

TAKE 9

GAY ARTISTS AND THE STRAIGHT WOMEN WHO LOVE THEM

Women, not their husbands, whom they tow through galleries, are the true patrons of art. In American popular culture, one proto-typical mixed-gender couple is the straight woman and the gay male artist. Has anyone yet sighted a straight man and a lesbian artist? For the women, the gay male artist often serves as surrogate partner who may also be a walker or a sitter. Walkers are men who accompany women to events requiring an escort. Sitters are men who literally sit with women who are broken-hearted or ailing or elderly. Ideally, neither exploits the other in the symbiosis.

The gay artist with his female patron, the gay photographer with his female model, the gay film star actor with his contracted wife, the gay bodybuilder with his blonde bimchette, the gay pro athlete with his perpetual fiancée, the gay Hell's Angel with his old lady, the gay business broker with his debutante, all kneel to the significance of the appearance, not the reality, of seeming to be a heterosexual couple. In the agreed-upon mendacity of American culture, the appearance of heterosexuality is good for business and keeps the tabloids at bay.

Does that say everything one needs to know about Mr. X and his fabulous wife, Charade X?

No matter what Patti Smith's real relationship was to Robert Maplethorpe, some people would wish her to be at least symbol, if not fact, of his "latent heterosexuality"

Heterosexuals commonly entertain the illusion that homosexuals given world enough and time will eventually turn to heterosexuality.

In actual fact, the reverse is true. As I stated quite clearly as a guest on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, on January 28, 1993, it is heterosexuals, particularly women's husbands, who turn to homosexuality for recreational sex. "I like having sex with you," a husband told me, "because you're a man. If I had sex with a woman, that'd be unfaithful to my wife. I love my wife and my kids. And I know I can't fall in love with another man."

Yeah.

Right.

Straight people want to believe the utterly wild scenario that if Robert Mapplethorpe had lived longer, he would have come to his senses after his misspent youth, married Patti (thus redeeming them both from sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll), and fathered a bevy of little Mapplethorpes.

AMERICAN FACT: No matter what you are in reality, give the public what they want in appearance. Convicted criminals appear to find Jesus. Murderous wives appear to be victims. Gays appear to be straight. What happens in reality in private no one cares about. What happens in appearance in public matters. The dysfunctional family must appear religious at church.

Some straight people want the gay Mapplethorpe to appear to be at least a closet heterosexual.

It would be so much better for business if his life and his work were, uh, acceptably straightened out.

In the public hetero imagination, Robert Mapplethorpe is fantasized to be secretly in love with Patti Smith.

Patti, likewise, in the hetero Hollywood version, becomes the romantic chanteuse manufactured as the artist's love interest to cancel out his homosexuality by intimating that his tortured creativity was fueled by heterosex longing.

The plot thickens when Mapplethorpe model Lisa Lyon is cast as "the other woman" who comes between Mapplethorpe and Smith.

The American pop culture of sex often grasps at straws with disastrously destructive results to sexuality.

If the appearance can be created that Mapplethorpe was straight, then his homosexuality (meaning, all homosexuality) stays as invisible as Ralph Ellison's invisible blacks in *Invisible Man*.

Actually, Robert Mapplethorpe never ever indicated to me in any way that his relationship with Patti Smith was anything but platonic friends who respected one another as persons and artists sometimes working together. Period.

Nevertheless, because Robert's homosexuality is central to his art and to his controversy, people always ask, "What about Patti?"

Only Patti Smith, the private person, can answer that question about Patti Smith, the public person. No matter the heterosexual speculation, and no matter what some women eventually confess about their relationship to Robert Mapplethorpe, the bottom line was, and is, and will never change: Robert Mapplethorpe was a man's man.

He was shy, he was sensitive, he was an artist; but so were we all. He was afraid of us, afraid of sexual-outlaw men; but he was terminally

fascinated. He took drugs to get up the courage of his perversion, because he wanted to enter our sexual, rugged, dark fraternity. He saw in our wild leather style of domination and submission the classic Greco-Roman masculinity he so wanted to infuse in his life and work. His first collage work featured muscular hustlers. Then he met those of us who could give him the rites and rituals for which he so hungrily lusted.

That's truth.

I had love and sex and relations with Robert Mapplethorpe, whose death made me a kind of unclassifiable widower.

But that's not Hollywood.

That won't play in Peoria. My hometown.

So, driven by the hetero needs of hetero pop culture, and because of the psychological drama of the made-for-TV movie, *The Perfect Moment: The Robert Mapplethorpe Story*, I have always deduced a role for Patti Smith in which I cast her as Robert Mapplethorpe's Symbolic Significant Other. Robert Mapplethorpe loved women with the purity, the courtly love, that only a masculine-identified gay man can bring to the feminine mystique, which he so honored in his resplendent photographs of women.

