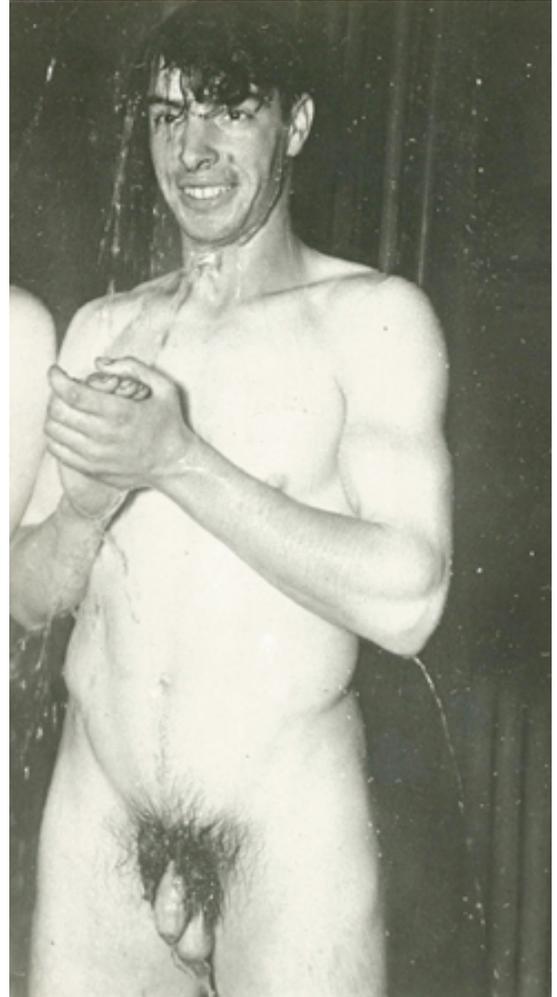
A full-frontal nude photograph of Joltin' Joe hangs in the gallery Modernism (685 Market St., Suite 290, through Aug. 29). The exhibit is "Hunted and Gathered," anonymous photos from the collection of Robert Flynn Johnson, curator emeritus of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

The photo shows DiMaggio in a postgame shower, wearing a happy grin. It's early in Joe's career, circa 1940. From the neck down it is Michelangelo's statue of David. Neck up, it's Huck Finn with a goofy smile.

Asked how he obtained the photo, Johnson joked, "I have friends in low places."

DiMag would be appalled. He was a private and guarded fellow with a carefully cultivated image of cool sophistication, a hermit prince. This photo is fascinating because it is Joe's alter ego. "Celebrities have a mask," Johnson said, "and when you pull out a camera, they put on the mask. Here you see Joe as a kid, with a slightly goofy grin. As he gets older he takes on a more severe, distinguished look. (The photo) is a kid, showing joy, and his guard's down."

Added Johnson, "It's a Rorschach test for people's perceptions. Some will only see a Joe DiMaggio, see only frontal nudity. To others, you or I, this is an athlete in his prime, showing



Anonymous, "DiMaggio", c. 1940, vintage gelatin silver print

A photo of DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe on the verge of a kiss sold for \$2,250. The nude Joe is not for sale.

"It's too interesting a photo," Johnson says.

HUNTED & GATHERED: Photographs from the Private Collection of ROBERT FLYNN JOHNSON
July 9 – August 29, 2009.