

TAKE 4

MAPPLETHORPE
AS CULTURAL TERRORIST

**Playing “Chicken”
With The Avant-Garde**

New York is a tough town, But the devil’s advocate whom
Mapplethorpe feared lives in London.

Edward Lucie-Smith is more British than the queen, more amusing, and better dressed. He is a much-published author of fiction, history, and art.

Robert never liked Edward, because Edward, meeting Robert Mapplethorpe, long before he became “The Mapplethorpe,” diagnosed Robert’s social climbing as a one-trick pony.

Robert, who rarely received a bad review, feared the power of critic Edward Lucie-Smith, whom he called “that nasty, English faggot critic.”

Edward is hardly nasty. He lives in London in a flat in Avonmore Road, next to the Great Olympia Exhibition Halls: computers one week, travel fairs the next. At his home, he cooked up a Moroccan supper for me while we rattled on, wedged in among his substantial collection of paintings, photographs, sculpture, and books. He is a brilliant scholar whose sense of art history and contemporary society gives a touchingly real sense of Robert hustling the New York art world. Two stacks of book manuscripts he is writing sit neatly on his desk. Among more than a hundred titles, he is the author of *Eroticism in Western Art*, published by Oxford University Press.

The hour was late. We had attended a gallery opening for David Pearce, who paints leather more classically than Mapplethorpe shot it, and then a late screening of Derek Jarman’s extraordinary film *Edward II*. Jarman was Mapplethorpe’s bete noire. And, now, we were both slightly giddy with the kind of after-midnight chat that loosens inhibition.

Lucie-Smith’s view from abroad offers insightful perspective on the young photographer lately sprung up in America. “Robert Mapplethorpe

was an extremely interesting American phenomenon,” he said. “Robert was not a great artist, he was a great salesman.”

Such judgment by the much-published art historian and critic flashed a fresh, provocative perspective on Mapplethorpe, whose later fame as a household word was owed more to political controversy than a national debate on aesthetics.

During the U.S. censorship battles, art, as expression of free speech, had been defended in principle much more than the work of Mapplethorpe in particular.

Robert was simply the legal scoop *du jour*. His surname became an answer on the TV game show *Jeopardy* in September 1990.

He was an artist certified by galleries, museums, critics, celebrities, and indirectly by the National Endowment for the Arts, which funded galleries showing Mapplethorpe, who himself never received NEA grants.

The courts judged not at all if he were a great artist. Somehow, the media and the public presumed posthumously that Mapplethorpe’s work must be great art because the great furor it caused made it famous for being infamous.

Edward Lucie-Smith is a scholar whose vision eschews instant media bites for the larger scope of art history.

“To understand Robert, one must understand that the New York art scene is extremely closed. I’ve always functioned as a well-informed outsider. Manhattan has its own social dynamic. A kind of incestuous interplay of money, fame, and art. Robert learned the game early on. He wanted in and he would do anything to enter the in-crowd. He parlayed a virtual hostage situation. He played ‘chicken’ with the avant-garde.”

“To gain what approval?”

“Imagine the young Robert in the late sixties, early seventies, deliberately setting up avant-garde savants by showing them his fresh, shocking images. They had to like his work, because if they blinked in shock, they immediately lost their avant-garde status. His assault on them was an ‘invitation to a mugging’ he could not lose. Robert wanted status and he achieved it by threatening their status. If they thought themselves far out, he presented himself as farther out. He was very clever.”

“Robert must have found it difficult to manipulate you.”

“My God! The poor lad hardly had the chance. A psychoanalyst, who is married to my best friend, engineered my meeting Mapplethorpe. He introduced Robert with the immortal phrase: ‘I want you to meet the most polymorphously perverse person I have ever met in my life.’ What a come-on!”

Robert's boyish charm failed to work to his advantage. Edward Lucie-Smith presented a formidable hurdle that Robert, even with a running start, could not clear. His practiced ingenuousness fell flat.

"Robert, at that early stage," Lucie-Smith said, "was still on the outside looking in. He was a greyhound on a leash. He foamed with ambition. He had various friends plugging his reputation. Gert Schiff, a professor at NYU, was one such person, more than the psychoanalyst, who fostered my brief first acquaintance with Robert."

"What was Schiff's interest in Robert?"

"Gert was two people in one body. He was a respected art historian, a full professor at NYU, author of the Fuseli Catalog *raisonné*, later the creator of the wildly successful Late Picasso show at the Guggenheim. A meticulous Swiss. He was also a prime case of gay satyriasis. He fucked anything that moved—if it was reasonably pretty and of the masculine gender. He performed a balancing act between these two selves by being a resident for many years at the Chelsea Hotel."

"The Chelsea Hotel?"

"Gert got me a room there, and that's how I continued my ongoing acquaintance with Robert."

"What year was this?"

"The New York underground cinema was in full swing. Warhol. The Kuchar brothers. Kenneth Anger. Warhol had just made *The Chelsea Girls*. He made *Blow Job* in 1963. He made *Chelsea* in 1966. So it was 1966.

"Robert at first was too poor to live at the Chelsea Hotel, so he lived down the street, but he hung out in the Chelsea, cruising its corridors, picking up on the art-sex-and-drugs cachet of the address, trying to meet people who knew people."

Robert at the time was twenty years old and had been hustling Manhattan for four years. He was six years away from meeting art historian John McKendry, curator of photography at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who bought Robert his first serious camera.

Robert worked the Chelsea Hotel and the galleries by day the way, in the later, more successful, period in the late seventies, he worked clubs like Max's Kansas City, The Saint, and the Mineshaft by night. Those early days, he once told me, were hard and dark. Sometimes, he was able to afford the tab on a small room at the Chelsea Hotel on West Twenty-third Street. Sometimes, he retired to a dingy walk-up just down the street. In New York, one's address is everything, and crashing the Chelsea, the notorious avant-garde enclave, gave Robert his first tangible sense of arrival.

At the Chelsea, Robert claimed (in his version), he met Patti Smith, who appeared in his open doorway looking for someone else, not Robert, whom she had never met. "I woke up," Robert said, "and there was Patti. We recognized each other's souls instantly. We had matching bodies. I had never met her, but I knew her."

The androgynous bodies took, according to Robert's take, to a kind of Chelsea heterosexual bonding. They became a couple on the art-and-party circuit. They pooled their money to afford their nightly visits to Mickey Ruskin's bistro at Park Avenue and Sixteenth Street, Max's Kansas City, where sixties pop celebrated itself nightly. "I hated going there," Robert said, "but I had to."

At dawn, the young couple returned to the Chelsea. Robert supposedly had kicked a hole in the wall between his room and Patti's. This instant suite was his first attempt at interior design.

Robert needed Patti. He was alone. She was there. She nurtured him for several years. She was a writer and he was mad for the company of writers. She was a singer and he loved rock 'n' roll. *The Chelsea Girls* film had lasted three hours and fifteen minutes. Robert and Patti lasted longer. For a while, as a couple, they were chronologically correct, until they weren't. Patti graduated to her own stardom, travels, and odalisques. One pop culture urban tale has Patti running off with playwright Sam Shepard, leaving Shepard's writer/film actress wife, O-lan Jones (O-lan later became a theater legend, directing her experimental music and theater company, Overtone Industries). Another urban pop tale, told by porn star J. D. Slater, pairs Patti with the lead guitarist of MC-5, Fred Sonic Smith.

Patti Smith herself can be the only one to tell the tales of her heart. Whatever her real private history, the true romance pop culture story is she never really left Robert, not for men, not for women, not for music, not for long, because she was more than his muse; she was his twin, his divine androgyne, and he was her photographer, the artist whose camera, with her, became positively Kirlian, capturing her spirit, her aura, her being.

His camera became their bond.

"Patti is a genius." Robert said that so often I began to understand that what he said about Patti he was projecting about himself as modestly as he could. His style was to reveal his personal self by indirection. (His professional self he revealed by edict.) Consequently, I never knew much about Patti, to whom I sometimes spoke on Robert's phone calls from my home, because Robert used her as an emblem to talk about himself.

When Edward Lucie-Smith met Robert and Patti, they were inmates at the Chelsea: spiritually, but not physically. “When I met him,” Edward said, “Robert was in one of his ‘broke’ phases, and the walk-up a few doors down the street was the place where he slept, if he ever did sleep, while he hung out at the Chelsea.” But Robert and Patti seemed “avant-ly” certifiable “Chelsea Girls.” Signs and omens were everywhere. Warhol’s film was banned in Boston and Chicago. The “Chelsea Robert,” so enthralled by Warhol, was already on the trendy trajectory toward censorship.

“When I stayed at the Chelsea Hotel,” Edward Lucie-Smith said, “there was a girl named Sandy Daley who had made the underground film *Robert Having His Nipple Pierced*. The scene was pure Warhol. Miss Daley’s screening of her film took place in the very room where it had been shot. Some of the silver plastic pillows, their helium depleted, flitted through the film. Robert was there with Patti. The relationship was starting to turn to a pair-bonding friendship.

“But there he was. He had never yet picked up a camera in a serious way. He was still on the other side of the lens. He was the star of this... movie.”

“What was he like that night?”

“He was pretty. He was uncertain. He knew who I was.”

“That’s Robert. It was the same when we met. He knew who I was. I had never heard of him.”

“That night, he fairly dripped with ambition for one so obviously not tremendously talented.”

“Was he playing underground film star?”

“He was beyond that conceit. The next day, he insisted I come up to his dingy walk-up so he could show me his rather creepy collages, pictures of naked young men cut from magazines. He had covered them with a kind of rubbery spiderweb so they seemed to be flies caught in a death trap.”

“What was your reaction to the film?”

“I thought the evening odd. In the film, Robert and Patti were very like each other, outsiders, pretty, but hungry and skinny, and deathly intense. Patti had a slightly hysterical edge, which I think probably has to do with something in her childhood. She did the soundtrack of the movie. She spoke live; it was an improvised poem. Patti worked then, the way a good rap artist works now Patti watches while Robert, having his nipple pierced, lies in the arms of a male lover.”

“Home movies in the cinema of the damned!”

“I think the film was supposed to be about the tensions in Robert’s nature, about his attraction to Patti and his attraction to men. They seemed to have come to some terms with the ambiguity, perhaps through the film. It encapsulated the moment from which they were all moving away.”

Edward Lucie-Smith’s assessment is as poetic as Fitzgerald’s closing lines of *The Great Gatsby*, and as existentially insightful: “the moment from which they were all moving away.”

That crucial “moment,” not yet a “perfect moment,” was that nano-second when Robert Mapplethorpe “came out” from heterosexuality into the chic homosexuality that would certify him as genuinely avant-garde.

Robert’s experience with Sandy Daley’s movie, in this charmed Chelsea circle, showed him the power of film that freezes time into moments perfect and past imperfect.

Never underestimate the power of women in art.

Patti, as poet and singer, jumped way ahead of Robert. Before her celebrity as an early punk-rock pioneer at the music club CBGB, she was an eager performance artist of her own poetry in SoHo clubs. Robert himself made it into the avant-garde Holly Solomon Gallery, where Holly was about to change his life.

“Holly,” Edward said, “is a formidable woman. She was then the Mother Superior of a certain kind of avant-garde scene. She advanced in a serious way. Soon Holly sent him to the Robert Miller Gallery!”

“Holly claims,” I told Edward, “Robert walked out on her, politely enough, right during her exhibition of his work. He simply wanted to trade up and out of SoHo because art patrons then didn’t like to go south of Fifty-seventh Street.”

“Everyone remembers everything differently” said Edward. “I do think it was another way round. I don’t wish to contradict anyone, most of all Holly, whom I revere, but Robert was doing images Holly couldn’t handle.”

I said, “Robert took Holly around to porn shops and they both had a good laugh about the sex magazines and the marital plastique.”

“Still, Holly is not gay. She’s straight. Avant-garde, yes. But heterosexual. And Robert had become overtly homosexual. Robert Samuels was an openly gay gallery hardly abashed by Mapplethorpe’s early work, even though I don’t think Robert Samuels ever did a show of the later, real S&M material. They used to show his *X Portfolio* to potentially sympathetic clients in the back room. All this pop culture history depends on one’s knowledge of the inner workings of the New York art scene, on one’s memory, and one’s attitude toward the truth.”

Truth is not chronology.
Truth is not biography.
Truth is something one distills from impressions.
Truth is *Rashomon*.

“Robert, I must say,” Edward mused, very like the analytical historian he is, “was very lucky to meet and cohabit with Sam Wagstaff, who was a real, old-fashioned easterner and one of the first pioneers in the collection of photography. My friend, Helene, the psychoanalyst’s wife, had known Sam since they were teenagers. They used to go to upper-crust teen dances together. She said Sam danced divinely. So you very well see that Robert married better than he first realized. Wagstaff was pedigreed and had a generation’s head start on Robert. Wagstaff was a collector. He had little creativity himself, but he had great taste.

“Very little, even by the mid-seventies, was known about photography as fine art.

“Wagstaff was collecting great photographic images before the hierarchy of photographers was settled.”

“Robert shocked Sam’s perceptions about sex,” I said.

“Sam shocked Robert about photography,” Edward said. “With Sam as his mentor in the vast unstudied sea of photographic images, Robert was a most privileged student. Sam gave Robert access to an art form, and genres within that art form, which was then completely unfashionable, particularly Edwardian pictorialist photography

“Robert absorbed every image he ever saw. The Baron de Meyer’s famous image of the flower became Robert’s flower. Robert also nicked something from de Meyer’s sequence of photographs showing Nijinsky in *L’Après-midi d’un Faune*.”

In several of his self-portraits Robert referenced himself as faun, satyr, Pan.

“The Diaghilev milieu,” Edward said, “would have suited Robert very well. And then, when the money started coming in, he began collecting. He absorbed anything that could be useful. He picked up on the incoming Deco craze.”

I told Edward that sometimes while shopping with him, I was amazed. He was buying up Arts and Crafts, Mission furniture, before anyone else in the seventies caught the rage.

“Robert was lucky with Sam that he caught the wave of photography, the same wave that benefits Cindy Sherman, Bruce Weber, Herb Ritts, Helmut Newton, and Annie Leibovitz.” Edward gestured to a shelf of recent photography books. “Back in the sixties,” he said, “New York

collectors were frightfully arrogant, frightfully specialized, and, therefore, frightfully provincial. They were frightened that images of flowers might be kitsch. Could they dare have photographs of flowers on their chic walls? But secretly they all had a sweet tooth for Robert's kind of candy.

"Robert charged into the scene and opened it up. He was young, fresh, and coyly abrasive. His bold condescension, his icy coldness to anyone who challenged him, was excitingly assaultive in a decade when theater loved cruelty. He broke the perceived taste of the avant-garde obeying Warhol's pontifications.

"Robert gave people permission to be avant-gardistes with photographs of lilies in the dining room, because, as soon as everyone knew about his fisting photographs, his lilies gained an edge. The flowers opened up whispered avant conversations about his forbidden photographs, which, at first, not too many had been granted favor to see."

Edward Steichen said in 1963 that the custom in New York since the 1920s was to hang nude art, especially photographs, discreetly away in the bedroom.

"So the subtext of the flower photographs' popularity is the existence of the nude and leathersex photographs?"

"The forbidden photographs," Edward replied, "made the flowers desirable, salable."

"Did that same sexual subtext cause his celebrity portraits to succeed?"

"He definitely benefited from his private history. Of course, it was sexy to be shot by such a naughty boy."

"But are the portraits good?"

"He was a great photographer of celebrities. That doesn't make him a great photographer historically, but he had a knack for bringing out an essential beauty in faces from the most ordinary to the most extraordinary.

"His subject whom I knew best was Bruce Chatwin. Robert and Bruce were the same kind of person. Ambitious, charming—if they wished to be. Bruce was a writer, the author of *Songlines*, a novel about Australian aborigines. In England, he cut a brilliant, legendary, seductive figure. Robert, very keenly, cut straight to the element of danger in Bruce's personality, just that risky trait which was to bring Bruce to an early end from AIDS."

Bruce Chatwin, the distinguished travel writer best known for his 1977 *In Patagonia*, died at age forty-eight on January 17, 1989, seven weeks before Robert died.

“Robert superficially posed Bruce as an pretty, blond English boy with blazing blue eyes,” said Edward. “He posed him as some wild creature caught in the glare of the spotlight.

“Robert stripped Bruce’s mask of ambiguity. Bruce had always been running away to the ends of the earth to deny he was gay. But Robert, who was so commercially out sexually, knew what Bruce was about and his photograph tells all.

“Robert often bragged that he knew what people were for, what they were really like, even if they didn’t know themselves, or wouldn’t admit it. He liked to upset people by showing them his truth of what their faces hid. I know he upset me when I saw my portrait. Eventually, he upset everybody.”

Robert certainly knew what Chatwin’s literary reputation was for. He engaged Bruce to write the introduction to Robert’s *Lady Lisa Lyon* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1983).

“Bruce was exposed on film,” Edward said, “but Robert kept him conventionally pretty enough to keep Bruce happy, even though the photograph virtually exudes his deepest, darkest secret.”

“Robert often X-rayed subjects who interested him,” I said. “The portraits he shot by personal choice are a different take from the commercial portraits he did for cash.”

“Let’s say Robert was good at perfecting people in the way that a good courtier perfects his patron, all the while keeping his cynicism cleverly coded even within the art piece.”

Edward opened the photography book *In the American West*, and read a quotation from Richard Avedon:

“A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth.”

“At least Avedon speaks like Steichen,” I said. “I find it sad, as does Joel-Peter Witkin, that Robert never wrote about his work. He said writing took too much time, so he preferred to hang out with writers. His literary talent was to give absolutely charming interviews to reporters.”

“Robert stole that gimmick from Andy Warhol,” Edward said.

“But Warhol wrote, sort of the book *Popism*. And Robert wrote only letters. Maybe he hadn’t enough intellectual mass to write. He wasn’t well educated. He was great at small talk: deflecting, derailing, trivializing, humoring. I remember him saying that primitive tribes who believed the

camera sees the soul were right. Maybe that says everything he had to say about his photography.”

“He *was* iconic,” Edward said. “It was his Catholicism. Women, madonnas, virgins. Celebrities of the Jungian anima. Robert seemed to venerate women as much as he did males. You once wrote, I remember, that Robert was partial to princesses.”

“Yes. Of both sexes.”

“Robert was very like Boldini, who is the Italian Sargent, much shallower than Sargent, who exaggerated the same elements which Robert was able to put into the camera. Especially with princesses. There is as much exaggeration in the celebrity portraits as there is in the genital photographs. I suppose there’s a certain chic in that.

“One could line the better Mapplethorpe portraits up against some drawings by David Hockney, who is so very good. Where the nudes are concerned, Robert, unlike Hockney, treated his subjects not as personalities, but simply as objects. Human sculpture. He studied sculpture first. There’s a big gulf between Robert’s black nude sex objects, shot by the gay Robert, and the nude celebrity portraits, shot by the homosexual Robert. Hockney’s nude drawings are always naked portraits: real personalities with cocks attached.

“So many gay photographers don’t take portraits of nude men. They just shoot pictures of a cock which happens to have an appendage, a person attached to it.”

“I often do that myself, for magazines and videos,” I said. “That’s what sells. That’s entertainment.”

“Exactly,” Edward said. “One must really consider so much in any assessment of Mapplethorpe.”

“Where do you place Patti Smith in all of this?”

“I wish I knew Patti better. She came to see me in England. She rang me up, which I never thought she would. She was photographing rock stars. I think she was trying to compete with Robert’s act. I remember how incredibly naive she was, yet she struck me as very sensitive. She’s a good person, but somehow damaged. Robert’s work gives some internal evidence that he clung to her as symbolic of some possibility he had lost.”

“That possibility was his heterosexuality, which reared its latent head once in a convenient while.”

“You don’t say.”

“I do. And what you say touches me, because when I look at the last photographs of Patti, she seems like the grieving, about-to-be-widowed Mrs. Robert Mapplethorpe. I think she’s the wife he would have had.”

"I'm sure of that. Women in men's lives create more mysteries than mistakes," Edward said. "I simply didn't understand her need to photograph rock stars."

"It could be she wanted to emulate Robert with her own camera. She is a woman of a certain vision in her writing."

"But she was unable to do photography. And then going back to Detroit, of all places, with the baby. I can't remember if the baby's father was ever announced."

"Perhaps Robert was the father."

"God save us. Another Mapplethorpe."

"He has a younger brother, also a photographer, to whom he left his cameras. He has exhibitions under the name Ed Maxey."

"I am well aware of that young man. He just had a show in London. Robert—and, I suspect, other Mapplethorpes as well—regarded me as a hostile power."

"He probably feared your critical analysis," I said.

"I hope Patti doesn't share that fear," Edward said. "She was his alter ego. She was the light to his dark. Perhaps she sees the other side of me. I suspect his photographs of her are his best work."

"Women responded exceptionally well to Robert," I said. "He was one of those men who genuinely like women. Brutus, a straight male model Robert and I both shot, traveled to Japan with Lisa Lyon. Brutus swears that Robert had a hot affair with Lisa."

Women, from college girls to socialites, love to dally with artists. Women were the first to promote Robert, who knew how to promote them. He shot film of Patti and video of Lisa and stills of them both. . . .

"I must say," Edward said, "that the women in his photographs, whether demure or daring, seem genuinely self-assured and comfortable, as if they trusted him implicitly behind the camera."

"His mother died shortly after Robert," I said. Her name was Joan Maxey Mapplethorpe.

"At least she missed the scandal," Edward said.

"His father, Harry Mapplethorpe, told the press that he wouldn't have any one of his own son's photographs hanging in his house."

"So where does that leave the younger brother?"

"My guess is," I said, "somewhere in the Mapplethorpe firmament. Immediately after Robert's death, he showed up in Los Angeles photographing women, celebrities, nothing sexy or controversial I know of. He seems to be straight. His girl friend, when he was in LA, was said to be one of Robert's female models. If he's not gay, in an age of AIDS paranoia,

he's a safe, nonembarrassing reincarnation of Robert, who loved confrontation. He's culturally a half-generation younger than Robert. He's mid-thirties, probably wanting, justifiably, what everyone wants: fifteen minutes of fame. At thirty-two, Robert had been famous for years. A certain San Francisco photographer, who was jealous of Robert alive, said, 'Ed's photographs in *Details* magazine seemed cloned from Robert. If Robert was an X ray, Ed is a Xerox copy.' How tacky these queens can be about innocent straight survivors."

"I was worried," Edward said, "that *I* might be negative about the Mapplethorpe clan."

"Don't look at me," I said. "I'm just a pop culture journalist talking to people."

Anyone who puts his art out for exhibit hangs it for criticism as well. My limited experience with Ed Maxey Mapplethorpe, his reputation, and his work has run from enthusiasm to wait-and-see if he finds his own voice or his own eye. Time will tell if he's his own artist or just numero uno of all the Mapplethorpe impersonators. It would be wonderful if Ed could have his own career. He seemed personable when we spoke. Robert bequeathed Ed his cameras, and told Ed not to use the Mapplethorpe surname, because Ed would do better on his own. Was that fraternal sentiment or commercial endorsement? Or was it that there was only one MAPPLETHORPE! Knowing Robert's knack for control and controversy, one thinks, well, this may be drama from beyond the grave. The dead Lord Mapplethorpe spins the archetype: Cain dies; Abel lives; Cain keeps Abel under control. Ed Maxey Mapplethorpe actually has some hands-on arts credential besides a share in the sibling gene pool.

"Ed worked with Robert," I said, "as an assistant from about 1982 to his death in 1989."

"God knows, someone should have," Edward said. "We were looking at some of Robert's later work at the last art fair in London and were rather shocked by the poor quality of the prints. They hadn't been properly spotted. They were dirtily printed. When you inspected them, the immaculate quality he had always been so famous for didn't stand up at all."

"At the last," I said, "he seemed to shoot faster. As he became ill, he had less time to pay attention to the editing, let alone to the printing. I don't know. I can only conjecture. Like Warhol, who let other people do his work, Robert sometimes seemed to me more into product than art. I've talked to several photographers who have AIDS and they all said they'd speeded up their production."

“Well, anybody would. But these were rather inexcusably grungy, even in an unfortunate age of grunge as style, especially when his reputation relied on one’s perception that his work was immaculate.”

“AIDS takes its toll in many ways.”

“I have a theory about extremely modern art,” Edward said, “which is that the person is more important than the product.”

“Thank Warhol and his fifteen-minute cult of personality. I think people are more important than art. But I understand what you mean as a critic.”

“What I mean to say is that Robert finished up in a situation where his presence was everything. What was left were relics. Robert, in effect, made himself, St. Robert Mapplethorpe, commodity and martyr.”

“To die for art ranks somewhere near dying for love,” I said.

“May I tell you a parable? Joan of Arc was a girl from a remote country, the daughter of a prosperous peasant. By strength of will and personal conviction, and some mad mysticism, she became an androgynous warrior. She took a gigantic risk, and, of course, she paid for it. Jump from Joan to Robert. Give a little. Take a little. Robert performed the same sort of self-transformation. He was a middle-class boy run away from a Catholic family. He transformed himself into a mover and shaker in the most insular and snobbish art world of them all. He did it by personal conviction. That’s why, in a sense, I don’t hold his careerism against him. He assaulted the New York avant-garde with his camera, and won.” Edward Lucie-Smith smiled. “Robert Mapplethorpe was a cultural terrorist.”

“What of his reputation twenty years from now? Will he be revered or just a footnote because of the censorship battles?”

“Robert Mapplethorpe will always be a figure of bizarre fascination. He’s no Oscar Wilde. Robert never produced in photography, no matter how much his ‘perfect moments’ are touted, anything as good as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which is the perfect symbol of comedy.”

“I think he is as talented, genre for genre, as Wilde,” I said. “He’s virtually a retroversion of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Certainly, in court and controversy, Mapplethorpe is this *fin de siècle’s* Wilde with a Hasselblad.”

“One should also consider Duchamp and Dürer. Duchamp invented the ‘found object’: art that isn’t art. Dürer portrayed himself as the Christ.”

“Robert often fantasized and photographed himself as the Christ,” I said.

“Actually, the most revealing Mapplethorpe book is Christie’s catalog of the auction of Robert’s estate. It may be Robert’s greatest joke.”

“No,” I said. “His greatest joke was his BBC interview”

“Well,” Edward said, “he wasn’t a great collector and his wasn’t a great collection. Christie’s catalog was extremely skillfully hyped to legitimize all the kitsch, and anyone wanting to know Robert would benefit from studying it.

“The catalog has four or five sections. First, all the glass, which was Robert’s real specialty; then a mix of Mission and fifties furniture; followed by rather leading-edge decorative specialties of his time. Next was Robert’s so-called photographic collection—the vintage material, which I suspect consisted mainly of gifts from Wagstaff. Also, I recall a pile of minimalist artwork, which no doubt came from Sam, because it had nothing to do with Robert’s tastes or interests. Finally, there is this accumulation of diabolist kitsch: devil’s heads, skulls with crossbones, satanic candlesticks. You name it. He had it.”

“I often shopped with him. He bought by whimsy. Price was no object.”

“I’m sure you thought it a joke.”

Robert was a dealer. The Christie’s auction catalog is a beautiful piece of work published for moving “The Collection of Robert Mapplethorpe, Sold for the Benefit of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, Inc.” Actually, the catalog is Robert’s Wish Book come true, a sumptuous garage sale, as has become custom among *haute* homosexuals, selling off grand-to-the-valiant-end in an age of AIDS, “by appointment only.”

Robert secures the last laugh, the biggest sale of all.

Loot.

The proof of his social and aesthetic acceptance.

He was an aerobic shopper.

He was good.

He learned from Sam to hit on a genre before it became chic. He collected 1950s glass, Mission furniture, African and Native American folk art, Old Masters and new from Europe and America. He had a good eye, but he often paid too much. Dealers knew he had money. He cursed when he was overcharged, but his lust for the object held him. I’d advise him to walk, think, have coffee, return, negotiate. That took time. He rarely bargained. He knew he had reached the fulcrum where he had more money than time.

Robert recouped the excessive prices he all too often was charged. He “worked” his collection. He photographed his American and European glass vases with flowers. He shot his collection of folk art and European sculpture: a small Farnese Hercules, Pan, Satyr, Mephistopheles. He used

the objects in his studio work, because he loved them, but, as a sharp trader, wanting to recoup his investment, everything of value had a price. He lovingly photographed his things in the glamorous, pricey style suited for beautiful commercial print ads for magazines to up their resale value.

When finally his precious objects were auctioned, he had, in addition, his beautiful photographs of them: sale objects selling themselves. The physical collectible might be sold, but he maintained ownership of the negatives of their photographs. Because he photographed the objects, they were worth more, endorsed by his selection and enhanced by his take.

Every perfect object served double duty.

Through his camera, he multiplied his loot.

He not only sold the stuff.

He sold photographs of the stuff.

The Christie's auction was a collection of relics of St. Mapplethorpe. He endorsed his collection the way athletes endorse Wheaties. He upped the value. A George Sakier glass vase became even more important when collected, photographed, and signed by Mapplethorpe.

At least to those collectors, mistrustful of their own personal instinct for style, who follow formidable tastemakers like Robert.

No wonder George Dureau said, "Robert ran himself like a department store."

Robert's collection of photography was far-ranging: antique to contemporary. He bought and sold and kept the best, at least, of the work he personally preferred, especially respected friends Lynn Davis, Joel-Peter Witkin, George Dureau, and Annie Leibovitz.

In his personal photography collection, kept till death, his private, delicious delight in the art is distinctly profiled.

Robert's final photo-sort profiles the homage he paid to photographers, historical or personal friends, who influenced him or whom he admired: F. Holland Day (*Orpheus Series, Return to Earth*), Adolph de Meyer (*The Opium Smoker and Portrait of Robert Stowitz in a Diaghilev Ballet*), Harold Edgerton (*30 Cal. Bullet through an Apple*), George Dureau (assorted male nude studies), Peter Hujar (selected images), Clarence Kennedy (fashion and society sculpture studies), Angus McBean (male face portrait and reclining male nude), George Platt Lynes, Julia Margaret Cameron (*The Shadow of the Cross*), Edward Curtis (Native American portraits: *Crow—Chief White Swan* and *The Potter, Hopi*), Edward Steichen (*Fashion Portrait*), Alfred Stieglitz (*Portrait of Marie Rapp*), three from Diane Arbus, two from Bruce Weber, seven from Joel-Peter Witkin (*Lisa Lyon as Hercules*, bearded, and *Mandan*, depicting the sun dance

ritual enacted by my friend, mystic performance artist, Fakir Musafar), five from longtime friend and Mapplethorpe Foundation board member Lynn Davis (*Iceberg* and *Selected Images*), and two from Annie Leibovitz (one, the sublime photograph, *John Lennon and Yoko Ono*, 1980: Lennon nude, curled fetally across the reclining Ono whose hair flows across the floor; this photograph was taken the afternoon of the evening Lennon was shot).

Robert, ever in search of the other's interpretations of his persona, enjoyed the tribute of other artists who created superlative portraits of "The Mapplethorpe." At Bond Street, early on, he cherished his image as shot by Scavullo.

Drawings, photographs, and screens of Robert, sold on the auction block, represent the best of what he liked about himself interpreted by sibling artists: Patti Smith, *Robert Mapplethorpe and Patti Smith Go to Coney Island Together*, graphite and crayons, \$400; David Hockney, *Portrait of Robert Mapplethorpe*, pen and black ink on paper, New York, June 1, 1971, \$75,000; Francesco Clemente, *Untitled* (Robert Mapplethorpe), watercolor on paper, March 1976, \$15,000; Don Bacardy, *Portrait of Robert Mapplethorpe*, pen and black ink wash on paper, February 2, 1979, \$1,500; Tom of Finland, *Portrait of Robert Mapplethorpe*, 1979, \$600; Andy Warhol, *Portrait of Robert Mapplethorpe*, synthetic polymer silk-screen on canvas—unframed, 1983, \$120,000.

These works give perspective on the photographer who was absolutely enamored of self-portraiture.

We once discussed gaining the whole world and losing one's soul.

Robert kissed the concept off.

Robert was a material boy.

He joked about his pact with the devil. Lapsed Catholics do that as shtick. He invited me along. I had other things to do. I preferred sex to money. At least then, when the world was safer. In that take, somewhere, is the difference between the erotic seventies and the greedy eighties, and the nineties' attitude about both decades.

Nothing in the Christie's auction was more personal than Robert's jewelry. Anita Loos and Marilyn knew diamonds were a girl's best investment. Elizabeth Taylor appreciates diamonds as tokens of romance. Robert liked jewelry. Andy worshipped jewelry. Of course, not after the gauche style of Liberace. But they often compared treasures. Andy's taste ran to the fashionable. Robert tilted more toward the arcane.

I witnessed more than one purchase.

In complement to his occult sculptures of Mephistopheles, Satan, satyrs, death skulls, snakes, and ritual knives, his jewelry related to necromancy: silver crucifixes worn pendent from neck chains; devil-faced cuff links; coiled serpent pins; gold bracelets worked with astrological symbols; brooches with pentacle, or lucky horseshoe charms engraved with the number 13, and Samboesque faces of black men; rings of magical design; and Third Reich “jewelry” particularly rich metal insignia of military rank. Robert’s choice in his night-life jewelry fit the leathersex style *offaux* Nazi set by the Hell’s Angels and ritualized in Kenneth Anger’s underground movie, *Scorpio Rising*, a favorite in the sixties in museum film-art programs and a classic in the seventies in leather bars that showed movies over the heads of the crowd.

Was the Christie’s auction slated for a “designer” date? The Robert Mapplethorpe Collection sale was held on Tuesday, October 31, 1989, the Highest of all Homosexual Holidays, Halloween, the first All Hallows’ Eve after Robert’s death, and four days before his forty-third birthday.

“Robert wasn’t amoral,” Edward said.

“I thought his whimsy revealed his character,” I said. “It was shocking fun. All the satanic buys reinforced my own interest in the occult, which was very important to Robert. He played at it. We all did then. For outrageous symbolism. The Age of Aquarius and all that.”

“I think, *hmmm*, more than that.” Edward sounded suspiciously British. “Robert was immoral in the sense that he wanted to parade as the devil. He photographed himself wearing horns.”

“Satanism was his affectation,” I said. “He used the occult like he used homosexuality: hot topics to distract and scare people so they couldn’t get too close and find out he was terribly insecure and not very well educated.”

“You don’t think he meant it?”

“I spent more than ten years, from age fourteen to twenty-four, in a Catholic seminary. Once a Catholic, always a Catholic. No matter how lapsed.”

“Perhaps he *was* in some passing phase.”

“Robert had as many phases as faces and postures and attitudes,” I said. “What I’d like to know is, historically, will Sam Wagstaff as collector and arbiter of taste exceed Robert’s reputation as a photographer?”

“I think anyone who cares to analyze the phases of Robert’s work will have to go through the Wagstaff collection in minute detail.”

“The Wagstaff collection was bought by the Getty Museum.”

“Yes,” Edward said. “It’s presently squirreled away for cataloging.”

“That should take some time.”

“I recently thought of the most wonderful story” Edward said. “Robert and Sam were already lovers, still in the first flush of love, and Sam had brought his little sweetheart to England on one of his photograph-buying trips. There they were, visiting an extremely nice flat in the best part of London: wonderful Old Master drawings, nice Dutch pictures, the flowers, the antique furniture. That was Sam’s milieu from birth; Robert’s only recently by marriage.

“What a show these two Americans put on! Cloying as two lovers, they sat side by side on a huge sofa holding in their laps a large album of Polaroids they had brought to show my friends, and Sam’s friends, Helene and Werner.

“These Polaroids! My God! They were shots of their personal sex life! The pictures were of genitals tied up into exotic knots and presented on little wooden plaques. I suspect the genitals were Sam’s. But, there they were, this honeymoon couple sharing their wedding photographs with sophisticated friends.”

“Those Polaroids were his first explicit leathersex pictures,” I said.

“I believe that Robert’s photography, as photography became the obvious vehicle for his ambition, was an offspring of their erotic games. He progressed from Polaroids to the very formal photographs which appeared in the Robert Samuels album. The fisting photograph appeared about this time: a pair of buttocks with an arm inserted. A very abstract form.”

“Actually, it’s one of my favorite Mapplethorpes,” I said. “The lines are sculptural, stoned, somewhat as abstract as Henry Moore sculpture. As I did a dozen years ago, writing meditations on Arthur Tress’s photographs, I’ve even written a Zen meditation piece on that photograph, because, in its penetration, its formal repose, it is a bouquet of flesh, exhibiting that ‘the way out’ can also be ‘the way in’ to the chakras of ecstasy. Male homosexuality is a problem to many heterosexual art critics, and to many businesses, whose overweening gay intolerance is not acceptable.”¹

Reading the literature on Mapplethorpe written by straight heterosexuals is rather amusing as they twist in the wind trying to legitimize the leathersex photographs or the black nudes.

1 When Arthur C. Danto’s overwhelming *Mapplethorpe*, created with the cooperation of Robert’s estate, appeared with 280 duotones, London’s Harrods, one of the world’s largest department stores, declared the book pornographic. The same week in November 1992, Harrods sold out, in one hour, their entire allotment of Madonna’s book, *Sex*, with heterosexual and lesbian photographs by Steven Meisel.

If Robert Frost's critique was good enough for poetry, in adaptation it's good enough for Robert Mapplethorpe's photography: "A poem need not mean, but be."

A photograph need not mean anything; it needs maybe just to be, to exist.

Gay photography of gay subjects does not really require interpolation by gay-friendly straight people, no matter how critically endowed.

No offense, but straight people don't really understand homosexual people the way white people don't really understand blacks; but, out of self-defense, gays understand straights, and blacks understand whites, because gays and blacks are raised in dominantly straight and white societies respectively.

"The step," I said, "from the honeymoon Polaroids to the three separate categories of leather, fisting, and S&M is, in fact, not very long. Robert's photographs—faces, flowers, figures, fetishes, fashions—however much distinguished, are all of a piece."

"Robert," Edward said, "even though he was far from that horrible introduction, 'the most polymorphously perverse person: was uniquely perverse in absorbing from Sam's collection the totally unfashionable style and content just so he could beat the avant-garde into submission to what he wished to declare far out. Robert would stamp his foot to get people to pay attention. I know the syndrome. I have it myself?'"

"We all do," I said. "Speaking of stamping one's foot, I wonder if you have any opinion on the rumor that Robert committed suicide?"

"There are many kinds of suicide."

"AIDS is some people's suicide."

"Sylvia Plath committed the most famous revenge-suicide in recorded history," Edward said. "When I knew Sylvia, not well, but well enough to dislike her, I knew Ted. Also I knew Ted's mistress, Assia Wevill, very well. Assia was the woman for whom he left Sylvia. I shared an office with Assia when I worked in advertising and we were close friends. Assia, too, later committed suicide."

"Maybe there is no Mapplethorpe curse. Maybe artists are simply more volatile and honest in acting out what other people refuse to even consider."

"Curses, truth, legends," Edward said. "History, my little flower; is simply an agreed-upon lie. Everything is true, isn't it? *Hmmm?* When Ann Stevenson's biography on Sylvia appeared, it was the first detailed and truthful biography of Sylvia, although certainly not the whole truth. When Mapplethorpe's literal biography comes out, I suspect the situation will be the same. Your work is the first insider's cut at his persona in

the popular culture milieu you experienced. Actually, the Mapplethorpe Truth is not going to match the Mapplethorpe Legend. *Hmmm?* And people will always prefer the legend.

“How can a biographer build up Robert as a modern hero and then tell the world that one of his turn-ons was to force his black sex partners to say, ‘I’m your nigger’! After all, every authorized biography will have to address itself to the liberal white audience. That’s where the buyers are.

“The whole truth about Robert Mapplethorpe, as you and I know, won’t take easy or convenient form.”

Actually, because Patricia Morrisroe, a free-lance journalist researching Robert Mapplethorpe, entered my life, she became a player. She’s one more writer who missed the seventies and is trying to backfill Robert’s life from the outside in instead of the inside out. The questions Morrisroe asked me were rather more chronologically based than psychologically penetrating. She was full of questions of *when* and *where*? “For five hours, I answered literally the literal questions she asked about a most metaphorical life.”

“I hope you taped that interview,” Edward said.

“Oh, yes. She even asked me what books she could read to learn about the seventies milieu. I could refer her only to *Some Dance to Remember*. She seemed very sincere—fragile, even—but I have this personal feeling, shared by many in the masculine-identified gay subculture, about all these straight women in the nineties trying to handle the postmortem lives and affairs of gay males in the seventies. I mean, even young twenty-something gay males in the nineties have more than their own share of difficulties understanding the *Zeitgeist* of the seventies.”

“What is the truth about someone, anyway?” Edward asked. “There are as many Roberts as there are people who knew him. As a straight white woman, Patricia Morrisroe has as valid a right as anyone to document what she can of Robert Mapplethorpe. I have a special view of him myself, because of my odd angle of having known Wagstaff so well. So, I hope I haven’t sounded too harsh.”

“I hope the same,” I said, “because of my odd angle of having known Robert so well, and because so many men have died so young and...All I can say is that Robert actually, specifically, asked me to write about him.”

“Mapplethorpe would love the contretemps of corporate biography competing with personal reminiscence,” Edward said.

“I’m neither mean nor competitive,” I said. “Writers other than myself are writing different genres. Their styles of lackluster questions and their innocence, when they telephone me, spurred me on to pull together

my notes, letters, journals, interviews, and memories to counterbalance the direction they were taking. I hadn't planned to write about Robert until I was eighty, which is twenty-five years from now."

"But with AIDS," Edward said, "gay men can't chance waiting until they are old."

"That is cold truth, but it is not the essence of my motivation, because I do not have HIV, nor do I intend to get it. I am HIV negative.

"Robert's death is one of three hundred dead men I've known. They're all becoming a blur. I want only to capture Robert's person, as he was, and as he reflected it in me and in some of the many people we all knew in common during one of this century's most exciting decades.

"I'm not interested in tracts about chronological biography and photographic technique.

"What interests me is the personal reminiscence of the living, breathing Robert, the way Lillian Hellman—with whom I share a common birthday—remembered Julia in *Pentimento*...and you know how they dared to dish Lillian!"

"Who can say what's better?" Edward Lucie-Smith said.

"Memory" I said, "is all *Rashomon* anyway."

