

TAKE 12

THE MUSE IS A BITCH

Photographers, a breed of artist only 150 years old, now throw their shadows on paper that fixes images, unlike the protophotographers whose shadows could appear only ever so briefly in the firelight on the wall of Plato's cave.

Robert Mapplethorpe was a night shooter.

He shot the dark night of the soul. He risked the dark truth of the human condition. He conjured the dark side of religion, culture, and sex.

He was an iconoclast who became an icon.

He never stripped a model more than he stripped himself in his self-portraits that are the narrative of his life.

Robert had not a vanity, but a vivid self-esteem, as he raged to the edge of the uncharted *terra incognita* of the human psyche. Art, as a vocation, can be a risky dance on the killing ground. That artist is best who dares reveal his or her particular soul.

Robert stripped himself one night, playing the lapsed Catholic for me, his bicoastal lover, the former seminarian and prolapsed Catholic. We were ex-altar boys working hard at upping the ante on his shock factor. He wanted feedback.

He was passionately afire with autophotography, the completely perfect loop of aesthetic control: the photographer as his own model, the subject as object, every nuance behind and before the camera controlled, the songwriter who sings his own songs, the shaman-priest as his own offering.

Robert got naked, his own personal-best model, vested in leather, spinning spiderlike from within, some fantasy of blasphemy that he wanted me as writer-partner to critique with both erotic and esthetic response.

He was a *Kama Sutra* kamikaze.

That night's role-playing, the masks, the costumes, the conjurations were purposely seductive scenarios of primal lust, blasphemous satire, and sophisticated art. He became the Archangel Lucifer, whose name means "bearer of light." Lucifer, theology's riskiest rebel, was Robert's patron of photographers to whom light and darkness are the essence of the art.

"I'll show you something I'm working on," Robert said.

Robert, committed body and soul to the fame track of notorious icon bashing, always had a purpose, even in the sack.

Recall Robert's quintessential self-photograph with a whip up his ass: Lucifer/Pan tailed as demon, snake—evocative of the serpent in Eden—leading us into temptation; his graphic homage to the lyrics of the poet/singer he adored, Jim Morrison, “riding the King Snake” in the song “This Is the End, My Friend.”

Assume what memory must recall when a notorious photographer into ritual enactment vests himself in leather, stands over his lover's face, penetrates himself with a braided leather whip handle, and undulates multiple poses with all the liveliness, voice, and erotic moves that no single still frame can deliver—and calls it foreplay.

That night in the Bond Street studio, Robert transformed himself, rehearsing the stance, the posture, the penetration, the turn of the head, the sneering face looking back, all of which he created, alone with his camera, into the 1978 autophotograph that exhibited his “response to a society of assholes” that he felt had abused him with its pushy notions of theology, sex, and politics.

Robert mooned the world with contempt.

His only real pleasure was making that world pay big hard cash for his sassy images.

The cost to him, as seer and sayer, was enormous: his photographs are not erotic; they are not emotional; they are cold. Probably no one has ever masturbated to a Mapplethorpe.

At the 1980 Castro Street Fair in San Francisco, Robert Mapplethorpe, rich and famous, sat vomiting on the curb near the marquee of the Castro Theater. He was alone when I found him, lost in the press of muscular flesh. We walked to the Eureka Valley School playground and lay together in the grass.

He was very depressed, alienated from the gorgeous bodybuilders partying nearly naked, unthinking, in the sunny street. His “take” on life was cold as art for art's sake. His “take” froze his emotions into the formalism of his classic photographs. He was pure crystalline intellect. He was suffering existential isolation.

“I can't always be the famous photographer,” he said. “They'll never understand me. Not the straight ones. Not the gay ones. What I'm saying, really saying, they refuse to hear.”

Photography, or fame, or maybe the exhaustion of always having to be “The Mapplethorpe” had stressed Robert. Talent, to the disciplined artist, is a relentless mistress. The talented ones are often slaves to their

talent; they achieve art, beauty, and glory at an exhausting personal price, if they are to remain true to their art.

“What does it take?” he asked.

“Everything you have.”

That afternoon, lying in the grass, Robert Mapplethorpe cried.

