

TAKE 13

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG SUICIDE

Robert Mapplethorpe was born a suicide. I told him flat out in 1978 that in many previous lives, he had killed himself and would do so again. He smiled, feigning no denial, so in tune were our spiritual lives during the three years we were bicoastal lovers, chronologically correct for one another.

Empathic friends by instinct know the other's destiny. For *In Touch* magazine, in 1979, I wrote an a *clef* short story about Robert, "Caro Ricardo." It was published a second time in the 1984 anthology, *Corporal in Charge of Taking Care of Captain O'Malley and Other Stories*. On his deathbed, Robert handed my book of short stories to a freelance journalist and said, "This is about me."

The key passage, written from my actual conversation with Robert, reads:

"This is," I told Ricardo, "your first incarnation in three thousand years."

"How so?"

"I intuit it," I said. "I get reincarnational readings off some people."

"I'm one of them?"

"My wonder is why you waited so long between incarnations."

The world and Ricardo were on no uncertain terms with each other. In this incarnation, or in past goatfooted Dionysian lives, Ricardo demanded, managed, and delivered what he wanted. Ricardo will, when his next death-passage is appropriate, take his life with the same hands with which he has created and crafted it. He will neatly, stylishly even, finish it. Ricardo is as close a mirror to my Gemini psyche as I have ever recognized. Fucking with him was very much fucking with his total being.

Robert idolized the famous who died young. Half in love with mournful death, Robert particularly worshipped rock star Jim Morrison, the pouty Botticelli lead singer of The Doors. Robert physically resembled Morrison and, after the singer's mysterious death in Paris, in July 1971,

Robert, three years younger than Morrison, began to assume the dead singer's look, attitude, and doomed-angel leather-style straight out of auto-cide James Dean.

In 1978, Robert begged me to give him my silver-on-black print of Morrison. Before Robert collected *objets* that Christie's would auction after his death, he collected identities.

At the start, he was very much the collage artist who cared nothing about the illegalities of co-opting copyrighted photographs, so why not borrow great bits of the Morrison persona? Later, when successful, as British art historian and critic Edward Lucie-Smith pointed out, Robert was not above shoplifting design and content from the work of New Orleans painter and photographer George Dureau, with whom we all were friends. Dureau's longtime assistant, Jonathan Webb, often hid George's work from Robert, because, Jonathan said, if Robert saw it, six weeks later he'd be showing his Manhattanization of the Dureau concepts.

Robert depended on other artists and benefactors, as he had on his family and then on punk singer Patti Smith, with her network of female gallery owners.

Ernest Becker, whose superb *Denial of Death* we were all reading in the 1970s, says that such dependency "for a strong person...may become intolerable, and he may try to break out of it, sometimes by suicide, sometimes by drowning himself desperately in the world and in the rush of experience....He will plunge into life...." Becker quotes Kierkegaard, who says about the defiantly self-created man, "into the distraction of great undertakings...he will become a restless spirit...which...will seek forgetfulness [of his dependency on others] in sensuality, perhaps in debauchery." Just the ticket for the 1970s, the decade starring the American Pop Culture of Sensuality.

The nineties' dazed and confused interest in the current hip revival of seventies' redux fads and fashions, for those who did inhale, means a new reconstruction of Robert Mapplethorpe so soundly deconstructed by Senator Helms in the NEA fiasco in the 1980s.

As Robert's letters to me affirm, I had told him to seek psychiatric help against his self-destructive excesses of sex and drugs. "I think you were right," he wrote, "about me needing a psychiatrist. I'm a male nymphomaniac, ...Just can't get sex out of my head...."

Sex was the vehicle for Robert's fascination to break out of it, sometimes by suicide, sometimes by drowning himself in scatology and African-American males. He destroyed his photographs of the one and merchandised his photographs of the other.

No one fools around with the often satanic ritual of gay scatology without invoking the dark powers of death, as Mapplethorpe did in his collection of devil sculpture and his romancing the demonic in his photo imagery. He took pride that his birth was four days after Halloween. When I asked him about the prudence of his twin obsessions, he said, "With scat, I make myself invulnerable. I build up my resistance to everything." That was before 1981 and the announcement of AIDS's presence. By 1983, he said, "I know that all the first to die had a lot of sex with niggers."

Yet, he continued his racist pursuit: to be killed by a powerful "nigger." (His word.) He played the racial stereotypes of sexually dangerous African-American males to shock the rich elite with whom he played his game of "chicken": "If you don't buy this, then you're not cool or chic enough to hang out at this gallery." Besides, Robert preferred models, both leather and black, who posed for little or nothing. His favorite film, expressed in Boyd MacDonald's interview in *Straight to Hell* magazine, was the race-erotic mid-seventies pot-boiler *Mandingo*.

Perhaps the reason so many "dinge queens," as white men who indulge in collecting darker races are called, died first of AIDS was caused by the African-American socioeconomic structure that almost ensures that intravenous drug use, and, therefore, HIV, will be more prevalent than in the Caucasian overculture. Gay folk statistics casually suggest something that may say nothing more than reveal the racism of gay culture, whose received taste is set by middle-class white males who control much of the gay media.

All intelligent people consider suicide, at least intellectually. Life, like the concepts *mother* and *child*, is a reciprocal term that cannot be understood fully without the concept of death. Artists are particularly sensitive to existential considerations. In America, artists have a tradition of suicide, either with startling violence (Hemingway and a gun), or with an eroding habit such as alcohol or drugs. Add the seventies' punk rocker style, which was sanctified by the deaths of musicians white-male Jim Morrison, white-female Janis Joplin, and African-American male Jimi Hendrix, to arrive at Mapplethorpe's preoccupation with his primal flower, the lily, the very symbol of death and ironic resurrection.

Robert Mapplethorpe killed himself, intentionally, despite warnings, with unsafe sex and drugs.

Even without the specter of AIDS, Robert Mapplethorpe would have been dead before the 1980s ended.

AIDS was simply a convenience: fashionable, marketable; a public display of dying, which Robert—like so many gay men—opportunistically seized, that was not like a quick, hidden suicide that would be over before he could enjoy the media attention.

Robert had a Grand Guignol sense of humor exceeded only by his acquaintance, photographer Joel-Peter Witkin, who once sawed a cadaver's head in half so that the halves could face each other for his famous "mirror" photograph which Robert owned until his death.

The polarities of love and death, both twisted in the American psyche of denial, infused Robert's artistic and emotional persona already tweaked by the Roman Catholic tradition in which he was reared. He photographed Patti Smith, his lifelong alter ego androgyne, as both Death Warmed-Over in his early photographs and as his Widowed Survivor in his final work as he was dying. The love-and-death theme in the American consciousness is a constant in both the pop culture of song and the aesthetic culture of literature and art. Critic Leslie Fiedler opened this cultural debate on eros and thanatos in his landmark book, *Love and Death in the American Novel*.

Robert exercised control over every aspect of his life. His control of his death did not require the "suicide doctor," Jack Kevorkian. He quietly endured the death of his benefactor and one-time lover, Sam Wagstaff, who left him a fortune. Robert, in turn, solidified through his well-thought-through Mapplethorpe Foundation, which was to administer his will after his death, funding museums and hospitals to keep his work collected and his name in print. He orchestrated everything in his images, in his life, and in his death to fit into his constant Catholic subtext of *The Roman Martyrology*, the lives and deaths of the saints.

He knew his only canonization would be, not by fickle critics, but by himself.

Robert spent his life first running after the critics, from whom he was proud, he said, to have never gotten a bad review (not true), until he began to run from critics. He feared the day that the world would turn on him, as it does on every fashionable artist. He asked me to defend in print the San Francisco photographer Jim Wigler, when Wigler was censored and censured in 1981 for his images of terminal leathersex, and death by gun, knife, and rope.

Robert, unfortunately, was already dead when Senator Jesse Helms, in the National Endowment for the Arts scandal, attacked his work and that of Andrès Serrano. He was long dead when he became so infamous that his self-portrait was projected as a veritable icon by anticensorship

protesters on the outside of the Corcoran Gallery. He had already self-immolated when he stopped, as no artist of his politically active generation has, the United States government in its tracks.

