

TAKE 7

MAPPLETHORPE'S SEXUAL AMBIGUITY

MAPPLETHORPE: If I were a woman, I'd be a whore.

FRITSCHER: You are a whore.

Our lives in the 1970s were steamy underground movies. The young Robert shot multiple frames.

In 1973, Robert shot Warhol superstar Candy Darling talking on the phone in a quartet of shots.

The same year, he shot: (1) a Polaroid quintet of *Patti Smith (Don't Touch Here)*; and (2) a quartet of self-portraits, with two shots of a statue, in which he lies nude on black leather, folded knees up, almost fetal, spinning a take on Marilyn Monroe's iconic calendar.

By the end of 1973, his autopic *Self Portrait, 1973* dramatizes him, a very up-against-the-wall motherfucker in a black leather vest, with his face a Kirlian blur.

By 1974, in his *Self Portrait*, shirtless, with leather wristband on rampant right wrist, and left hand tucked in the rear waist of his leather belt, he presents himself in full focus as a kind of standing *Le Penseur*.

Mapplethorpe had started out as a sculptor.

Robert's sexual ambiguity escalated after he died.

Confusion.

He was gay.

He was straight.

He was bisexual.

He was polymorphously perverse.

Actually, he was all things to all men and women.

The straight press profiled Mapplethorpe as an aristocratic artist, a peculiar lord of leather homosex, who shot pretty pictures of faces and flowers when he wasn't being a bad boy shooting fetishes.

The gay press ignored him in death as it had in life.

Finally, shamed by the notoriety paid Mapplethorpe by the clamoring straight press, the gay newsmagazine the *Advocate*, according to then editor Mark Thompson, had an internal fight about putting Mapplethorpe on the cover as Man, er, Person, of the Year. Actually, Robert appeared

on half the cover, because the *Advocate*, perhaps tired of the beating from the P.C. crowd, was obliged to put a female on the cover.

As if the “politically correct” time-share of the December 18, 1990, cover wasn’t enough indignity, some queens decided, because they themselves were female-identified homosexuals who were left in power when Bette Davis died, that the Mapplethorpe half-cover would be, of course, darlings, the self-portrait with lipstick.¹ As if Robert were a drag queen!

Robert was a male-identified man.

He enjoyed an artist’s ambiguities.

If the viewer needs to think Robert was investigating his female side, how Jungian!

If the viewer needs to think Robert painted himself up, clowning around, to examine, maybe, expose, the masks women are forced to smear on their faces, how Freudian!

If the viewer needs to think Robert was a commercial photographer glomming on to a new angle to sell high-fashion cosmetics a *la* Joe Namath’s famous seventies TV and print commercial wearing pantyhose, which gained from his uncompromised male identity, how clever!

The *Advocate*’s needs are different from that autopix’s autobiography. Actually, only a small percentage of gay men are so confused about gender that they think all gay men want to be women; unfortunately, those few long ago took over most of gay publishing to perpetuate their particular mythology.

What was not ambiguous was Mapplethorpe hated the *Advocate*. That mag was not his advocate advocating anything of his advocacy if he had ever bothered to advocate anything in his apolitical life.

The *Advocate* queenstream has never understood the leatherstream of masculine-identified men, or gay artists who are in the straight mainstream.

Robert was in aggressive competition with everyone. He achieved fame in the seventies. He achieved power in the eighties.

Michael Douglas, in the Manhattan madcap movie *Wall Street*, said, “Greed is good.”

In 1988, the dying Robert photographed himself as Death Warmed Over, holding his cane-with-skull. Edward Lucie-Smith thinks that in this photograph, Robert looks like a handsomer Dr. Joseph Goebbels.

¹ *Quel* success! Twenty-one months after he died, Robert appeared looking like a topless drag queen in a mental institution. Third World lesbian Urvashi Vaid appeared looking very mannish in a lifeless wannabe-Mapplethorpe “portrait” by Timothy Francisco.

He who dies with the most toys wins.

Actually, time flies when you're dead.

Robert never knew how the eighties ended.

Or that he became more famous dead than alive in Cincinnati.

Or that Communism collapsed.

He wouldn't have cared. He was so apolitical he wasn't even sure Communism wasn't just another style.

Actually, Mapplethorpe was a crypto-Republican exclusionist who believed in the traditional places for women, blacks, and gays.

How doubly ironic!

In life, he closeted his sexism and racism to fit into pop art. Warhol's need for everyone's talent made pop art an essentially inclusive movement.

In death, Republican southern religionists, unaware of his attitude toward women, blacks, and gays, attacked him.

Senator Jesse Helms picked on Mapplethorpe because he needed to get reelected and had no hot burning issue to address, until he demonized Robert Mapplethorpe as a smut peddler.

What a waste! Robert was dead and unavailable for comment. Just as well. He would have been terrible in court.

In death, Mapplethorpe and Warhol are no longer persons. They are incorporated foundations creating arts and charity grants. Their competition continues. Money, worth, has always been the way of keeping score. At the beginning of 1994, Warhol's estate was block-priced at \$220,000,000, and Mapplethorpe's estate was un-block-priced at \$228,000,000. What a row in the courts and in the press that caused! Especially to the executors who were to receive a percentage of the value. Critics thought it strange that Warhol was valued as if all his works were sold in one day in a block package. Mapplethorpe's "remains" were valued on separate pricing sold over the years, if not the ages.

Andy and Robert may be the Abbott and Costello of pop art, but who's on first?

Robert Mapplethorpe's sexual turn-on was all-American dollars. Lots of them. In large denominations. And diamond rings he could bite. Mapplethorpe was Marilyn-esque marrying a millionaire

Sam Wagstaff had all the sex appeal in the world.

Question: What if Sam Wagstaff had been Pam Wagstaff?

Whatever the answer, it's Robert's truth about women, about sex, about men, about money....

In the artpolitik, women legitimize gay artists. Gay artists know the role of women: to make the gay artist escort-friendly to other women and nonpredatory to threatened husbands.

Robert and Patti played Romeo and Juliet with homosexuality as the puzzling problem between Montague and Capulet. Patti never was a fag hag. Patti Smith actually connected him to Ms. Sandy Daley, who shot *Robert Having His Nipple Pierced*.

Patti Smith, if the truth be known, is the soundtrack, words and music, of the moving image of Robert Mapplethorpe's life.

In Daley's film, as Robert lies stoned in the arms of some male *amour du jour*, Patti keens over his rite of passage from personal experimentation with heterosexuality to professional homosexuality. There's a story.

What secrets does the erstwhile "Mrs. Mapplethorpe," the First Lady of the Faces and Flowers, the "Female Widow Mapplethorpe," recall from those steamy early days of the mister's polymorphous proclivities?

What promises were made?

What silences purchased?

None?

None.

In the gay seventies, women who were poets, singers, and performance artists were considered chic ornaments for gay men. They were not unlike straight men's trophy wives.

Masculine-identified gay men, particularly, matched up with female partners who were not like female-identified gay men's "sisters."

The women, in turn, for spinning the gay man's image, gained access to clubs, bars, discos, galleries, and audiences they would never otherwise have had.

It was not lost on career-minded women in the seventies that pop diva Bette Midler had conquered New York performing down in the depths of the notorious Continental Baths of the Ansonia Hotel—where she sang.

In November 1976, the night the infamous Mineshaft opened in New York, a woman in full leather stood on the stairs rising up from the street to the second-floor entrance. Wally Wallace, the founding genius of the Mineshaft, watched the woman move in her place in line to the door where he was selling admission.

"I knew," Wally Wallace said, "when I opened a leather sex club for men that women would want in. Women's liberation and all that. But I wasn't prepared for it the very first night. So I told this very beautiful woman that this was a sex club for men. I was polite and she was nice. I mean, she was great-looking. I told her maybe some other night. She said

okay and walked down the stairs and out the door. As soon as she did, about twenty hot guys, and I mean hot-looking leather guys, followed her. She had an entourage. I invited her in after that. She was Camille O'Grady."

In the late seventies, Camille moved to San Francisco. She was a punk poet, a rocker, a singer, a leather player, a beauty. She partnered up with the leatherman who had streaked the Academy Awards, Robert Opel. He had moved in The Great Sex Migration to San Francisco, where he opened the Fey Way Gallery.

Opel exhibited Mapplethorpe.

Impresario Opel's identity confused with photographer Mapplethorpe's.

Naturally, Camille O'Grady was confused with Patti Smith.

Camille O'Grady objected vehemently to being the West Coast Patti Smith. "I opened CBGB's," Camille told me in 1979, "before Patti Smith ever entered the door."

My! My! My! Sorry I asked.

That's the way the women were before so many men died leaving the archetypal widows alone: Jackie Bouvier (gun), Yoko Ono (gun), Camille O'Grady (gun), Patti Smith (camera)....

In the seventies, certain people seemed bohemian except when they seemed like white trash, which became a "style" in the leather scene and the drag scene of the seventies.

Robert, however, in those days, seemed poor to me the way New Yorkers escaping from apartments to San Francisco looked dirty from drugs and after-hours clubs. Maybe we all looked that way. I hated the Mapplethorpe look he shot of me back then. That Mapplethorpe photo was my wake-up call. Coming to terms with the generic *bohemian* and the specific *hippie*, one branches out to *nay*, which becomes *waif*, which begets *trash*, which becomes *punk*.

The labels and the "Look" from NYC to LAX to SFO were mutating fast in the sexual underground.

New Yorkers, like Michael Maletta, hit San Francisco announcing they intended to teach the West Coast how to party.

They kept their promise.

The Manhattanization of San Francisco was considered a bad trip.

Mapplethorpe arrived in the wake of rip-offs like Maletta's Creative Power Foundation, which had funded major parties like "Night Flight," hung with panels from Cristo's curtain, and "Stars," which took over the

entire dock of Pier 26 on the San Francisco waterfront almost under the Bay Bridge.

STARS!

Thousands partied under one roof for one night only.

STARS!

Thousands of dollars went up noses so the fists fit up asses. *STARS!*

Leather and Levi scenes of water sports, scatology, and S&M beatings and torture wilder than any Mapplethorpe photograph. The men were dancing stripped to the waist in the huge center of the pier, where the disco beat on under trapezes of the flying acrobats and the go-go platforms of the posing bodybuilders. Unscrewed bottles of popper drove the dazzling light show spinning through movies from a dozen projectors.

“Stars” was a pop culture event that went positively tribal.

New Yorkers had upped the ante when San Franciscans needed it most.

The San Francisco that Mapplethorpe knew was better than Sodom and Gomorrah.

Actually, San Francisco in the seventies has been best remembered by religious fundamentalists. Everything they say is true; but we weren’t guilty, because it wasn’t sin. It was liberation after years of oppression.

The San Francisco that Mapplethorpe knew was a city made paranoid and operatic in the wake of the November 1978 assassination of straight mayor George Moscone and gay supervisor Harvey Milk by confused supervisor Dan White, the immediate and scary ascension of Mayor Diane Feinstein, the White Night Riot, and the city’s very direct connection to the mass Kool-Aid suicide in Jonestown in the same traumatic November 1978.

What a libretto for *Mapplethorpe! The Musical!*

New Yorker men and their women working San Francisco’s distractions were not overly popular.

Robert Mapplethorpe had to override the prejudice, not the expected prejudice of being gay or male, but simply of being from New York City. Talk about provincial!

Robert needed new labels.

He needed *leather* and *S&M*.

He needed new ladies.

In later days, Lisa Lyon, traveling as Robert’s sidekick, stood in for Patti Smith, who was appearing on Saturday-morning kid shows, bumping around with Soupy Sales.

Lisa was like Robert's Amazon Protectress. Not at all playing Patti's Madonna. Patti had seemed poor as punk. Lisa seemed hard as trash. Robert Mapplethorpe and Robert Opel actually argued about the value of the women they had in tow!

Robert's view of women was no more opportunistic than his view of everyone else.

He needed them.

And, for a while, he needed me.

Robert was straight the way that straight women figure that gay men are, under it all, really straight. That Straight-Woman Fantasy, that she can cure a queer if only he has sex with her because she has the female power to straighten him out, was an Urban Folk Myth Robert loved to exploit. He added to his commercial mystery adroitly hinting, neither affirming nor denying, that he had sex with women. How could his perversity be *poly* if he didn't?

He anguished continually over sex in letters and conversations.

"Robert Mapplethorpe once told me he was straight," I told director J. D. Slater, who laughed for two minutes and said, "Gee, Jack, if Robert had lived, he might have turned into Betty Boop."

Robert was perverse enough to say to me in one of our enhanced seances, "What if I'd been a straight asshole, and had turned Sam down?"

Nice touch of sexual ambiguity.

Go down to the crypt immediately, poke the ashes, sample the DNA and see if Robert was a genetic homosexual or simply an opportunistic heterosexual scared of sex with women.

Actually, if science articulated the difference between genetic homosexuals and *faux* homosexuals, who are really genetic heterosexuals afraid of heterosex, the perceived gay population would instantly drop by 25 percent.

Strident feminism causes men who would otherwise be some women's husbands to head for the cover of gay bars. They'd rather be fags than married.

These failed heteros, posing as homos, often disguise themselves as the straight (not gay) stereotype of the "Effeminate Homosexual."

Women know that the more traditionally masculine a man is, the more likely it is he's gay. (Rock Hudson was one of the greatest actors in the world: he made heterosexuality believable.) Taught Straight Stereotypes of Gays by military pop culture, these don't-wannabe-straight guys become at worst sissy-wimps and at best screaming drag queens. Desperate and confused, they ape the women of their attraction-repulsion. To

the degree he is effeminate, the more genetically straight is the *faux* queer, who hides from women, and who reinforces the sissy-queen stereotype against otherwise masculine-identified genetic queers.

In 1989, I wrote for publication again what I had written in 1980, that masculine-identified homosexuals have more in common with masculine-identified heterosexual men than men who are female-identified homosexuals.

Camille Paglia basically repeated the same concept in the October 1991 issue of *Esquire* (p. 138).

That drive-by shouting needed saying in terms of the Mapplethorpe universe staked out by men in the hypermasculine ritual and *Zeitgeist* that has nothing to do with women. Robert tumbled into this leather-driven male world and had to make his way almost against type.

Robert romanced society.

He was bisocial.

When he wasn't romancing men, he romanced women.

Robert was emotionally connected to some women, but always conditionally.

Whereas Robert's men were mostly gay, Robert's women were mostly straight.

Robert Mapplethorpe was to society women and media women what most gay men are: *entertainment*.

Where rich women gather, men sing for their supper.

And sometimes they cook it.

In the seventies, I shot leathersex movies of, among other men, Robert Walker, the extraordinarily handsome blond society portrait painter/bodybuilder/chef, who was sent smiling back to cook for his patron, one of the world's richest women...after Mapplethorpe had his infamous way with him. A week later, Robert Mapplethorpe was guest of honor at Madame Swank's table, where he adroitly peddled his photographs, to her and her husband and their friends, thanks to the chef, for whom Robert in turn found painting commissions.

Whatever Robert's sexual identity was, deep inside, he had to be the archetypal gay man as bad-boy artist, because rich and famous women and the art establishment would not have taken to him if he were straight or female or bourgeois.

Robert was not popular those days for his intellect or his private personality; he was known for his snide you-don't-dare-not-love-me attitude.

He glossed Diana Vreeland cynically and said, "I love the rich. They're so clean."

His smirk-faced autopic with the leather whip tailing from his buttocks is Essential Signature Rorschach: “Kiss My Ass and Eat My Shit.”

That’s the self-portrait *Advocate* editor Mark Thompson wanted on the cover. He may have been overruled by queens, but his instinct was absolutely correct.

Madonna, sort of the world-stage media child of her ambitious predecessor Mapplethorpe, knew the value of Being a Gay Male. Shadow-dancing, Madonna claimed to be “a gay man trapped inside a woman’s body.”

It had to happen to somebody sooner or later.²

What is this Gay Man Identity Factor doing to women’s identity?

What did Robert’s Gay Man Identity do to the women in his life? According to the pop culture gossip, Lisa Lyon retired to Los Angeles to live with *Center of the Cyclone* author John Lilly; and Patti Smith married, moved to a Detroit suburb, had a child, and wrote some articles about gay men in pop culture magazines.

“*Details* magazine features a reminiscence by singer Patti Smith on her relationship with Robert Mapplethorpe, accompanied by pictures from *Mapplethorpe*, a new book of his work. ‘I’m not after beauty,’ Mapplethorpe told Smith, ‘I’m after perfection, and they’re not always the same.’”³

Patti Smith, Camille Paglia, Joan Didion, Susan Sontag, and some other women excepted, it is interesting that, in the sea change from the chic seventies to the AIDS nineties, a coup of some women has barged in for a hostile takeover of the life histories, art, and politics of some gay men who lived during the seventies and died in the eighties.

Such co-opting of gay men on the lecture and publishing circuit is another exploitative hit at the current pop target of choice, white males.

In the sixties, Valerie Solanas of SCUM shot Warhol, and no one cheered. In the nineties, the onomatopoetically surnamed Mrs. John Wayne Bobbitt, Lorena Bobbitt, the New Improved Valerie Solanas, cut off her husband’s Bobbitt, and some women cheered. The allegedly

2 *Women’s Wear Daily* praised fashion photographer Steven Meisel, who, once considered too risqué for the fashion mainstream, eventually crashed his shocking art into magazines such as *Vogue* and into advertisements for pricey Gap spots. Meisel worked closely with Madonna on the concept of her book, *Sex*. Meisel, who shot the photographs for *Sex*, enjoys in his mid-thirties a kind of pop para-Mapplethorpe commercial career.

3 Orland Outland, “Out There: The Annals of Queerdom,” *Bay Area Reporter*, November 12, 1992

heterosexual Bobbitts, momentary dick-less wonder couple, entered history like the Irish Squire Boycott as their typically nineties' story entered folklore and their name entered the English language.

If anybody's going to cut up white guys, remember: Mapplethorpe, a white guy, did it first. His famous black-and-white photograph of the male privates, bloody in bondage, preceded his portrait of the seated, naked leatherman whose body was a mass of scarification from razor cuts.

The black-and-white "still life" of the bound, bloody privates was derived from Mapplethorpe's early Polaroids he and Sam Wagstaff showed around London on their English honeymoon.

Robert's literal prime cuts read symbolically.

His primal castration references exhibit his garden-variety fear of the vagina dentata as well as his respect of other men who are quite willing, really, not in fantasy, but really, to torture other men to the extreme they want. Robert liked the concept of torture. Consensual or not. He was raised a Roman Catholic. He was Irish. In his mind, he placed the whole being of the sadist and masochist on the playing field of love and death and all the reciprocal terms between those extremes: pain and pleasure, passive and aggressive, soul and body, beauty and terror, animus and anima, the cross and the crown.

The leather photographs are all of white males. Robert attempted to stake out a fetish franchise of white leather and black men.

But if he had done to women with knives and guns and penetration what he did to white men, no liberals would have defended him from Senator Helms, who probably would have ignored Mapplethorpe's presentation of black men.

And black women, who remain invisible except for a dancer or model or two, such as Anna Waddell, and Dolphina "Dolcie" Neil-Jones, she of the handbag and hat, in *Some Women*.

Robert's views of women and blacks, his views of gender and race, were not those of a saint. In fact, the only candidate for sainthood in this story is Patti Smith.

She ran her own life, sometimes part of Robert's, sometimes pulling back, taking care of her own self, her business, her career, her life, to be apparently alienated, reconciled, and to return again.

Patti was Robert's Muse, Eve, Madonna, Poet, Twin, and Widow.

No wonder Robert always spoke reverently of her.

"Patti's a genius," he said.

Repeatedly.

Robert should have written about his own life.

But he didn't.

Patti is a much published writer.

Nobody owes anybody anything.

I can write a certain gay "Take" on Robert.

But Patti is the writer, friend, and confidante of Mapplethorpe who can write the best "Take" on Robert as perceived with the straight insight of a woman.

Patti is a pop goddess.

She appeared as "January" on *Annie Leibovitz' 1994 Calendar of Portraits*.

