

TAKE 8

SOME WOMEN

Robert Mapplethorpe easily disarmed people. He knew how to charm the defensive, relax the uptight, and direct the independent to an obedience.

He was the man who removed Yoko Ono's shades and presented her eyes to the world.

Some women interested Robert. Not women in general, but some women in particular, and not even all the women in *Some Women*.

Robert, essentially, was a one-woman man, and that woman was his mirror, Patti Smith, whose very existence fueled Robert's introspection.

Patti and Robert were old souls destined to meet again and again.

Lisa Lyon, Robert's "other woman," who appears twice in *Some Women*, was never soulfully connected to Robert as was Patti, who appears four times at the climactic close of that book.

Lisa was a dynamic model, a worldly woman whose surfaces interested him. Lisa was, at least when we dined together, a double stun gun of sexy beauty and dishy wit. Lisa is one of those straight women with the talent to be one of the guys, a prankster, earthy, with a humor so self-effacing that she actually joked that she had built her body on MDA.

Robert and Lisa traveled well together as a famous couple.

Lisa helped Robert escape the confines of his studio. She brought Robert out to shoot the world. She opened him up. She made it possible for him to create in less controlled situations. She widened his scope and his out-of-studio *oeuvre*.

Their work together, *Lady Lisa*, is Robert investigating the anatomy and role-playing of an assertive feminine personality, who, in the feminist seventies, was the first famous female bodybuilder. Lisa, as bodybuilder, developed herself as a muscular female. She avoided the mistake later women bodybuilders made in designing their muscles, using freak-out anabolics—male steroids—to build men's musculature on women's bodies.

To Robert, Lisa was a new icon, a new image.

Robert eroticized Lisa at the beginning.

At the end, Robert hung up on Lisa, who called him repeatedly from California with strange cures for AIDS.

Before their falling out, Robert posed Lisa, virtually phallically, in blue swimsuit and red rubber cap standing barefoot over the black model, Jack, lying on the floor. Terrific ambiguity: Lady Lisa Lifeguard is either seductive Siren or Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* on the half shell. In other poses, she is the Society Woman in hat, veil, gloves. She can pose in changed gender.

Lisa and Patti represent in body type the Mapplethorpe female who is not in the tradition of the fecund female figure. Mapplethorpe's women straddle androgyny by their very slender builds.¹

Click! Click!

Robert liked the anomaly of an athletically feminine woman in the sport of bodybuilding, which traditionally worshipped the male body.

Early on, before he met black bodybuilders, Robert protested too much when he said he cared little for straight, white male bodybuilders. "You can't work out that much and have a brain," he told me.

In 1976, he had shot Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was, Robert said, "straight and very pleasant."

His photograph of Herr Schwarzenegger is simple as a declarative sentence.

Robert was indifferent to it, but he published it, because der Herr was famous, and clever, taking bodybuilding out of its sideshow status. Actually, Holly Solomon said, "the photograph of Arnold was the first photograph Robert sold to private Manhattan collectors."

Der Herr appeared posing, live and in person, in a kind of performance art show at the Whitney Museum, Wednesday, February 25, 1976. The 8:00 P.M. program was titled, "Tissue Issue. Articulate Muscle: The Male Body in Art."

Candice Bergen's photographs of der Herr are as declarative as Robert's.

Maybe "straight and pleasant" doesn't show up on film.

Robert, recognizing my then obsessive attraction to bodybuilders, felt obliged to explain that he simply didn't get what male bodybuilders are all about.

That's practically heresy for a gay man to say, because, if physique contest auditoriums were emptied of homosexuals, most of the audience and numerous contestants would disappear.

¹ Robert directed a 1978 black-and-white film of Patti titled *Still Moving/ Patti Smith* which, he wrote me in a letter, he shot on \$2,000 of his own money and worried he'd never earn back. In 1984, Robert directed Lisa Lyon in a color film.

Robert may not have “gotten” white male bodybuilders, whom he called “fucks from outer space,” because he had bedded more than a few bodybuilders and found their narcissism impenetrable.

He couldn't get into another man's narcissism.

He hadn't the power to disarm bodybuilders, shielded psychologically in Jungian terms by the muscle of their body armor, the way he could disarm, in Freudian terms, normally built men or women.

He was human.

Robert genuinely liked women, the mystique of women, the company of women, and women seemed to like him.

He was one of those attractive men who make some women dislike homosexuality because, unlike sexual competition from other women, sexual competition with other men is a fight for love and glory they rarely win.

Robert was a typical masculine-identified homosexual whose concern for women was limited by his homosexuality. But he was not one of those male artists whose fear of women translates to sadism toward women. He reserved his sadomasochistic investigations to men.

Luckily, Robert lived in Manhattan among women sophisticated enough to enjoy the plenty of him that was available to them.

He eschewed the feminist movement the way he avoided gay politics.

A classicist, a formalist, he was a humanist evolved beyond gender squabbles.

When faced with emotional political issues, he simply cut through the issue and went for the principle.

He refused to deal with abortion, sex, and drugs because, to him, they were nonissues. He felt that people should simply take a cue from the women, and allow free choice on everything.

He was very permissive, because free choice had led him to such great personal freedom.

One cannot escape, perforce, when discussing Mapplethorpe's women, to address the androgyny that had, at least, a kind of Jungian interest for Robert, always in his connection to Symbolic Patti, and particularly in his 1980 self-portrait wearing cosmetics.

His “androgyny” was essentially pop cultural and commercial. He never gave evidence of wanting to be a woman. He was no closet transvestite and certainly no drag queen.

Mapplethorpe was a fashion photographer.

He was also his own least expensive and most cooperative model.

He began his career shooting himself and displaying other of his photographs in frames he designed with mirrors. He actually appears more “effeminate” in his autopix from the early 1970s.

Touching up himself with cosmetics associated with women, Robert experimented with putting on one of the masks women often wear to see if he could work the sex and magic of his camera to break through to the other side of gender.

He wasn’t trying to look like a woman. He was like the straight men, and gay men, who like to wear women’s panties while they smoke cigars for exhibition sex. These men say they don’t want to be women. They want to be seen as men red-blooded enough to fill out women’s panties. Witness his high-heel and mesh-stockings photographs of the hyper-masculine Roger Koch. In 1983, Roger, billed as “Frank Vickers,” was the number-one throb in gay films. Robert did not want to shoot Roger in drag; Robert wanted to display soft female apparel in contrast to the hard male physique. Roger was not too happy. Actually, Roger failed to understand that Robert was dramatizing his strength even in parody. Robert would have killed to possess Roger Koch.

Robert, in the erotic-court Manhattan style of the genderfuck times, was actually trying to look like a contemporary rock star.

He was secure enough in his personal masculinity to mask himself with mascara to see what feeling he might evoke in himself. The artist was attempting to increase empathy with women at a time when androgyny was an issue dramatized in the nightlife of the clubs and the world of rock ‘n’ roll: Mick Jagger, David Bowie, et al.

Androgyny is a ritual act that states the person is not male or female, but flesh, not man or woman, but human.

“Mapplethorpe,” Edward Lucie-Smith said, “was typical of those deliberately artificial artists, somewhat like Gustave Moreau, who helped begat Art Nouveau. Moreau and that group admired in Michelangelo what they took to be the ‘ideal somnambulism’ of Michelangelo’s figures.”

Robert, one of the world’s great leather and kink fetishists, experimented, but couldn’t penetrate the incredible essence of being female.

Perhaps that super-facies self-portrait, which the gaystream wrongly embraces as a drag shot, is actually satire of cosmeticized women, and, always in the spinning Mapplethorpe, of drag queens who figured so prominently in the wares of his mentor/tormentor, Andy Warhol. A satiric gloss fits with his constant mythological gloss in his other self-portraits.

The Mapplethorpe autopix are not true confessionals; they are sold for amusement purposes only.

Robert's nearest autobiographical record of androgyny looks so mask-like that its very failure to penetrate the secrets of the female gives clue to why his photographs of women, other than Patti, seem rarely to penetrate the surface of their feminine mystique. When it came to the real sexuality of women, Robert really hadn't a clue beyond the takes of fashion or the iconography of religion or art history.

He was typically gay. Gay men, despite popular folklore, know no more about women than do straight men. If women disappeared, gay men would never notice. Gay men, who aren't interested in pussy, only pretend to bond with straight women through fashion and sensitivity. It's a clever way to be available when the women's husbands inevitably want to take a walk on the wild side.

Yet Mapplethorpe could catch beauty, in his style, in his take, within his capacity, like no one else. In his photographs of women, he tenders his females with the same narcissism he offers in his self-portraits. Narcissism, after all, knows no gender. Narcissism is the main theme of pop culture, capitalism's consumerism, and advertising.

His photographs in *Some Women* are studies in the control of the beautiful surface.

How civilized!

Some issue-driven women don't like his photographs of women. That's a measure of something and, though it may say more about the fad of "correct politics" than it does about Robert, they think real attention must be paid them.

Go figure!

The photographs are a male's interpretation, and most of the women seem ornamental, if not downright vulnerable, except for that sexuous Sarah Bernhardt, the lippy Sandra Bernhard.

Some Women, after all, is carefully titled.

Robert knew the limitations of what he was doing.

These photographs are not the enigma of Everywoman.

These are some women, not all women, certainly, not even particularly representative women. They are mostly famous women, many of them performers. They know how to give face to a camera, how to interact with a lens.

Robert did not create photographs of women for men to consume. Mapplethorpe shot women for an audience of women. And gay men. His fine art photographs and his celebrity portraits grow out of his seminal interest in fashion photography, whose audience is women and gay men. The photographs are technically exquisite, but strangely aloof, some kinky

but not sadomasochistic, and a bit off-center: women are arranged, perhaps like flowers, sectioned off in body parts, framed by the lens, passive, pensive, eyes very often closed. Others are reacting rather than acting, some are, by their choice, vulnerably nude, some wearing jewelry or restrictive clothing that carries a bondage subtext.

The *Some Women* cover shot of Lucy Ferry at first looks like Lucy Ferry resting her head in her hands, which seem like flowers. Studying the portrait, one sees the trickster photographer at work. The image reads as if a pair of hands, Lucy's, or other than Lucy's, cuffed with bracelets, are holding up a disembodied head, the face and hair perfectly groomed, not a death mask, but a mask to be worn in life.

A cover shot is always a signature shot.

A book can be read by its cover.

If so, then masks, not faces, are the subject matter of *Some Women*, even in the unmasked Yoko Ono.

Pop art faces are generally blank.

Pain, Emily Dickinson diagnosed, has an element of blank.

Some of his women seem to exhibit suffering.

A kind of suffering different from the self-conscious suffering of the men in the leather S&M photographs. Robert examines this quality of female blankness.

Aloof women do not promise sexuality.

Jacqueline Bouvier's father took one look at her college graduation photographs and told her to schedule a second sitting. He reportedly told her, "You look too available."

As late as the sixties, middle-class Americans did not show their teeth in formal photographs.

Yoko, years before, had been photographed nude with Lennon, to much controversy. In Mapplethorpe's photograph, she appears stylishly dressed and coiffed, but an ineffable look of can't-get-no-satisfaction reminds the viewer that she was the most controversial woman in rock 'n' roll, a nowhere-man artiste, who looks up, with inscrutable privacy, at Robert.

Like Mapplethorpe, Yoko Ono has been accused of social climbing. What Asian mask does she present to Mapplethorpe? It's more than the continuing grief of the second most famous widow in the world.

Something there is about some women's eyes, those windows of the soul, that imprint the presence of Mapplethorpe's camera.

His studio lights reflected in the pupils of most close-ups are so distractingly apparent, the photographer, who was an expert technician,

must be telling the viewer something about the complicity of the subject with the photographer in the high crime of art.

Is Robert himself reflected in those pupils the way Hitchcock walked through his own films?

Is it simply studio lighting, because it appears only in the studio shots?

Robert liked speedy drugs. Robert liked speedy shoots. He had little time for most people. He had a little spiel about his edgy attitude about shooting portraits on assignment:

“Just climb into the automatic photo booth, darling. Pull the curtain closed. Sit on the bench. Deposit your quarters in the slot. The machine will flash four times and you’ll have your poses on one strip, they’ll come out that dispenser there, in three minutes flat, be careful, they’ll still be slightly wet, and you and all your girlfriends can stand around and giggle.”

Some things, when heard, are remembered virtually intact.

Robert’s celebrity photographs of some women, excepting Susan Sarandon and several others, seem distant, disconnected, even cynical. Saran-don, rising *deshabille*, clutches the bed sheets, and casts a powerful look.

His work with Lisa Lyon, however, connects on the level of two artists working professionally at creating content and form, working at creating commercial art.

His work with children is simply portraiture.

However, the shot of the little girl with genitals exposed as she lifts her little dress seems to reference, not pornography, but a little Cupid by Leonardo.

His photographs of Patti are excruciatingly personal studies, from the early drug-waif portraits to the wraithly romantic 1988 portraits in *Some Women*.

At the end of Robert’s life, Patti becomes the Madonna, the Pietà, matured in Robert’s Roman Catholic vision, the woman, the survivor, the lover, the might-have-been wife, the soon-to-be widow, his suffering mirrored in her sorrowful mature face.

By 1988, nearing the end, both of them knowing that any shoot could be his last, Robert captured the face of the woman he loved as if she were Mrs. Robert Mapplethorpe: woman, artist, artist’s wife.

Her face in those final photographs matches Robert’s final signature self-portrait, his *eminence grise*, holding the staff of life capped with Death’s skull. These very personal photographs offer two more faces of AIDS—the person with AIDS and the grief of the survivor.

When a second Robert Mapplethorpe panel for the AIDS quilt is sewn, it should exhibit, side by side, with no more words than MAPPLETHORPE-SMITH, the last photographs of these two people, man and woman, who had so long been friends together.

His women, his portraits of women, represent women as seen by a male, as seen by a New Yorker, as seen by Mapplethorpe.

Basically, the Mapplethorpe women are to womanhood what New York City is to America in the famous *New Yorker* cartoon by Saul Steinberg, in which the nation outside of New York shrinks away inconsequentially from the self-pumped Manhattan perspective.