

## TAKE 16

# WHITE ART, BLACK MEN

### Racism Is Essentially Sex

Race fascinated Robert Mapplethorpe as much as sex and more than gender.

The only self-portrait that even the shocking Mapplethorpe could never exhibit was himself made up in black face.

In 1979, Robert sat bolt upright, startled erotically, by William Friedkin's searing screenplay, *Cruising*, which captured precisely the dangers and excitement of leathersex in the New York nightlife that was Robert's milieu.

Thirty minutes into the controversial film, star Al Pacino resists—because he is an undercover cop—interrogation by cops who do not know his identity.

Suddenly, a door opens.

A huge black man strides tall into the room.

He is built like a linebacker.

He wears only cowboy boots, cowboy hat, and a white jockstrap. He backhands Pacino, sending him flying across the room.

Wordlessly, he exits.

"What the shit was that?" Pacino asks.

Robert knew

*Epiphany!*

Friedkin shocked him to a new crystalline vision: the erotic power of the black male.

Illuminated by that seminal moment, Robert dared confront his curiosity about masculinity and about race. Earlier, in 1976, Robert told Boyd MacDonald in the premier underground erotic magazine *The Manhattan Review of Unnatural Acts*, also called *Straight to Hell*, that his favorite movie was *Mandingo*. Based on Kyle Onstott's Falconhurst series, the movie presented blacks as serious sex objects of white desire. This was a fresh spin on the pop stereotype of black men as sexual predators hunting white women.

At a grind house on Market Street in San Francisco, in 1978, before video rentals shut down twelfth-run theaters where patrons' feet stick to the floor, Robert, who was very selective about the rare movie he saw, insisted we go together to see *Mandingo*.

"We've both already seen it," I said.

"We need to see it together."

*Gone With the Wind* had avoided the issue of black men by desexing all blacks into Mammies and Toms.

*Mandingo* exploited the libidinous attraction of the white plantation lady, Susan George, to the handsomely built black slave, Ken Norton.

Critics hated *Mandingo*. Liberal whites were embarrassed. Some blacks loved it. *Mandingo* was a pop morality play of white sexual lust that ends in racial violence, which is always sexual violence.

*Mandingo* popularly reflects the honest sexual attitude of the Sexualizing Seventies toward race relations. In pop culture, no black woman has yet become a sex icon to mainstream America. But plenty of black men have long had romantic or athletic sex appeal that sells tickets at the box office and at the stadium: Poitier, Belafonte, Ali, Johnny Mathis, Billy Dee Williams, Ken Norton, and Magic Johnson.

Robert's sex-race curiosity found instant gratification in *Mandingo*. Only sexually was Robert multicultural. He liked the street-chic crowd in the Market Street theater: mostly young, male blacks in Afro haircuts, dashikis, and blue wool watch caps. The culturally participatory crowd, raised on interactive religion, were eating, smoking, talking, shouting at the screen with more spontaneity than staid white culture—including the with-it white crowds acting out the Saturday midnight ritual screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Up to the 1980s, twenty-four-hour grind movie theaters gave homes to the homeless. They were street people's entertainment and shelter. (This particular Market Street theater was torn down and rebuilt as another link in the consumer chain of The Gap.)

The audience knew *Mandingo* by heart. They yelled hip responses at the screen. When the blonde actress Susan George called the boxing champion Ken Norton to her four-poster, she was slathering lust. He was black pride: heroically muscular body stripped to the waist; wearing only a pair of soft white cotton pants. He stood, back to the camera, as she crawled across the bed, reached up, pulled the drawstring knot of his pants—a very long drawstring that, as she pulled it, caused his white cotton pants to slide ever so slowly down his beautiful black butt.

The crowd grew increasingly Uh-HUH at the wantonness of this rich white lady. As Ken Norton's butt appeared, and Susan dived down under the drawstring, a black male voice in the audience shouted out with full-soul inflection: "Howl-leeeee-w000000d!"

Robert and I, leering at the scene, and even more at the crowd's cheering response, squeezed hands together under the arm of the theater seat.

"See what I mean?" he said.

Robert found in *Mandingo* a certain pop culture confidence to proceed into sex and race.

Wally Wallace was founding owner of the after-hours orgy club, the Mine Shaft. The orgy club was to male sex and drugs what CBGB was to punk music and drugs and what Studio 54 was to celebrity schmoozing and drugs.<sup>1</sup> The three clubs' name lists overlapped. Not everyone went to CBGB or Studio 54, but sooner or later everyone came to the Mine Shaft, where sex, not status, ruled.

The Mine Shaft was located on the West Side of Manhattan, at 835 Washington Street. Its Joe-Sent-Me entrance swung open between the multiple sides of raw beef hanging from hooks over the loading dock, where men in bloody white coats tossed carcasses in the wee hours of the morning. It opened in October 1976 and was closed on November 7, 1985, by the New York City Department of Health.

The action was leathersex.

The clientele was leathersmen, laced with celebrities out slumming. One night, Robert, quite thrilled, said he had seen Mick Jagger turned away at the door, not because he was Mick Jagger, which counted for nothing once inside, but because he was with a woman. (Women, disguised as men, often made it into the Mine Shaft. In fact, more than one woman, aided in disguise by her escort Mapplethorpe, spent a splendid night of active orality and fisting at the Mine Shaft.)

Robert asked Wally, the source of all New York sexual information, about, in Robert's term, "nigger" bars.

"I told him about the black bars," Wally said, "but he was scared. He kept after me, so I took him there myself. I'd never seen Bob so nervous. He had shot a few black men previously, but they had been gay black men, some of them professional models. I knew Bob. He wanted the danger of the real thing."

---

<sup>1</sup> Wally Wallace opened the Mine Shaft in 1976. Hilly Kristal founded CBGB in 1973 and opened to punk and new wavers in 1974; Camille O'Grady and Patti Smith both appeared at CBGB. Steve Ruben and Ian Schrager opened the Studio 54 disco in spring 1977.

Wally Wallace is one of the few people ever to call Robert Mapplethorpe “Bob.”

Diffidently moving into his “*Mandingo* Period,” shooting rugged black men, Robert wrote me, “I’m still into Niggers. I even have a button on my leather jacket that spells it out when I hit the bars. It seems to attract them.”

Attract them, he did.

Robert pushed the then accepted taste of race, which is a category of sex, by exposing the body of the nude black male, which is twice as verboten as the nude white male.

He worked with a double edge.

He could invest his art with a certain ambiguity that often made viewers feel that maybe they were the butt of some smartass joke.

“If you flinch, you lose.” Double-dare spin was the prime secret of his success.

For instance: he could make polite nudes seem somehow buck naked.

He blurred the line between the received conventions of art and the sexual frontiers of art. In his technique, he used classic values. He invoked formalist style. He used beauty, and art for art’s sake, to tweak the received taste of what was beautiful and what was art.

Robert, first famous as a collector and then as a photographer, was not particularly dedicated to inscribing the African cultural contribution into the white history of art.

He wanted to sell photographs to his target market, the radical chic, who had attended Leonard Bernstein’s fund-raising party for the Black Panthers in 1970. Agnes Varda, a filmic equivalent of Cartier-Bresson, had made her films, *Black Panthers* and *Lion’s Love* (1969), back to back. *Lion’s Love* starred Warhol superstar Viva, the authors of *Hair*, Gerome Ragni and James Rado, and filmmaker Shirley Clarke.

By 1970, many photographers merchandised the collision of white beauty and white sex. Few, if any, artists presented images of blacks. Warhol approached the subject in his 1964 silkscreen *Race Riot*, which Robert eventually folded into his personal art collection.

The seventies were Robert’s time for his secret, sexual exploration of black men. Leathersex had led to the leather photographs. “Nigger sex” led to the black photographs that debuted in the eighties. Blacks had crossed over the same way gays crossed over. Race and sex: blacks and gays. To the mix, Robert carried camera and a checkbook.

The blackening of white America happened in sync with the queen-ing of straight America.

Seventies alternative pop culture blew out the jams. Mainstream America was never to be the same again, despite the Republican regency, southern politicians, and fundamental religionists seeking a restoration of the old, white, and straight patriarchy.

In 1977, pop icon Warren Beatty was dating Iman, one of the most beautiful of the black women beginning to appear in the world of fashion photography that Robert covered for *Vogue*, Italian *Vogue*, and *Vogue France*.

Black women in fashion introduced a new elegance.

Black men in photography remained problematic.

Images of black males began to cross over only in the work of male photographers shooting for gay erotic publications interested in sporadic novelty picture spreads on astounding genital size.

The male frontal nude would not exist were it not for gay photographers and the gay audience.

Despite Lorena Bobbitt's cutting her way into nineties folklore, straight women generally are interested in the whole man, not his penis. Straight men generally do not want to see any penis because all penises invite comparison.

Photographer Jim French, in his Colt Studio work, is basically the only gay photographer balancing fine art with fine erotica. French is, arguably, one of the most consistent if not one of the best American photographers of males in this century. He knows the art of public taste, popular culture, and successful commerce. One day, an exhibition called "Jim French and Robert Mapplethorpe" will be revealing.

French and Mapplethorpe shared at least one model, the exquisite blond bodybuilder, Roger Koch, known in Colt films and the underground videos of Christopher Rage as "Frank Vickers." For French, Frank wore leather. For Mapplethorpe, Roger wore mesh stockings. On his deathbed, Roger told me, "I have nothing good to say about Robert Mapplethorpe." Robert was difficult. For friends and models.

Mapplethorpe models, black and white, were often recruited from the ambitious world of erotic video. They often resurfaced on adult screens advertising that they, "live on stage," had once been a "Mapplethorpe Model."

French's work with blacks is far less threatening than Robert's. Mr. America, French's black superstar, Chris Dickerson, does not disturb the viewer the way that Mapplethorpe's photograph *Michael Spencer*, 1983

turns a rugged black man in white thermal underpants into raw sexual power.<sup>2</sup>

Robert picked up on the seventies' West Coast "porno" success with black men. He admired photographers Jim French and Calvin Anderson, and artists Tom of Finland and Bill (The Hun) Schmeling. As a collector with Wagstaff, Robert was also well aware of New Orleans's painter-photographer George Dureau's nude studies of black males. Robert sensed an untapped Manhattan market for this new subject matter: black males.

He took race and sex up from the trend-setting gay subculture and mainlined it into the gold veins of Manhattan.

Almost ten years of personal sexual and racial experimentation passed from Robert's initial "plantation" fetish for black men, whom he wanted as sex slaves, to the publicly "corrected" aesthetic of his *Black Book* in 1986. He realized he could market only race, not racism.

Conventional wisdom in the politically correct eighties, when Robert shot the majority of his black men, levitated Robert above seventies "blaxploitation" movies. No one objected when Lili Tomlin darkened her face to play a black man on stage and screen. In 1993, the PC (Politically Correct) crowd freaked out when Ted Danson put on black face to entertain his then intimate, Whoopi Goldberg, who as a black woman had to defend Danson and herself in the media for their consensual sex-and-race humor at the New York Friars' Club, which holds nothing sacred.

Meanwhile, African culture, having entered white politics, began to inscribe its image into the apartheid of the art of photography.

Robert's timing was astute.

In 1982, the Harlem Exhibition Space, in New York, included him in the group show "The Black Male Image." In 1984, Robert's *Ken Moody*, *Stern Magazine* dramatized a nude black male "selling" a woman's shoe with a tangible edge of high-fashion fetish. In 1986, Robert triumphed with the lyric mandingo *pas de deux* of *Thomas and Dovanna*. In June 1988, *Harper's* designed its cover around his photograph, *Robert Sherman and Ken Moody*, white and black, both bald and in profile, to illustrate Shelby White's lead feature, "I'm Black, You're White, Who's Innocent? Race and Power in an Age of Shame."

Talk about *spin*!

Robert, white-bread from Queens, no matter what his motivation, had crossed the racial barrier as a hero. He broke apartheid in photography the same way apartheid in South Africa was broken: economic sanctions.

---

2 Mr. America, Colt Studios model Chris Dickerson, commissioned an inter-racial drawing from Bill Schmeling, "The Hun," in 1984.

Robert's new goods sold, but not without some controversy.

Gay culture has always required an explanation of Mapplethorpe, because gay culture's obsession with politics, which, way more than AIDS, keeps it from truly mainstreaming itself, envies and can't comprehend a famous queer who was about as politically correct as Eva Peron.

Gay culture, wanting explanation of Mapplethorpe, has fingered me as his friend, his lover, his publisher, his biographer, and his "widow," when in reality I am only one of his friends, one of his lovers, one of his publishers, one of his biographers, and one of his "widows."

In the eighties, the gay group called "Black Men and White Men Together" had debated Mapplethorpe's point of view. So had the, Avatar Leather Organization in Los Angeles, on June 27, 1990, to whom I presented a lecture on Robert Mapplethorpe coincident with Nelson Mandela's first visit to Southern California.

Previously, the first OutWrite Conference was held Saturday and Sunday, March 3 and 4, 1990, at the Cathedral Hill Hotel with Allen Ginsberg as keynote speaker. Mark Hemry had videotaped a panel I was supposed to address on the subject "Censorship of Gay and Lesbian Art in the Age of Helms and Mapplethorpe." The subject could not be addressed because a PC brawl erupted between some gay men and some lesbian separatist feminists Hemry captured it for posterity with his video camera. The Zapruder-like footage exists in gay pop culture archives.

In the aftermath, in the lobby of the hotel, some gay black men, hot on the topic of my panel, accused Robert's work of exploiting race. Lesbian black women deemed him acceptable, because he at least made black people visible.

Robert, fascinated by black leather against white skin, felt black skin was exotic as black leather.

He fetishized both.

Los Angeles erotic-art photographer Mikal Bales expressed his own feeling of what his gay kinsman Robert felt when a white boy looks at blacks. Bales's Zeus Studios often features muscular black men in bondage, not as slaves, but as captured hypermasculine heroes.

"In 1967, when I was in the Peace Corps in Nigeria," Bales said, "I was the only white. Everyone around me was black. It shocked my eye when I would reach out my arm and see my white hand against the others' black skin. I felt outlandish. Literally strange to myself. At first, their blackness made them all look the same to my white eye. Soon I could discern the difference. I was astounded at their individual and collective beauty, which white media had effectively, and so mistakenly, censored

from my eye and consciousness. This was not Bojangles or Superfly. These were people.”

That had been my own experience in the summer of 1961, when, as a Catholic seminarian, tutored by Saul Alinsky, I was engaged as a social worker by The Woodlawn Organization (TWO), knocking door-to-door in tenements, explaining to rural blacks fresh to Chicago’s South Side, Sixty-third and Cottage Grove, what urban resources were available where.

Robert teased me of being racially chic before it was fashionable. He questioned my religious motives. Did I find blacks sexually attractive? He said he guessed it was all right for me to be carried bodily by the Chicago police out of Mayor Daley’s office. He confessed he’d never do that, not even with Martin Luther King leading the sit-in.

“You never wanted to fuck them?” Robert said.

I was a seminarian, a very young seminarian. At the time, sex wasn’t something that I did. Sex was something I kept people from doing.

“Oh, Jack!” Robert laughed and laughed. “You missed the opportunity of a lifetime.”

Robert related to athletic blacks who were genitally endowed, in order to marry the threat of race with the threat of sex. He was, in his adopted “European” way, picking up on Leni Riefenstahl. They had met in Manhattan. She had shot both the perfect moments of bodies in her 1936 *Olympic Games*, as well as the mystique of blacks. (Riefenstahl’s 1935 *Triumph of the Will* is the most powerful propaganda film of the twentieth century.) The never-ending racial controversy over Riefenstahl anticipated the moral furor over Mapplethorpe.

Robert’s cannily mixed race and sex is evidenced in his *Bob Love*, 1979, *Philip*, 1980, *Man in Polyester Suit*, 1980, the white oral-sexing of the black in *Marty and Hank*, 1982, the phallic equation of calla lilies in *Dennis Speight*, 1983 and *Thomas*, 1986 with Thomas’s *Navel*, 1986. (Thomas’s navel is shaped to suggest a second set of male genitalia.)

Robert’s dismissal of white endowment is the very early photograph of the white leatherman, *Mark Stevens (Mr. 10½)*, 1976, who was the Caucasian exception, not the rule.

Robert Mapplethorpe was a size queen.

What man isn’t? (If not for penis, for breasts.)

Robert ritualized black men for sex. He was like Holden Caulfield who thought he was not a man until he had made it with a black woman. In a sense, because the black photographs buzz a running subtext to the



leather photographs, white-southern senator Jesse Helms may have had no more quarrel than a bad case of sex-race penis envy.

Racism is essentially sexual fear.

Robert enjoyed confronting his white patrons, especially women, with photographs of black men and black penises. He played “chicken”, with clients. “If you don’t like this photograph,” Robert implied, “you’re not as avant-garde as you think. You don’t belong in this gallery.”

He capered through dialogue: “Black guys are hung bigger, except for the ones who date white chicks.”

Robert used sex to audition models: leathermen and black men. As scary as S&M leather was, blacks were more so when Robert objectified blackness into a mix of sexual threat and aesthetic beauty.

Again: the blackening of America and the queening of America.

Mapplethorpe’s black photographs are chic advertisements of miscegenation. He dramatized black men as desirable sex partners to a nation that for three centuries had lived in sexual fear of black men. His mandingos make his white men look like wimps. His blacks are fuckers.

If ever Robert shot truly sexy photographs, look not at the drama-queen sexuality of his leather period, nor at his below-freezing nude females. Attention must be paid to his black men.

His 1976 “white” celebrity portrait of bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger is cold statuary compared with the heat of his 1986 “black” celebrity portraits of Joe Morris kneeling over a barbell and Terry Long sweating in a shoulder-shrug cropped so tight that his facial expression might be interpreted as orgasmic and the composition of head and neck as phallic.

It was perfect marketing in the AIDS eighties, where sex equaled death. AIDS was too popular a drama for him to be excluded. He made choices. In his life and in his art. In his own psyche, Robert changed from archetypal young faun to archetypal dying man reaching for universal immortality.

Robert courted love and death, sex and danger, in the faces and bodies of black men. That’s what he paid for when he picked a black man off the street. He chose the same kind of “upscale nigger” for a model as he chose for an “uppity nigger” sex partner.

He wanted a black man made as compliant by money as he was defiant because of the money.

He wanted “niggers” he could buy for his racy sex games in his bed and in his studio.

He wanted them compliant enough to take direction.

He wanted them defiant enough to require him to be either their “massa” in his bed or their director in his studio.

Defiance keeps models from being mere objects, because a defiant person exerts a personality, an energy that defies the camera’s inherent objectification. That’s why Robert “entered” his work with hired black models with more vigor than he “assayed” his leathersex work.

The black models surrendered with a conditional edge.

Robert was artist enough to know he had to move his art on to black men, the way Tennessee Williams, tired of blond meat, had moved on to dark in *Suddenly Last Summer*. In the seventies, the decade of black music, black magic, Black Power, Black Panthers, and the Symbionese Liberation Army, black males’ inherent defiance was Robert’s way of realigning hot spin on the cold axis of his formal work. In the Warhol-connected Broadway musical, *Hair*, Robert had heard the song sung by both men and women: “Black boys are delicious. Chocolate-flavored treats....”

Robert recognized his main aesthetic flaw: by sheer force of “Being Mapplethorpe,” he turned models into objects.

By sheer force of his earlier vocation to sculpture, he turned people to stone. He assaulted the individuality of the human persona with his camera. He poured cold beauty on mortal flesh. He couldn’t even leave a leaf alone. He was always the sculptor, always the transcendentalist, always the symbolist.

Every “lily-white” portrait he ever created is summed up in his quintessential sculpture-photograph, *Apollo 1988*, which he approved specifically for the cover of *Robert Mapplethorpe*. The book’s occasion was his virtually terminal exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1988.

Robert, the dying Catholic iconographer, rubbed the cold marble profile with his hand and wet its lips with his breath.

The “sweat” on the marble face is a tricky take, a self-photograph preciously objectified. As if the statue has life. As if Mapplethorpe will soon be cold as memorial stone on a knight’s sarcophagus.

*Apollo 1988* is an autobiographical photograph of the finger grease of Robert’s touch and the condensation of Robert’s breath.

It is perfect valedictory, frozen in the perfect moment.

Robert clobbered anyone and everyone. He used money, fame, drugs, or whatever he needed to exert his will. Life was easy. Everyone was caving in to Mapplethorpe. How could he create a “perfect moment” without resistance? By the early eighties, Robert was disdainful of everything and everyone, because whatever Mapplethorpe wanted Mapplethorpe got. He wanted people to resist him.

"You are a petulant bastard," I told him.

My resistance to him added longevity to our relationship.

People wonder how intimate friends withstood Mapplethorpe's hubris. If his character was flawed, his flaw was the caliber of Greek drama. His wanton arrogance required wanton insolence.

The naughty white boy wanted someone to be as insolent to him as he was to the world.

He hoped blacks would deliver insolent heat to his frigid work, and animate his art with "soul."

He hoped someday he would meet his own powerful Cinque, who would radicalize his work the way Cinque, the black leader of the Symbionese Liberation Army, had changed kidnapped heiress Patty Hearst into a gun-toting bank robber demanding cash from moneyed people cowed into submission. He even shot an advertisement for himself as white gangster with machine gun.

He hoped to find a black man who would change his life in a black way as Sam Wagstaff had changed his life in a white way. He chased black men. "I have no shame," he said. He hoped in the perfect moment of sex to find the perfect moment of death.

He hoped someday a black would kill him.

When it came to real sex, Robert didn't have a clue about leather, fisting, or fetish sex. He sometimes seemed like a scared heterosexual posing as a homosexual, putting on his alternate sexuality the way he pulled on his leather pants.

One of the most handsome of his black models, Joe Simmons, went on to make erotic gangbang videos in New York for late director Christopher Rage. Simmons then took his solo performance-art act out nationally to the gay theaters: "LIVE ON STAGE! MAPPLETHORPE MODEL! JOE SIMMONS!" His priapic onanism on stage caused onanism in the SRO audiences.

His black work, not his leather, is the closest Robert comes to fulfilling his reputation as an erotic photographer. Sex in Mapplethorpe's world is never procreational. Sex is always recreational.

In American popular culture, Robert is a high-toned NY-Gershwin version of the race culture Hollywood ground out in movies from the 1930s through the 1950s to cash in on the sex appeal of actresses like the black Marilyn Monroe, Dorothy Dandridge. The pop culture taste for underground race and sex is as old as Cain's being called black.

Technically, in lighting, black skin presented Mapplethorpe a photographic challenge different from white skin. Also, because blacks are only

sporadically visible in the history of photography, Robert could not fall back and reshoot historical photographs of blacks as interpreted by earlier photographers.

Photography's brief history began, really, less than a decade before the American Civil War. In 1840, the camera took from eight to twenty hours to shoot one single frame. By 1850, a single exposure was two minutes or less. Photography, like the novel, was a luxurious art seemingly destined for the idle rich. No one early on suspected everyone would become a photographer shooting mass images in mass culture.

The imprint of black men and black women in the art of photography is as model, not as photographer. White photographers who shot the occasional black included: Louise Dahl-Wolfe, fashion photographer for *Vogue*, who also shot calla lilies; Edward Weston who shot one black female; and Eikoh Hosoe, Tokyo 1977, who shot strikingly pre-Mapplethorpe black-and-white duos.

Painter-photographer George Dureau was prime tutor to Mapplethorpe.

The second most influential photographer was Miles Everett, who had three distinct virtues Robert loved: the elderly Everett, who lived in Los Angeles, was unexhibited, unpublished, and unknown in New York City.

As really the first collectors of photography, Mapplethorpe and Wagstaff created a market for the contemporary photograph by initiating a craze for the historical photographs they bought inexpensively. With antique photography they had found, at last, a genre the ubiquitous Andy Warhol had not staked out.

Without many "race" photographs to reference, Robert educated himself in the art of shooting blacks by studying work he could find, and by visiting photographers such as the famous Dureau in New Orleans and the unfamous Everett in Los Angeles.

Robert, as lucky as he was absorbent of other photographers' work, met the over-eighty shooter, Miles Everett, at a private Los Angeles exhibition for gays in the late seventies.

Robert was yet a neophyte, lusting after blacks.

Miles, a white man, an octogenarian, was a veteran.

Blacks photographing blacks was then virtually uncharted, exotic territory for white culture. *Playboy* displayed its first black Playmate, Jennifer Jackson, in March 1965. *Ebony* magazine, a black *Life* magazine look-alike, had flourished since 1945, but rarely crossed over to white culture. Ralph Ginzburg's counterculture *Avant Garde* magazine, which

flourished briefly to very hip white acclaim, published a cover and a spread on black photographer Hugh Bell's female models, "Bell's Belles," in the May 1970 issue.

The feature was introduced with a cropped waist-high nude shot of the black male photographer. No other men were shown.

Bell's black women were presented nonexploitatively, nude, in full-body shots, but with genitalia masked with hands and flowers. Frontal nudity in mainstream media was only just becoming legal. Ginzburg had already suffered court trials and censorship with his *Eros* magazine.

As artsy as Ginzburg's *Avant Garde* was, it offered a beginning access to the pop culture literature of the black body, even as it bowed, like historical litmus, to the sexual fears of black beauty.

In 1974, photographer George Butler and writer Charles Gaines collaborated on the wildly popular book *Pumping Iron: The Art and Sport of Bodybuilding*. Physique posing quickly moved out of sleazy gyms directly into the showbiz mainstream.

Butler's photographs emphasized two things: Arnold Schwarzenegger and black musclemen.

Robert hated bodybuilding the way he hated blacks: he couldn't get enough.

By 1976, Robert, appreciating the sculpture of muscle, had shot Schwarzenegger on his way to co-creating the first female bodybuilder, Lisa Lyon, and to shooting my then lover, bodybuilding champion Jim Enger, who modeled his own muscle and look on the drop-dead gorgeous 1967 Mr. America, Jim Haislip.

Robert coveted Butler's photographs of black bodybuilders like Serge Nubret, Leon Brown, and Gordon Babb, displayed next to antique photographs of strongmen, including 1951 Mr. Universe, the black Montosh Roy, who posed for fantasy photographs, not nude, but suggestive of the "Young Physique" magazines Robert had come out on in the adult bookstores on Forty-second Street.

Bodybuilding's sudden popularity seemed sexy. Robert watched how display of the "Object Body" as "Object Physique" brought phallic bodies up from the underground magazines that he had already used in his earliest collage work: *Leatherman II 1970* and *Model Parade 1972*.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> So in tune were we even before we met that I had in my own collection the 1968 magazine *King's Leather Men*, from Calafra Enterprises, Inc., San Francisco. I had bought it in 1969 on Forty-second Street. The warning inside the cover typifies the moral climate of the time and the "purpose" of these underground magazines: "*King's Leather Men* is produced to provide a collection of photo reference studies to be used by the Artist and Art Student in his studies

Traditionally, the words *artists and models* were code for *johns and whores/hustlers*.

To legitimize itself from this stigma, bodybuilding often referenced classic statuary. Gaines's pop-seminal *Pumping Iron* called bodybuilders "living sculpture."

A point was made that in biblical myth, God is portrayed as a sculptor to such a degree that God maintained copyright in the Third Commandment, which warned against sculpting images not in God's likeness.

Bodybuilders Frank Zane, Ed Corney, and Arnold Schwarzenegger have all explained themselves in terms of classical sculpture as they offered their bodies up as photo ops.

Charles Gaines said in his lecture at the Whitney: "Physique posing is a kinetic art. . . . Posing is the presentation; the physique is the object being presented." This, of course, fit in with the formal direction sculptor Mapplethorpe was heading.

Bodybuilding, among other sports, gave blacks another athletic venue. But bodybuilding is not an objective sport like basketball, in which the ball either goes through the hoop or not.

Bodybuilding is rather a subjective sport that has historically always been judged in terms of classical size, look, and myth.

On Wednesday, February 25, 1976, Schwarzenegger appeared live, as a performance artist, posing, one night only, at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Presenting Schwarzenegger with the bodybuilders Frank Zane and Ed Corney were *Pumping Iron* authors, Charles Gaines and George Butler.

They were all "Exhibit A" for the panelists debating a kind of pop culture wrestling chautauqua of "Mind versus Body." The panel included professors of fine arts from NYU, of English and comparative literature from Richmond College, and of the Art Department at Rutgers. They were all male and made legitimate by the gender of the assertive moderator, Vicki Goldberg.

That night at the Whitney was historical for itself and for its directly quoted reference of the night nearly 170 years before when Lord Elgin brought the Parthenon marbles to London.

---

of anatomy and the posing of the model. While it is always preferable to use a live model, photographs can provide an invaluable reference when a professional model cannot be obtained. Those desiring erotic or prurient material are warned that such is not to be found in this product, nor is it our intention to provide material of such a nature....Beware of cheap copies and duplicates of our work, which cannot compare in quality and detail."

"In June 1808," Goldberg said, "the famous prizefighter Gregson was induced to stand naked in the museum and pose for two hours in various attitudes so that his anatomy could be compared with that of the statues."

Intellectual sex—Mapplethorpe's favorite kind—has always been deliciously prurient.

At the Whitney that night, Schwarzenegger and Ed Corney and Frank Zane posed on a revolving platform. The SRO crowd went wild. The scene was a gladiator-slave show "straight" out of a Fellini coliseum in ancient, decadent Rome.

Candice Bergen, shooting photos for the NBC *Today* show, made her way through the thronged artists, fashion models, and jet-set rich for whom Mapplethorpe was licking his chops.

As the symposium concluded, Robert worked his way to the green room, where the musclemen were holding court and signing autographs. He invited them to pose for him at his Bond Street studio. Schwarzenegger, the most self-promoting of the three, recognized a kindred soul in Robert Mapplethorpe. Robert, the sculptor, was the first contemporary fine art photographer to explore bodybuilding's *objet d'art* aspirations to classical sculpture.

Also, that night at the Whitney was filmed by George Butler's movie crew for the film *Pumping Iron*.

No one yet could acknowledge directly that humans are essentially voyeurs.

Bodybuilders go beyond the well-proportioned nudes of art history into the aggressive naked superheroes of mass media.<sup>4</sup>

The lost war in Vietnam required a home-front reinforcement of American masculinity. If the United States had not been losing the unpopular Vietnam War right at the popular rise of feminism, feminism would not likely so quickly have gotten its leg up on men.

In a country where biggest is best, bodybuilding, maybe as compensation for a war lost and for women marching, became the next pop cult attraction. Women and men, both coached by the sexual politics of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Schwarzenegger's career, no matter what he is personally, is symbolic of the kind of classically overwrought sculpture that becomes the superhero, the *ubermensch*, who is a larger-than-life statement of national virility, much like Mussolini's fascistically homoerotic statues commissioned for the Foro Italico. The "lost war" of Schwarzenegger's Austrian past has always provided a kind of romantic subtext. I photographed Arnold Schwarzenegger in paparazzi shots from the hip in May 1970 at the Venice Beach muscle pit. Actually, Arnold walked into my 35-mm color shots of the strawberry-blond bodybuilder Ken Waller.

open seventies, had to adjust their post-Victorian ambivalence to a new erotic icon. As women grew more powerful, men grew bigger. Why deny that bodybuilders stuff 220 pounds of male into two-ounce posing briefs!

These pumped and articulated pioneers introduced the virtually nude male with the pop art message: "Straight women love bodybuilders and straight men want to be like bodybuilders."

Straight society was at sixes and sevens about such aggressive masculine behavior. Psychologists speculated: "Is the goal of steroids to create a thousand-pound bodybuilder?"

On the other hand, the unexpected male aggression of gay liberation, newborn at the Greenwich Village Stonewall Rebellion in 1969, welcomed the heroic iconography of bodybuilders with open arms. Bodybuilding, like the male frontal nude, would not exist were it not for gay photographers and the gay audience.

Finally, out of the closet came male sex objects as delightfully exaggerated as any Hollywood female sex object.

Gay liberation was not invented to be politically correct.

Gay liberation was invented to party without getting arrested.

The way black liberation was spontaneously invented to get a seat on a bus without getting arrested by fascists.

In that first decade of gay liberation, bodybuilders (no matter what their personal sexuality) became sex objects. The openly gay gym was invented. This gay-driven rise of bodybuilding elevated black men as well as white men to erotically perceived media status.

In 1976, screenwriter Sylvester Stallone set the Hollywood craze for bodybuilding in the first *Rocky*, which proved in cash the worldwide race interest in a muscular white man (Stallone) and muscular black man (Carl Weathers) fighting nearly naked in a ring. Stallone's success paved the way for screenwriter John Milius's *Conan the Barbarian*: bodybuilder Schwarzenegger and voice-builder James Earl Jones parry white and black themes by never referencing race in a medium that is essentially visual.

Before bodybuilding, photographs of blacks were of the historical and anthropological kind. The *National Geographic* provided many a white boy's fantasy material directly about breasts and indirectly about blacks, until the *Geographic* updated its policy away from objectifying native cultures and turned instead to environmental concerns.

Robert, not yet nationally known, was creating self-conscious New York art when fate introduced him to the West Coast photographer Miles Everett. Miles fascinated Robert, because Miles, during his long career, had never bothered to stage an exhibit in a gallery.



Robert was stunned by Miles's avoidance of fame.

"I had never thought of fame as a requirement for life," Miles said. "Bill Schmeling, the painter, introduced me to Robert. Bill also knew Lizard, who was Robert's friend."

Robert knew Lizard better than Miles realized. The handsome Lizard was a star who was famous for his leathersex in clubs. He was one of the intimates Robert tried to appropriate to himself.

We were all longtime friends together and singly in the communal seventies.

And then Robert would ride in and try to divide and conquer the posse of friends, many of whom did not appreciate the famous "Maplethorpe ego trip."

Robert had already purchased a drawing by Bill Schmeling, known as "The Hun." Schmeling's specialty is black men in leather and sports gear, usually depicted in an extremely orgiastic fantasy prison in the American South called "Shadynook," where whites and blacks both speak in Stepin Fetchit English that has been criticized as "extremely racist," not by blacks, but by some whites.

"Robert," Bill Schmeling said, "bought the original drawing from me for four hundred dollars. He raved on, pumping me about how I created 'blackness' in my work. I think he was trying to divine how to transpose my drawing technique to his photography of blacks. He was so intense and insistent, I told him everything I could think of about capturing 'soul.'"

"Finally, Robert asked me the oddest question. 'Why don't you draw more dominant black men as sexual tops?' I do so most of the time. In fact, the drawing he bought depicted a very dominant black top in full leather. *More dominant?* How far did he want to go?"

Exactly! Robert's search to crack the black aesthetic had landed him in the right group. Schmeling's longtime companion is a black man.

"I met Robert," Miles said, "in the late seventies in Hollywood. I went to a Maplethorpe exhibit. Some show. Some gallery. I had seen a few of his pictures, and had heard of him through Jim Yaeger, who photographed blacks in Chicago, and through Craig Anderson in San Francisco."

Craig Anderson, aka "Calvin" Anderson, was a photographer specializing in erotic studies of black men. He was yet another photographer, like Maplethorpe, who solicited my writing:

“July 12, 1983. Hi Jack. [Here’s] my latest catalog. Maybe we should collaborate on a book of Black kink for Winston [Leyland, publisher of Gay Sunshine Press]. A sure winner!—Calvin Craig”

His studio, Sierra Domino, flourished with a small-format magazine-catalog featuring full-color and black-and-white erotic studies reveling in muscular nude young blacks. Using “Calvin Anderson,” a more black-sounding name, Craig often hosted lavish parties at his Pacific Heights Victorian so his photography patrons might mingle with the talent. He was not, as were so many other erotic photographers, running a black brothel.

Too bad. At a Sierra Domino Christmas party in 1981, shopping for Mapplethorpe models, I had to discipline myself so beautiful were the men, especially Anderson’s premier model, Jon X, who was in training for the Mr. America physique contest. In his own way, he was the equal of Jim French’s Chris Dickerson, who was one of the very few black models ever featured by Colt Studios. Afterward, I introduced Robert Mapplethorpe to Calvin Anderson, who was shy of Robert’s intent. He thought Robert was too crass, too commercial, and that Robert would require sex with the models, which would add fuel to the black prostitution charges.

To squelch the “black brothel” accusations, Anderson, in the *Sierra Domino Newsletter* (December 1981), wrote: “It has come to our attention that there are several agencies in New York advertising ‘Mandingo Men’ and ‘Top Sierra Domino Models.’ While men of Sierra Domino may work at the agencies in question, Sierra Domino is in no way associated with the companies.”

Anderson, after running an article on the interracial group, was accused of “exploiting” blacks on one hand, and acting as an “Uncle Tom” on the other. “It appears to us,” he wrote, “that a disservice is done to ‘blackness’ and the black race whenever the term ‘exploit’ comes up when someone is paid *fairly* for his blackness. Should Cheryl Tiegs feel ‘exploited’ for blonde hair?”

When race mixes with sex, strange inquiries arise.

These questions, all whites, even Mapplethorpe, working with black models, are asked, because of American pop culture’s “plantation mentality” about any and all relation between white and black.

To avoid such confrontation, especially because his work with blacks was so personal, Miles Everett never sought public recognition.

For Miles, it was enough that other artists, graphic and photographic, found his work through underground networking. Besides, Miles worked for the federal government with a top-security clearance.

Miles photographed his first black man in 1931. He was a track and field athlete. "We had to be very clandestine," Miles said. "I admired the guy. I had never seen anything like him. So I spent two years finding out what he was all about. His body stunned me."

"So," I said, "you shot this series of him in nude track poses?"

"We could have both gone to jail."

"For any number of reasons from nudity, to photography, to race. You were ahead of your time. You were doing photography and they were lynching."

"I've always had to be clandestine. I had to sneak into government darkrooms, my negatives carefully folded. The prints I always washed at night. Oh, Jesus, I think of those days. I've lived through almost a whole century of censorship. But those limits caused me to create my work in my special way." Miles smiled. "There'll never be another me."

"Not even Mapplethorpe?"

"Not even Mapplethorpe."

"How did Robert," I asked, "react to your clandestine work that first night he came to your home?"

"After we met at the gallery, we went to Bill Schmeling's so Robert could see his drawings. It was a Saturday night, and it was early, so we stopped off at a tea party thrown by the group called Black Men and White Men Together. Then I brought him home here where I've lived for fifty-one years.

"I never understood Robert, then or now. He was extremely nervous. He kept telephoning some guy he said he was having a hell of a time with. He smoked continually. He stayed till one o'clock, but wouldn't let me drive him back. He wanted to take a taxi. He was very intense. He rifled through my work, and, let me tell you, he pulled out my best stuff."

"He took photographs with him that very night?"

"Maybe twelve or fifteen. A sizable bunch. I suppose they're in his estate now. When *20 / 20* or *60 Minutes* showed Robert's work during the censorship controversy, goddamnit, five or six of those pictures were mine, not his. My friends caught the mix-up, too. I've had five heart attacks and about three strokes. That mix-up nearly gave me another one. But I really don't care. Friends of Mapplethorpe think that a lot of my work is better than Robert's."

"Did Robert buy your photographs?"

"Him? Pay? It was a barter, an exchange. Many photographers trade pictures no one else sees. He sent me a picture of Marty. He insured it for five thousand dollars. Marty was one of my models before Robert

shot him. I think Robert's picture of Marty is very crude and vulgar, but Marty likes it."

"What makes you think it's crude and vulgar?"

"He's got a hard dick, holding it right up so you can see it. I think that's disgusting. Robert could have done better than that."

"You think Robert was too assaultive in his work?"

"Yes. I have most of his books and they are a little too gross. Erection is going too far. I don't mind the picture with the little girl. That's nothing."

"So it's one thing to be nude and another thing to be hard?"

"Years ago, because I've always developed my own film, I shot erections, but I realized they distracted from the beautiful bodies. In the seventies, when I was in my fifties, I shot many beautiful nudes out in the vastness of nature. I love Death Valley. The High Sierras."

"You shot bodyscapes in the context of landscape."

"Yes, artscapes. George Mavety, the publisher, recently looked at my work for his nude magazines, but he said it wasn't as pornographic as he would like it."

(The Mavety Media Group in New York publishes several gay magazines: *Torso*, *Honcho*, *Playguy*, *Mandate*, and *Inches* and has featured my work but none by Mapplethorpe.)

"Erotic art is not necessarily pornographic," I said. "Even when erect. I know George Mavety's work. He honestly paid you a compliment."

"What is strange is that the Mapplethorpe photographs that caused so much controversy here were exhibited in Japan where they're much more conservative and there was no problem."

"Robert liked to absorb other photographers' images, change them, make them his own. Did he borrow from you?"

"I shouldn't say this, but I'm ancient enough to say anything." Miles positively twinkled. "I do feel in some of his later pictures, where he shot black men against a black background—that came from my work. Before, he had used gray, not black on black. He saw in my work a certain beauty that he liked and duplicated. His lighting is much the same as mine. We were looking for the same thing: the features of the body, the muscles, the contours of the skin. He got it just as I got it. We both understood the art of photographing blacks."

"When did you last see Robert?"

"We mostly talked on the phone."

"That's how he disappeared from most of us. On the phone."

"I saw him last about 1984. Around that time, maybe earlier, he flew to Los Angeles to shoot the ballet. He was too exhausted to come see me. I never saw his name associated with the ballet pictures that were published, but I've never seen such beautiful work in my life. Frankly, I don't think anyone has done any work like his: so polished, so finished."

"So you judge his work will be appreciated in years to come?"

"Oh, yes. He's like Von Gloeden. A hundred years from now, people will look back and say, 'Jesus Christ, this guy was good.'"

"What distinguishes your work with blacks from Robert's?"

"My work is no longer nude, and I photograph them in motion. On television sports, it all comes together. I remember Rafer Johnson, and then Ben Johnson in Seoul. I saw immediately on television the beauty of the black man in athletic motion?"

"Which takes you full circle to the black athlete you photographed in 1931."

"Yes. I was supposed to have a shooting session today with a young man who's about six-foot-six and weighs about one hundred twenty pounds. He's a dancer. He's beautiful. He's like a snake."

"After sixty years, you're still shooting."

"Age takes its toll, but there's always another shoot?"

"That's what's so tragic about Robert dying so young," I said. "So what do you think of Robert's black studies?"

"Beautiful. Spectacular. I like the studied way he places the body parts to form shadows. I particularly like one chunky man he photographed. From Massachusetts. Robert didn't know he had a brother here in California. I photographed him."

"In your style, not of classical stasis, but in motion."

"I have them hop, dance, jump rope."

"You catch them in actual movement, whereas Robert was static in his takes, perhaps because he started his art studies in sculpture?"

"I think his still life is the key to his work. He had a static eye, whereas mine is all dynamic. Not that he couldn't cross over to movement, as he did so beautifully with the ballet."

"Robert shot the dancer Gregory Hines in motion."

"I'd like to see that."

"It's quite wonderful."

"I see everything in motion. Beauty in motion. My background is electrical engineering; elemental nature in motion. From the first, my pictures were all in motion. Those black men in motion from 1931 were among my best pictures. Unfortunately, most of them have been sold. I

have the negatives, of course, but, oh, God, I don't have the energy to go into the darkroom to do anything. I would like to find a company that really knows how to handle negatives."

"Robert spent little time in the darkroom."

"Toward the end, Ansel Adams left the darkroom. He found a printer who did better work than he himself did. By the way, did I mention that Edward Weston photographed a black girl? Just one. That always surprised me: Edward Weston doing one colored girl."

"Have you encountered much prejudice as a white man shooting black men?"

"Fifty years ago, I might have been shot down quite severely, but at the time, I didn't realize photography galleries existed. I never shot to be famous. I would have been instantly removed from government service. I'm content to be unknown. All I wanted was a picture of an individual. I wanted to find out what a black man looked like."

"When did America first become aware of the black body?"

"Some photos exist from the 1900s. Robert certainly stirred up interest. That may be another of his legacies."

"Perhaps the time has come to exhibit your work."

"Actually, I do exhibit. Clandestinely. My work is shown in black high schools around the country. It's motivational. To show black students photography is something they can look at and, hopefully, shoot themselves."

"That would be wonderful," I said. "Something for the NEA to fund: black kids photographing inside black life, photographing life!"

Miles beamed. "We've had very good luck with my shows."

"Have you shown at white high schools?"

"No. Black high schools. All black. I'm not black yet. I'm certainly getting that way."

"So you are a closet exhibitor: high schools, private showings to other artists and friends."

"Not closeted. Clandestine. I think we live in a wonderful age. We see these photographs now, but we won't see them a hundred years from now"

"What do you mean?"

"Photography is one hundred fifty years old, and I think it has another twenty-five years before some new medium of recording will replace it. All the good photographers of this time should see to it that their work is secured, so that people in the future can enjoy them, no matter what storage and retrieval system will be then available."

"Have you ever shot white males?"

"I tried once. It came out so bad I tore it up and threw it away. You can't get the muscular definition from a white man that you can from a black."

"Has it to do with the lighting?"

"No. The white body is different from the black body. Whites have a subcutaneous layer of fat that masks the muscles. Blacks don't have that. When a black fellow flexes his arm, you can see every muscle. That was the first thing I detected. The black body has beautiful muscles you simply can't see in the white fellows."

"Miles," I asked, "do you think in your life you have found truth with the camera?"

"Momentarily. That's all. Just for the moment."

"Some truth."

"Yes, a moment's truth."

"Put all together, your photographs contain much truth."

"Unlike Robert, I don't care what happens to my work. I give up in despair. My grandfather came across the Dakotas. He was attacked by Indians. My other grandfather came from Scotland around the Horn. I've enjoyed my life. That's more important than fame."

Miles projected a distinct attitude that he thought Mapplethorpe might have shot himself in the foot while the foot was in his mouth.

"Do you think," I asked, "that Robert finally realized that, too? That fame, too much publicity, too much public life, can kill the soul, the private person?"

"Who knows? When he was at the gallery where we met, I noticed he was very uncomfortable among all the asses standing around drinking wine and smoking, shouting, 'Oh, Mr. Mapplethorpe! Oh, Mr. MAPPLETHORPE! OH, MR. MAPPLETHORPE!' That 'Mr. Mapplethorpe' thing wore him down. I saw it that first night. For me, it was right to be the hidden one."

"You lived your life. You created your art. You created a heritage of images of blacks who would otherwise be invisible."

"The pages of my life have gotten to the end of my book."

"You did what you wanted."

"As I hope did Robert."

In 1993, rumors circulated fingering blacks as the race most likely to spread AIDS.

As sex and race, always combined, intermixed once more, tempers on both sides generated more heat than light.

In my own life experience, I know that my friends who died first had sex almost exclusively with young blacks.

If black society has as much unsafe sex as white, and has more intravenous drug use than white, then this observation is racist only if one says blackness itself causes AIDS.

Blackness does not cause AIDS any more than homosexuality itself causes AIDS.

A virus causes AIDS.

After Robert's death, a public service "commercial" warning about the losses caused by AIDS appeared on television. It showed several faces. Prominent among them were the white photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, and the black TV journalist Max Robinson.

Robert was hardly a saintly AIDS Poster Boy.

Underlying his controversial sex photography lurks his more disturbing theme of race.

Mapplethorpe wanted a black to kill him in what can only be interpreted as some weird parody of a possible future.

Robert's personal racism is nothing compared with the genetic racism bred into every race.

When the politically correct are swept away by the racially correct, the global village will deconstruct to the social turmoil of an emerging Third World country.

Who will look at photographs then?