

TAKE 10

FIRST BLUSH: HOLLY SOLOMON DISCOVERS ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

Holly Solomon is the person who shifted Robert Mapplethorpe's world on its axis.

In 1977, the Holly Solomon Gallery launched Robert Mapplethorpe in his first two distinguishing solo shows: "Flowers" and "Portraits." Within months, Holly Solomon presented Robert in the group exhibit "Surrogates/Self-portraits." In 1978, the Holly Solomon Gallery presented Robert in "The New York Boat Show." That same year, 1978, Robert's work, christened by Holly Solomon, first appeared in the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. This was also the first gallery to cancel his work, in July 1989, due to the pressures of some U.S. senators and some religionists. In 1978, Robert was among ninety-five photographers invited to show his work in the landmark exhibition "Mirrors and Windows: Photography 1960 to the Present," at the Museum of Modern Art. "Mirrors and Windows" was conceptualized by John Szarkowski, director of the MOMA's Department of Photography. Holly Solomon had accomplished the prestigious launch on the course she set for Robert Mapplethorpe.

JACK FRITSCHER: In the beginning, at the creation of Mapplethorpe, you were there, as was I, silent witnesses, unknown to each other and kept separate by Robert, who excelled at keeping his various friends apart. Now that he's dead, my task is to restore the person who was Robert Mapplethorpe. It is very much a detective story, as all of us who knew him come out of our sadness to memorialize the living, breathing Robert, who could fuck you over or not with his shy smile that made him an expert at always getting what he wanted.

HOLLY SOLOMON: I met him about the same time you met him. Suddenly, he was in my life. Just as suddenly he was gone. Ours was one of those 1970s art encounters. I was showing the photographs of Eddie Shoustek, who recommended that I meet Robert and see his work. Immediately, when I looked at his portfolio, I had two major responses. First, I was absolutely convinced that Robert was an artist. Second, and this

is a very important distinction, I understood that Robert was not only a photographer; Robert was an artist who was a photographer.

I studied his other work. His collages. His frames. He had the passion of a daring young man. Also, I was taken by, and felt very deeply about, that very young Robert's conviction that photography should be taken seriously as a fine art. He was as eager as an evangelist about this new way to consider photography.

Remember, that as late as the mid-seventies, photographs as an art form were collected by enthusiasts who put them in little plastic envelopes and stashed them away in drawers.

Before 1980, photography was considered a dubious art. Photography was hardly felt to deserve the full power of exhibition reserved for art.

JACK: And there stood Robert Mapplethorpe at the Gates of Art.

HOLLY: Precisely. I felt Robert's evangelism was his very clever presentation of photographs in elegant, even over-elegant, frames that positioned the photographic work with aesthetic power.

Other photographers, of course, had presented their work as art, but Robert was determined to legitimize the camera through a kind of aesthetic assault on the art establishment.

Robert thought gallery owners, critics, collectors, were not as avant-garde as they thought, precisely because they had overlooked photography as a legitimate art form. I appreciated his evangelism. And, oh, he was charming, warm and gentle. He was a very nice companion. I enjoyed my relationship with Robert. It was a short and very happy collaboration.

JACK: Weren't you the first art professional to promote him?

HOLLY: Yes. I believe we met in 1976.

JACK: That year, Robert appeared at your gallery in a group show titled, "Animals." He so wanted in that exhibition that he photographed a dog, *Dalmatian*.

HOLLY: After that group show, I did two solo shows of Robert. Both were distinctly one-artist exhibitions in 1977. One was called "Flowers." The other was "Portraits." I remember those two shows were really tough going.

JACK: Why? The critics? The public? Robert?

HOLLY: Listen, in the mid-seventies, to get any kind of uptown audience downtown to SoHo was extremely difficult.

JACK: SoHo, I remember from my experience, was first pioneered by gay guys who found they could rent a loft more cheaply than a Village apartment. That kind of gentrification by gays, some of whom were artists, opened the door to other artists and the first galleries.

HOLLY: First galleries. Yes. Remember when most people wouldn't cross Fifty-seventh Street to come downtown? I was downtown by 1976, and established by 1977. I had been showing Bill Wegman. Billy was at the gallery. I had other artists who, like Robert, were artists working with photographs. So as people came to look at their work, I'd say to them about Robert, "I've got this other young artist. You have to see his work."

In that way, I was instrumental in getting Robert into "Documenta 6" at the Museum Firdericianum in 1977. I remember flying over to West Germany to personally help the curator hang the goddamned show I thought: *I'm not going to go all the way to Kassel, West Germany, and not see Robert hung.* "Documenta 6" was Robert's first kind of real breakthrough. He was very happy. He was in Europe and his photographs were on exhibition.

Then we all went to Basel, Switzerland. I remember we had William Wegman, his wife, and the dog, and Robert. We were quite an entourage arriving in Basel. The artist, his wife, their dog, and the photographer. So that was my objective in 1977. I was trying to introduce Robert as an artist, and not just a photographer.

JACK: Your concept clarifies quite a bit. In order to explain an artist working with photography, you had to educate people that photography was not the bastard child of painting.

HOLLY: Well, we really tried. All of us together. I had known Sam Wagstaff before either of us knew Robert, and Sam had met Robert before I did.

JACK: Sam had met Robert very early in the 1970s. Actually, film footage exists, much like the footage of the very young Bill Clinton meeting President Kennedy in the Rose Garden, of Sam Wagstaff introducing Robert as a rising star to the collector Robert Scull in 1973.

HOLLY: Sam was the great curatorial person who helped photography achieve its identity as art. Sam really loved Robert. He adored Robert's

work, and he adored Robert. He helped Robert wherever possible, but he was sophisticated enough to Robert's career needs to take a backseat role once I began dealing with Robert in the gallery.

JACK: What was Robert like when you were with him on his first trip to Basel? Now that he's dead, people want to know what he was like behind the face he shows in his self-portraits.

HOLLY: He already had many European friends, people he had met in New York. Sam was very connected. And Robert was so charming. He really was an extremely sweet human being. Everyone liked him. I remember once we went out to dinner. I'll never forget that he was trying to convince me that I had to wear leather.

"Holly" Robert said, "you've got to try leather."

"Robert, I hate leather. It's cold in the winter, and hot in the summer. Forget it!"

"Oh, no!" Robert said. "You'll look perfectly beautiful in leather."

JACK: He liked his women in leather.

HOLLY: Oh yes. Really, I admired him very much for adoring Patti. I'll never forget how he once dragged me to this concert somewhere the hell outside of New York. He was very proud of her. He cared very much for her. I was very proud in retrospect because I thought that we were two people whom he really loved, and who really meant something to him. The way he took Patti's photograph and mine was just different than anybody else.

JACK: I love the photos of you. The triptych Robert shot in 1976. Each of the three frames reveals more of you. Like time lapse of a flower.

HOLLY: I treasure it.

JACK: It's wonderful.

HOLLY: That portrait series was pivotal. He wanted to join my gallery. I wanted to see him work, not an audition of his talent so much as of that charismatic ingredient very necessary to a photographer: how the photographer deals with people. How he can manipulate the poser. So, I said to Robert, "Okay, kid, I'm going to try you out. Before I take you on in my gallery, you can do my portrait, and I'm going to pay you."

I didn't tell him why I particularly wanted to see him work shooting my portrait. I really wanted to know how he dealt with people he was photographing, because the one thing that I thought I could do was get him commissions for portraits.

So I sat for him. He worked so easy, and he made you feel so comfortable.

JACK: When I sat for him, he worked effortlessly; he seemed to do nothing while creating everything.

HOLLY: He had an extraordinary gift for working with people. I was an actress in earlier years. Andy wanted me to play the part in *Lonesome Cowboys* that he finally gave to Viva. I told Andy, "I'm not going to Phoenix with Joe Dallesandro and your group, dear." If he had shot it in New York, I might have done the movie. I was just taking care of myself. As an actress, I had worked with absolutely horrible photographers who were not artists. Every job was "dear," "honey," "babe." They made you feel lower than a prostitute. Robert was the soul of respect and charm—and not above using cunning when it was for someone's own good. I think Robert never abused the trust of anyone whom he photographed.

JACK: Thank you. I've spent a lot of years on the West Coast defending Robert's personality. He was no saint, but he was no villain either. He was as charming as he was cunning, and he was very good at dismissing people who became tedious.

HOLLY: Robert and I always had so much patience with each other. And sometimes I needed it. Especially early on. Right at the first, right in the middle of the first show I gave for him, he came into my gallery, polite, friendly, businesslike, but very sweet, like a real mensch, which I've always respected. And he said he wanted to move his show away from my gallery up to the Robert Miller Gallery.

That was very tragic for me. An artistic loss. My mother had just died. A personal loss. It was a trying time. Anyway, I said to him, "Robert, I respect your decision. I wish you had waited till after the show to leave." I told him frankly it was quite rash to leave in the middle of a show. But, and this was my advice to him, I said, "It's your career. I think it's a stupid move, because you could have asked for and gotten the best of both worlds."

JACK: Which was Holly Solomon downtown, and Robert Miller uptown.

HOLLY: Yes. I tried to tell him about gathering power to himself.

JACK: Maybe he felt more comfortable uptown.

HOLLY: I think he felt more at home and at ease in the Robert Miller Gallery—for reasons I don't wish to be quoted.

JACK: Ambitions, rivalries, sexual preference. Anyone can fill in the blanks after the fact without incriminating anyone.

HOLLY: Nevertheless, I continued to support his work, even though neither Robert nor the subsequent galleries ever gave me any credit for showing him first.

JACK: Art politics is like politics in every area. The San Francisco gallery owner Robert Opel, who showed Mapplethorpe in 1979, was also overlooked. His Fey Way Gallery exhibitions of Mapplethorpe I've never seen listed anywhere. In fact, none of my published writing on Robert has been noted in any of the bibliographies. At least, you were finally mentioned in the acknowledgments in the Whitney book, *Robert Mapplethorpe*. The critic Edward Lucie-Smith, who was also around Robert from the first, has always said that in England, you are known as the woman who was so very important to Mapplethorpe's early career.

HOLLY: Well, I had hoped to be.

JACK: But after the first burst of Mapplethorpe, after you had given him confidence and credibility...

HOLLY: He bid me farewell, and he presented me with his self-portrait with the whip up his rectum. To put it mildly, I kind of gasped.

JACK: This was his parting gift?

HOLLY: Let's say I knew there was a message.

JACK: Maybe about him acting like an asshole.

HOLLY: But I understood that he meant me no insult. My former husband took one look at it and said, "Tear it up." I said, "No, no. Someday I'll sell it for an awful lot."

JACK: Robert was very clever about giving photographs to special friends. Sort of repaying people for their help. He was generous to me, but I know he was generally most stingy at giving out prints of his pictures.

HOLLY: After he left my gallery in 1977, Robert really never talked to me.

JACK: Don't feel bad. Around 1983, Robert started dropping lots of people. By 1984, he was not remembered fondly in San Francisco. People resented being dropped. By 1985, he had closed his circle down to a Manhattan few. My relationship to him by that time was only by telephone and usually he made the calls when he was traveling and lonely. He had suspected for at least three years that he had HIV. He didn't see how he could have been anything but infected. By 1986, when his diagnosis was rather public knowledge, he had retreated into himself and his work in the way so typical of artists with AIDS. Our mutual friend, the San Francisco photographer Crawford Barton, who died in 1993, had told me that his diagnosis had pushed him into a veritable orgy of productive work.

HOLLY: When Robert became extremely ill, I wrote him a letter. Robert sent word back indirectly through a mutual friend in San Francisco who said, "Holly, please, Robert would like to meet you for dinner." I said, "Of course." So after all those years, I had dinner with Robert. It was very sad. Actually, it was quite appalling.

JACK: Was that in 1989, before his last illness?

HOLLY: I forget the actual date. It was before his Retrospective. Maybe 1987. At dinner, he made me promise I would go to the Retrospective. He looked so sick. But we just giggled and laughed as if we'd been in constant touch for the last ten years. That night, I think, Robert thought I was terribly funny. Few people understand that an elongated death by AIDS is stressful. We laughed and giggled, but, of course, my heart was heavy. That's how we made up, and, after that dinner, every time we saw each other, it was "Hello" with big hugs and kisses.

Of course, I did go to his Whitney Retrospective in 1988. Dear Robert! He was so sick. When I went over to congratulate and kiss him, he said to me, "Holly, this is my retribution for leaving you." He was seated in a wheelchair. "This is my retribution," he said, "to be sitting here looking at your portrait all night."

Robert had actually stationed himself in his chair in front of the portrait of me. It was the one I had hired him to shoot, so I could see how he worked before I knew what he could do.

With that, I really wanted to cry.

I said, "No, Robert, there's no need for retribution. I'm so proud of you."

And that was the last time I saw him.

JACK: What a scene that opening at the Whitney was! And what a tableau. You with the honored, dying artist staring at your portrait.

HOLLY: Of course, I'm still very proud of him. And protective of his work. I am instrumental in correcting the marketplace about his work. I do have a gallery I do promote art. After Robert died, I called up a particular auction house that had advertised an original Mapplethorpe in a beautiful original Mapplethorpe frame. The price quoted to me was two thousand dollars.

I said, "You really have got to be joking."

They said, "No, no. Two thousand dollars. That's what they sell for. Not a penny less."

So I bought it, and in three days I called the manager at the auction house and said, "You really should get your figures and facts straight." I took pains to explain that a Mapplethorpe was not just a photograph, that they were not estimating the value of a photograph, that it was one of a kind. Done in the original frame.

"Oh yes, yes," I was told.

"Oh, my yes," I said. "You guys made quite a big mistake. I just sold your not-a-penny-less photograph for forty thousand dollars."

JACK: I'm not surprised. Nobody knew that Robert would get his fifteen minutes of fame after he died. Immediately after Robert died, when I first approached magazines with my "Pentimento" feature article, even Manhattan magazines didn't know who he was, or didn't think he was important enough to memorialize. You understood him. I understood him. But so many people just didn't get it.

HOLLY: Robert was very ambitious, and he loved money more than anything. I once said to him, when we were talking about his health, "Robert, you're not going to die. You love money too much."

JACK: Money can keep you young. It can keep you alive. It can keep you moist.

HOLLY: We joked about money a lot. But money was no joke to Robert. Not really. Money was his way up and out of the working class.

JACK: At the beginning, did you meet his family?

HOLLY: I met his mom and dad. He was very gracious and courtly to his mother and father.

JACK: He sometimes spoke to me about his younger brother, Ed, because my only sister, whom Robert had met, was about the same age.

HOLLY: His parents were working class, and that was good because most artists come from the working class. Great artists rarely come from the upper classes. His folks were very Irish-looking to me. Robert and I both tried to make them feel at ease.

JACK: It's not easy for parents when a child turns out to be an artist.

HOLLY: They were so very proud of their son.

JACK: That was then—at Robert's first show. After the Helms and NEA scandal, Robert's father was quoted in *Newsweek* saying he wouldn't want any of those photographs hanging around his living room.

HOLLY: I realized from the start that Robert considered it very important to be extremely social. More so than most people.

JACK: Art let him move in a richer crowd.

HOLLY: He was suddenly with the class he aspired to become.

JACK: Art and money gave him social mobility out of his blue-collar Irish background.

HOLLY: Exactly. I understood immediately why he loved all these social beings. He did. He loved royalty.

JACK: One morning, his phone woke us up in bed. He rolled over and said, "Ah, *principessa!*" I said, "Robert, stop it!" He could be so vulgar about royalty. He was in his glory.

HOLLY: I actually told him once, "Robert we are a democracy." I really did. But beyond the patronage of royalty, it's very important for artists to support each other's work. In Robert's case, when I took him into my gallery, everyone in my gallery helped to support his work.

JACK: What made him attractive to them at the start? Was it just because he was good-looking? Or was it that he was doing his Liza Minnelli number from *Cabaret*: "Divine decadence, darling!"

HOLLY: Robert worked all those angles, but my artists simply thought he was a good photographer. Plus, he was this photoevangelist daring people to pay serious attention to photographs as art objects. Also, and I don't blush to say it, I showed his work to every single curator I knew

JACK: And weren't you also responsible for guiding Robert into fashion photography?

HOLLY: I had a few friends who were fashion designers. I said to Robert, "Come on, try this too. Try every venue you can." He did. He was very open and cooperative. He had his own mind but he took suggestion well.

JACK: So you truly introduced him to the genre of fashion photography.

HOLLY: Yes, I did. I worked very hard for Robert. And I continue to do so.

JACK: He was so personal with me that I wonder, was he very personal with you?

HOLLY: I can remember we went to Broadway once. To go to the movies. And we found ourselves standing outside a dirty-book store.

JACK: Of course! One of those Forty-second Street "libraries" where he got that exhilarated feeling of looking at forbidden sex!

HOLLY: I knew he'd gotten his collage materials there.

JACK: That's where he first read my work and decided we had to meet.

HOLLY: We stood outside the adult bookstore. He kind of looked at me funny.

I said, "Robert, what the hell's wrong with you?"

He laughed. "Oh, come on, Holly," he said. "You don't want to go in there."

"Yes, Robert, I do. I want to go inside and see for myself."

He turned beet red. He thought I was kind of a dummy, but his protectiveness was kind of sweet, you know, because I'm old enough to be his mother.

JACK: Were there magazines or sex objects in the store?

HOLLY: Objects and magazines. We walked around looking at everything. He was a little embarrassed. I wasn't at all. I was genuinely

interested in how people used that stuff. It was like a scientific/anthropological expedition. I laugh when I remember how Robert turned beet red.

JACK: Call the *National Enquirer*. “Maplethorpe Blushes in Dildo Store.”

HOLLY: Robert so enjoyed shock value.

JACK: I recently showed a woman friend Robert’s photographs. I asked her if she found his work shocking, and she said, “No. The only thing I find shocking about these photographs is that I’ve never seen them before.”

HOLLY: So true. Censorship is shocking. Robert showed me everything. I respected him the more for that. And, to tell the truth, during the trial in Ohio, I hung one of his accused “dirty” photographs in my gallery when I was having a summer group show.

Bill Wegman was about to open a show at the Taft Museum, and the curator asked me about the wisdom of opening Bill’s show in such a censorious climate. I felt it very important to open Bill’s show. I am against that kind of censorship. I was very instrumental in getting the American Dealers Association to write a letter publicly in support of Robert’s show. I called up the ADA and insisted that a letter be written right away against any kind of censorship. I will always defend Robert’s work. Even past his death.

And, oh, it’s so very sad to think that he’s gone.

JACK: I know. The work lives, but he’s gone. We can celebrate the work. That’s why I appreciate your telling me that Robert blushed. It’s like a nuclear flash. Most people don’t think that Robert Maplethorpe would blush at anything.

HOLLY: Robert blushed quite often. Actually, I must say, my humor with him often made him blush.

JACK: You were close to Andy Warhol as well as to Robert.

HOLLY: Andy was always very instrumental in my professional life. But both men, Andy and Robert, kept me out of the personal part of their lives. Of course, I kept them out of mine. One should. Andy and Robert treated me like some madonna. I was never expected to participate in their sex lives or drug lives. They both gave me the highest respect.

JACK: Do you find that's basically a statement about Robert's relationship to women?

HOLLY: Yes. I think so. Robert was keen about people and quite sensitive about women.

JACK: And Patti?

HOLLY: I must say, I felt Robert really loved Patti. I mean *really*. Robert and Patti were both tolerant of my way of life as I was of theirs. But I don't presume to know what their relationship actually was. He really loved her. I don't know if they had sex or not, nor do I care, but he loved her.

JACK: Patti was his constant subject from his first photographs to the last.

HOLLY: I feel every person's sexuality is personal to them. Everyone should have freedom of action as long as they don't hurt anyone. What Robert enjoyed sexually, you may know, but I don't. He liked leather. That means something. And he had declared himself a homosexual. That's such a big relief. The worst are the closet people. Robert, I will attest from the very personal way he treated me with respect, was always most gracious to women. Women loved him.

JACK: If the women got a fair shake, then what about the men in the leather photographs?

HOLLY: I admired Robert's amazing talent in trying to make everyone as beautiful as they possibly could be. He never put a back-handed spin on his subjects the way some photographers really try to make people look as ugly as possible. He wasn't mean or nasty in that way at all.

JACK: For history's sake, to whom did you make Robert's first significant sale?

HOLLY: Barbara and Eugene Schwarz were the first people to buy one of Robert's photographs. They bought his 1976 portrait of Arnold Schwarzenegger. Eugene had thought to put together a photography collection in the face of the great dichotomy: either a person collected photography or collected art.

JACK: Enter Holly Solomon.

HOLLY: Indeed. I carried his work into the gallery and hung it on the wall. I wanted to create a market for the concept Robert Mapplethorpe brought to me in his evangelical zeal to canonize photographs as art.

