

Manuscript

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MAPPLETHORPE MENTOR: GEORGE DUREAU

“The camera is just a mindless lunatic.”

— *George Dureau*

New Orleans. In March, 1991, I met with George Dureau who had photographed Mapplethorpe who photographed Dureau. That was not the whole story. Much like the Antonioni film, *Blow-Up*, the single frames which the two dueling photographers shot of one another contain the eerie kind of plot and character so expected by northerners descending into the French Quarter where, because they are northerners, they suspect that something beyond the appearance may, in fact, be the reality.

Mark Thomas Hemry and I had flown into New Orleans with video equipment to shoot George, barefoot and quippy, brushing his final strokes on a huge painting he was completing for the “The War Show” at the New Orleans Contemporary Arts Center. In the news media, the Gulf War had finally eclipsed the ongoing NEA controversy over Robert Mapplethorpe who had been dead for twenty-four months.

“I can never remember birthdays and anniversaries,” George said. He stood on his canvas that cascaded down the wall. At the top, a tank charged out of the painting; on the floor, George painted in Persian carpets on the canvas where he knelt. “This ‘War’ show is not anti-war,” George said. “It’s simply about war. Although my painting certainly dramatizes the current war.”

“Distracting, isn’t it,” I said, “having another war to protest while we are busy protesting censorship of art?”

Dureau’s enormous studio is large enough to contain his huge paintings, his photographs, his sketches, his collection of other artists, his household treasures, and his ebullient self.

From his wrought-iron balcony aerie, Dureau holds down one corner of Dauphine Street. Music from the sidewalks in the Quarter, the beat from car radios roaring past, the far-off barking of dogs, the voices calling out to each other, sometimes wailing up to Dureau’s studio, where, no mean Blanche du Bois, George provides the kindness strangers always depend on.

Dureau’s home is a gallery set fit for Tennessee Williams’s drama. Photography books about artists and New Orleans homes so frequently show his bed and board in their pages he has had to turn down requests to shoot. The magazines beg for no more than one or two shots, but the dramatic texture of Dureau’s digs has the art directors begging for more.

By comparison, our double shoot of Dureau on two afternoons was easy. After hanging George’s canvas at the Contemporary Arts Center where the work draped from the thirty-foot ceiling to the floor so viewers could actually walk across the carpet patterns George had created at the foot of the work, we returned with Jonathan Webb to find George in the midst of washed

greens, cooling pasta, and boiling pots of shrimp. He cooks as expansively as he paints. Robert Mapplethorpe loved visiting Dureau, but not for the food. Robert was made quite anorexic by drugs; his main interest was in Dureau's latest ideas. Mapplethorpe was a collector of Dureau's photographs and a closet student.

"We have wonderful food and wonderful restaurants in this town," George said, "but Robert always turned up his nose at food and the art of food."

"Actually," I said, "Robert should have eaten the food he photographed. He'd be alive today"

"His 'precious' grapes? I don't think so. All Robert wanted was an egg done his certain way and a Coca-Cola."

Dureau sat for his video close-up on his balcony. Afternoon became evening as George, a true raconteur, thoroughly engaged our video camera. His lighting was brilliant in the twilight. We had nearly ninety minutes on tape. The sky had moved in, cracking with lightning, whipping the breeze up around the many jungle plants on his balcony. When the rain began, we scuttled our setup- at table, yanked our documentary cassette to safety, and carried lights, cameras, and tripods back inside, stepping through the huge openings of the ten ten-foot-fall, floor-to-ceiling guillotine windows.

"Nawalins has great special effects," George drawled broadly.

Two days later, Mark Hemry set up our video in Dureau's studio, where we filmed George at work shooting the classically muscled black model, Glen Thompson.

* * *

IN THE DOCUMENTARY VIDEO FOOTAGE:

The rainy season of an early spring tinkles on the roof. Dureau's lighting of Thompson on the set lights the video. The effect is stunning. Thompson's body glows incandescent.

Around the heroic-looking model, already dripping with sweat and shining in the pinpoint flood lamps, the rest of the studio is dark as night in the overcast afternoon.

George directs the model with voice and touch. His gentleness makes his longtime house-model Thompson generous in holding the physically strenuous Dureau poses.

From another room, the scent of cut flowers mixes with the damp wool of jackets worn in from the rain after lunch.

"Glen, drop your head and move your arms to your right....Can you please bend your left leg...That's it...Hold it..."

Dureau shoots carefully, never clicking his shutter until the model and the light transcend the actual moment and turn, we felt it, into the perfect moment every artist feels, when Dureau rose up in the darkness to make his shot, to condense time and space and into one single frame.

Long silences as Thompson holds steady while Dureau continues to ponder the human sculpture. Distant thunder rumbles over the occasional voice rising up from the Quarter. Dureau directs like Balanchine. No wonder Mapplethorpe worshipped at the altar of Dureau.

Recorded on our documentary videotape, the perfect moments of creative silence

followed by creative explosions calibrate the rhythms of Dureau's masterful genius. Finally, George himself turns to our color monitor and directs his first-ever video segment.

The moment is historic.

Dureau, the painter and photographer, touches videography.

The technological future meets the classical past.

No one need ever wonder at the secrets of a Dureau shoot.

Finally, we turn the studio lights down.

An amazing blue light shafts down on the set.

Our video camera, monitored in beautiful strobe effect, catches Dureau on screen positioning Thompson the way a dancer moves a lover.

Silence.

Thunder.

Rain.

The far-off dogs.

Robert.

I lament video was not available the earlier times I watched him shoot his photographs.

"Robert Mapplethorpe saw some of my photographs at the Robert Miller Gallery," George Dureau said. "He fell in love with a couple of them. He wrote and asked could he buy one."

"How many did he buy over the years?"

"More than thirty. He came around here a good bit. New Orleans fascinated him, but he behaved very differently from me."

I knew Robert liked the open sensuality of New Orleans. He was an artist from a cold clime come down to warm his hands.

"Robert and Sam were collecting every photograph they could find," said Dureau.

"Robert was distilling them all into what he wanted his work to look like.

"My classicism resembles early periods of Greek and Italian art where the form is still identifying itself and there is still a struggle with the content. Because Robert was so derivative, studying photographs instead of studying art, he is the soul of neo-classicism.

"I must say I never thought about what my photographs would look like. I came to the camera to document my family of ragamuffins. When critics compared me to gay photographers like Holland Day, I had no idea about 'gay' photography. I love Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange who shot during the Depression. I thought if you 'worried' over art, your photographs would end up looking like *Vogue* magazine."

"You have a reputation in Europe that you are Mapplethorpe's secret mentor."

"Robert certainly never came to me to learn anything."

"Robert's absorbency factor was great. He wasn't a plagiarist so much as a Great White Hunter out stalking ideas."

"You've got the 'Great White Hunter' right." George said. "Of course, Robert borrowed, and borrowed, especially when he could appropriate the form but not the content. He sometimes stole form from my photographs, but he deleted my content, my solicitousness, and that subtraction, of course, reduced the risk that his theft would be immediately identified."

George Dureau's voice rolls with New Orleans charm. He has that quality of storytelling so particular to southerners, like Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams, who once lived around the corner; they can take so long to get from here to there in a story because there is so much in between the *here* and the *there* that is too intricately colorful and meaningful to omit.

Dureau is languorous, witty; and ripe. He mixes art and sex and food and human relationships together the way he mixes paints on his palette, splurging them across his canvases, with such vigor that he recently hit himself in the face with a brush. There's southern passion in the man who drew in the cold Robert from a colder Manhattan. The difference between them is the heat of passion. Dureau was a painter before he was a photographer and he remained both. Robert had studied sculpture before he was given a camera.

Their common interest is the black male.

"Robert and I," George said, "could hardly be more fundamentally different."

"Yet there are similarities."

"But different sensibilities. Robert and I started photographing about the same time.

Perhaps our photographs of black men, where some people see similarity, is where we were most divergent.

"My photographs look like my paintings and drawings. I'm very much a humanist. I'm very involved with the people I shoot. My photographs are family pictures. Very sentimental. Sam Wagstaff couldn't abide that. He never for one moment would have tolerated Robert shooting people with my compassion, because compassion was highly inappropriate for the market Sam had in mind for Robert's career. Wagstaff was a real fascist. He despised minorities—not that anybody has to love them; they piss me off sometimes, too—but he really hated the whole idea of anyone making beautiful statements about the poor. I remember Sam looking at a large selection of my photographs. He just kept staring at me as if to say, you must be crazy to like these people: lovely, handsome, young men, poor whites and blacks, oftentimes with missing limbs. My photographs say quite clearly that I like everybody I photograph."

"You certainly don't exploit your subjects. Your work is not a sideshow of freakiness. In fact, your photographs are erotic. Robert's aren't."

"Robert, at Sam's insistence, cleaned my work up for New York, where I once lived for nine months in the sixties before returning to New Orleans."

"Why?"

"So I could remain human."

"You both are regionalist photographers. Robert could thrive in New York, though he wanted to live in San Francisco, but he denied himself that, because New York was the art marketplace. What do you mean, he cleaned up your photographs?"

"He used some of the aesthetics of my kind of good, old-fashioned posing that I had developed over twenty or thirty years of painting and dance training, but he stylized it into an art-for-art's-sake kind of art which suited him and his chic clientele. His clients were not usually compassionate. There was a coldness about his work, either because Robert was cold, or his audience was. He always used to smile and give a 'Ooh, how could you do it?' look."

"When we met in 1979, I took two or three really lovely ones of him, and, later, in 1985, when he was not well."

“Robert had a beautiful face,” I said. “He narrated the whole story of his own life in his series of self-portraits.”

“So you could have taught him a trick or two,” I said.

“You must understand Robert and me in the late seventies. In those days, I had a big house right outside the French Quarter. Now I live in the French Quarter. We went out together, drinking, cruising, comparing notes. We shared quite a bit of the same taste in whom we liked, but we had little similarity in our sexual roles.

“Robert had that sweet, come-hither, baby-sister look. I’m an old-fashioned Greco-Roman patriarch queer, not a flip-flop queer. I’m the dominant male about the house. I have gorgeous young men who work for me. My house is a kind of genteel colony of the underclass, but I’m Big Daddy always.

“Robert’s behavior was more modern gay, which is so altogether different from me. Robert didn’t understand that old-fashioned queers are different from liberated modern queers.”

“In what way?” I asked.

“Involvement. Caring. Robert would pay four hundred to five hundred dollars to get a young man to drop his pants in front of the camera. That was it. Shoot, pay, gone. It seems so time-efficient and cost-efficient.”

“Robert was moving fast. He was one of those people who knows his life will be short, so he has to act quickly to accomplish what he is about. I wrote him as early as 1979 and told him he would not live a long life. I always thought him capable of suicide at the proper moment.”

“What made you think that?” said George.

“We had a very empathic relationship. You live in New Orleans. You should understand.”

“Maybe that explains his one-shot quick take. I’m not like that.”

“You have a different sort of wild reputation.”

“Even when I was drinking, my wildness was the tenderness I afford my models. They are my children. Robert, at the time, was always scraping for money. He asked me how I could get them to pose so cheap. I said, you can get them cheap if you don’t mind having them for life. My models are all people I’m involved with, letting them stay with me, ‘doing’ for them. I’ve always seduced people because I loved them and then I would have them to dinner to paint from or to draw from. To photograph or to fuck. Robert didn’t understand New Orleans economics. If I paid them a hundred dollars to pose for me, they’d be back the next day anyway to get money to pay their momma’s water bill. I could have paid them a thousand dollars, and they’d still be back. New Orleans isn’t New York. You can’t shoot them and leave them. There’s always two or three standing at my door.”

Dureau reminds one of Tennessee Williams’s *Suddenly Last Summer*, but he is no exploitative Sebastian Venable. He is more like a Father Flanagan, although he says sometimes when he’s not Big Daddy, he’s Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Actually, in one of his self-portraits, a painting, he is a Doppelganger of Richard Locke, one of the most popular gay film stars of the seventies.

“When I was thirty-five in the sixties, when we all had long hair, I looked in the mirror and realized I had attained the age of my fantasies. Oh my God! I suddenly became the daddy, the pursuer instead of the pursued one, and I must say it’s the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“When you and Robert went out, were you loaded?” I said.

“Robert always had to make pit stops. I didn’t have to. I did smoke into the sixties and seventies. I used to be quite alcoholic, but I’ve never related to the drugs Robert used. He had a different mentality. His drugs of choice hooked up very well with his vision of what people could do for him as opposed to my Big Daddy come-on of what I’m going to do for them. I see people as somebody I might adopt, or do for for a while, while Robert never looked beyond what’s this one going to do for me tonight. His was a very modern-day, gay, and, I suppose, legitimate behavior for the seventies and early eighties. I’m an old-style queer, not a contemporary gay man. I think the new style is tied together with drugs and immediate gratification.

“I must tell you about my best time with Robert. We had an absolutely splendid time cruising through the cold of Mardi Gras. Canal Street, the main drag, was mobbed. We played a cruising game like we were gunners in a war bomber.

“I’d say, ‘Look at three o’clock: tall, skinny, tan.’ He’d say, ‘Look at nine o’clock: mean, black, dangerous, sexy.’ That’s what we shared the most mutual joy in, the hunt. He’d talk me into going into a black gay bar, and they’d recognize me and be all over me to shoot them. Robert would find someone he thought fabulous-looking, and I’d drop him home with them, but often as not, afterward, he’d say, ‘Oh, they weren’t any good. They didn’t do the right thing.’”

“I thought him petulant. He liked what he saw, but often their performance never came up to New York standards. In the bars, he’d stand in the corner and scowl at people, then say something. He acted the same way in a New Orleans bar as he would in a New York bar, looking petulant. I don’t do that. I ask them about their wife and kids.”

“Did Robert ask them what kind of drugs they liked?”

“I suppose he offered them drugs, because he didn’t have enough confidence in his own charm. Drugs are the cheap and easy way.”

“What is your take on Robert’s wearing a button that said, ‘Nigger’?”

“That was a real problem with him, that nigger thing. I’d set him up with someone I knew, and the next morning I’d ask, ‘How was he?’”

“‘Not too good,’ Robert said.”

“‘Not too good? Why not?’”

“‘Well, he didn’t want to do anything.’”

“‘I can’t believe he didn’t want to do anything.’”

“‘He wouldn’t say,’ Robert said, ‘I’m your nigger.’”

“I’d go, *Huuuh?* I’ve been accused of being a colonialist, accused of keeping slaves, despite my cordial behavior with my darlings. And I’d say to Robert, ‘He wouldn’t say, ‘I’m your nigger’?’ Isn’t there an alternate, like, ‘Oh my darling, I love you’?”

“Robert would say, ‘No! Why couldn’t he say, ‘I’m your nigger’?’ I say to them, I’m your cocksucker?”

“Well, do I have to explain why it’s hard to say that? The problem was on his side. He wanted a scenario that was very set, inflexible. I mean that some person had to open his mouth and say, ‘I’m your nigger.’ Robert could have just thought that part as a fantasy in his head.”

“There’s that picture of his, the one with the big black dick hanging out of the polyester suit. Robert had major plans for that one. He thought that was going to be some big lifelong affair.”

“One time, he said, ‘I wish I could find a smart one.’”

“I said, ‘What do you mean, a smart one?’”

“He said, ‘You know, I’d like to find one as good-looking as Bryant Gumbel.’”

“I said, ‘Why?’”

“He said, ‘I want one that has a brain of his own:’”

“‘Why? So he doesn’t hang on to you?’”

“‘Yes.’”

“‘But, Robert,’ I said, ‘if there was a black man that was brilliant and beautiful and had a successful business, why would he want to go into a corner and say, ‘I’m your nigger’ to someone like you?’”

“That was probably the New Yorker in him talking.”

“Oh, God, was it! He was hooked on New York. He said I was living a sweeter, warmer life than he was. A couple times, he came down to spend a couple months, but it never worked. He’d stay a week or two. He’d love it. But he couldn’t stay off the phone. He was always doing business.”

“The kill for the Great White Hunter was the sale.”

“Whenever he’d arrive, he’d ask to see my latest work. He always wanted to see if I had any new niggers.

“He’d complain, ‘I haven’t photographed any nigger in six months.’ “ ‘Then what are you doing?’ I’d ask.

“ ‘Oh, I photographed some horses and some ads for Cardin.’

“ ‘But haven’t you done something you enjoy?’

“ ‘No: Robert said.

“ ‘What a price! First you’re famous, then you have to beat yourself up to be more famous. Frankly, there’s just desserts there,’ said George.

“ ‘What do you mean?’

“ ‘Robert was so famous his fame shit all over him, and not just over him, over me as well, because people got such a load of Mapplethorpe, it’s hard for them to understand my work. What he did doesn’t have anything to do with me.

“ ‘His famous style laid a wet blanket on every other photographer. My pictures, because they’re about being human and romantic (compared to his by formalists), look less pure, because they’re not as stylized, or as abstract as his. My photographs are more concerned with the person in them than in formal classic stylization. My models look at you, embarrass you, make you feel guilty and uncomfortable.

“ ‘Robert’s controversial photographs caused a different kind of discomfort, more abstract,’ I said.

“ ‘Melody Davis wrote an essay about Robert and me in her book published at Temple, called *The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography*. One of my photos is the cover. She wrote that Robert’s pictures belonged in the speculative concept of art, like the nude over the bar in the western saloon. It’s put up for men to speculate on and use it in their heads as they will. My photographs do the opposite. They look at the viewer. The viewer becomes the viewed.

“ ‘Very few of Robert’s blacks look at you except in a funny, sexy way. There’s a photograph he did straight out of me, the very first picture of mine he took from. The model’s name was Oscar. He had a recently scarred face and big bulging eyes.’

“ ‘You said you weren’t his mentor.’

“ ‘You have to understand, because of the circles Robert operated in, particularly in Europe where people knew my work, that I heard from people come back from some university in Belgium or from Paris who’d say, ‘Well, everyone over there knows that you were Mapplethorpe’s master. Everyone knows he had this master in New Orleans whom he would visit like a pilgrim.’

“ ‘Then he learned some things from you.’

“ ‘Let me tell you about my assistant, Jonathan. Robert always thought Jonathan too quiet and vegetarianish, and Jonathan always thought he wasn’t sophisticated enough for Robert’s

company. The truth is, Jonathan is no fool. Robert knew that and wanted to keep his distance.

“Jonathan, one time, said, ‘I know you luuv to wrestle with Robert. You always have a good time together. But can’t we hide some of your pictures, because you know you’ll see his version of them in print if you leave them sitting out on the table. You’ll lose more than you’ll gain.’”

“It was the kiss of death when Robert would buy something of mine. It was like he was paying a token price for what he was going to do with that picture. Put it in the Big Time! It was funny, because he would drain the soul out of it, that big slice of soul I created out of my personal experience, and not exactly for public consumption.”

“You opened your house to him and showed him your work. You sold him photographs. You were friends. What is all this?”

“New Orleans.”

“You know I’m going to quote you.”

“Let me read it back afterward.”

“In the best sense of context.”

“I do get a little like Long John Silver when I get really mean.”

“Everyone has his or her own Mapplethorpe.”

“I don’t mind saying wild things that are the way I see them.”

“Why did you let him in your house?”

“Where I live in the French Quarter is the most wonderful house. It’s an 1840 house with guillotine windows, but a hundred years ago, it was gutted and made into a warehouse. So it has a Queen Anne front and a Mary Ann behind. There’s a roofed one-hundred-twenty-foot balcony that wraps around the corner of the block. It’s the biggest and best balcony in the city. That’s why I moved here. The front is laced with ironwork and inside there are no walls. At one time, it would have driven me crazy, because I love details of architecture, but I learned from the last house that you can go crazy from beautiful architecture.”

“Maybe *Architectural Digest* makes queens crazy”

“I have rooms that are fifty-five feet long. Two big warehouse rooms that are fifty-five by thirty. My paintings and drawings always want to be looked at from fifty feet away. I draw very big and bold. My contours are strong.”

“But why did you let Robert in?” I asked.

“His studio on Bond Street was so tiny. My God. What a terrible way to have to live when you’re rich. It was so grim and grungy with a hole for a room and kitchen with a half-eaten can of tuna.”

“That studio was the real Robert. That showplace apartment that is shown in the BBC documentary was not him.”

“I let him in because he needed a sense of home and studio and warmth and love and romance. I find it delicious to show and sell things out of my home instead of at a gallery. It’s kind of a bother, but you can really communicate with the person who’s worrying through trying to buy the best picture that suits them. I wanted Robert, who was suffering from all too much business, to have a sense of all that.”

“You don’t mind letting a Trojan Horse into your house?”

“Let’s say Robert did ‘departures’ from me. There were two pictures. One is of Dave Kopay, the football player, sitting side-saddle, nude, with his knees up on a platform. The other was a black boy sitting the same way, but with his dick and balls hanging out the bottom. Robert put these together to make his photograph of a black boy sitting on a pedestal.”

“The photographs of Ajitto,” I said.

“He also did a ‘departure’ on Oscar, the black with the pockmarked face. That was the first one he bought. He put his ‘departure’ on the cover of his *Black Book*. Every time Jonathan would see one of Robert’s ‘departures,’ he’d say, ‘Oh, he really must have loved that one of yours.’ Robert had that picture of Oscar hanging in the hall right next to his bedroom when he was dying,” said George.

“Imitation is a sign of influence.”

“Robert never photographed a black before he met me. That’s why he bought the first one. He asked me how I did it, and, like a fool, I told him. He said, ‘I can’t believe how you can get them to look like that for you.’”

Robert owned almost forty photographs by Dureau.

Said George, “Robert bought some of my very earliest work. Nineteen seventy-two. I used a sixty-five-dollar, eleven-year-old two-and-a-quarter Mamiyaflex camera. I photographed three years without a light meter. I learned from the start how to photograph black people, because you frequently have a bleed-out background by the time you’ve exposed the black or brown person. I addressed the situation tenderly. Robert couldn’t be bothered. I thought his using strobes and lighting up the whole thing in that magazine style was too MGM. I don’t do that, because I don’t want to scare my darlings, or my tricks, to death. I told him what I told you: I made love to them while I shot them. I play with people a lot. I downright seduce them. I grease them with heavy Vaseline. I got that from my kickboxer friends. Robert got it from me, but he never understood the greasing as a comforting seduction. My pictures of blacks, and whites, are actually foreplay, the act itself, or afterplay. Did Robert ever do that?”

“Perhaps that’s why his photographs are so cold, so intellectual, so unemotional, so unerotic,” I said. “But, then, he was a commercial photographer. I can’t imagine him stroking his socialite princesses and actresses. He was working in a different genre with his commercial assignments. Perhaps that element of commerce is what makes his blacks so different from yours. So much else seems the same by derivation.”

“I must tell you, one day, Robert and I photographed each other,” said George. “I posed with a model up against huge, battered columns. It was my idea. He wasn’t very manipulative. I suspect he was more directorial with people who were important to him. He didn’t fuck with me and I didn’t with him. Maybe it was because we knew too much about the same thing. We didn’t want to expose everything about ourselves. We weren’t in the least attracted, but were fascinated by how different our approaches were to art. As it was, quite by accident, Robert and I used the same camera and the same paper and the same film and all that causes some similarity, which is coincidence more than a ‘departure.’”

I said, “I notice your influence on Robert in certain photographs, especially one of his model, Thomas, who is posed, full-length, nude, torso arched back, his face so far back he’s faceless, and it’s in his presentation of arms that Robert references you. Thomas’s arms are raised

up around his head and disappear at the elbows. He also virtually amputated the arms of another¹ model. I wouldn't have thought much about this 'amputee' stylization if your work did not exist. Actually, that pose is a classic physique contest pose I used in a series of "Self-Portraits 1979."

"Many of my models are deformed, by birth or by accident. Some are just drop-dead gorgeous. People seem to respond with affection to physically impaired people. Some respond foolishly. Sam Wagstaff was one of them. My models are people who are beautiful and sexy and the fact that there's a stump where an arm or a leg should be doesn't mar their sexiness or their beauty. You don't say, 'Well, let's throw out this little Roman sculpture because it's partly broken,' " said George sarcastically.

"Perhaps people respond to your work because you make literal, in your pictures, the parts that are missing. You confront them with the notion that we all have parts missing in ourselves."

"My work elicits much affection."

"Robert's doesn't," I replied.

"Of course not. He was always a classical formalist. Some of my work is classical and the sense of form dominates the subject, as Robert's always does. Mostly, my work is romantic in the sense that the subject is so important that it almost always goes off balance, because it just has to, because I can't bend this model around anymore, I can't tell his story formally because I make contact with the person coming out of him."

"Robert often stepped in and did your ironing," I commented.

"Exactly. He cleaned up my work to make them respectable for respectable queers with money," said George.

"Gay photography, at least in the magazines, certainly shies away from deformity, except the deformity of big cocks. Ordinary people rarely appear. They take a backseat to super, heroic, built, and media-handsome men. At least some gallery shows, and some photography books, are beginning to break that taste by showing persons who are living with AIDS."

"That's what I mean when I say Robert's art speculates others," said George. "His models are meant to be looked at. He pushed them all into a sort of calendar-boy pose that, even when they're looking menacingly at you, you're saying, 'Oh, that's Robert's Mr. December.' "

"You mean his work looks commercial, as if the photograph is trying to sell itself as a product to mainstream money," I said.

"I know it! He makes his models look too available, whereas mine look like something dragged in off the street, which they were. His were dragged off the street, too, but he presented them in a way that every good faggot will know what this means. With mine, every good faggot doesn't know what this means. He was very commercial. He used to ask me, 'George, how do you live off this? Who's going to buy these things?' That was his big worry."

¹ A prime example of Mapplethorpe's referencing Dureau's amputee stylization is his photograph of a black model, *Ken Moody*, 1983. In the Schirmer/Mosel edition of Mapplethorpe's *Ten by Ten*, Photograph 56, Robert displays Ken Moody back to the camera, in a way that causes Moody's arms to look amputated. Robert's reference, quoting race and gender and pose from Dureau, also references ancient classical statues whose perfect forms ancient vandals broke from their perfect moment.

“It sounds like you assault a social consciousness.”

“And he assaulted checkbooks. It’s true. I’m so comfortable dealing with handicapped people. I have lots of intellectual, sophisticated handicapped friends, some who are lawyers for the disadvantaged, and they invite me over to discuss sex, because I’m the only normal person they know who knows about having sex with handicapped people. One time I almost died when, in this group of handicapped people talking about sex, I had taken a friend and his wife, neither of whom was handicapped. There was a girl with no arms, and all this couple wanted to talk about was what it would feel like to put their arms around a girl with no arms.”

“That sounds like a scene from Todd Browning’s *Freaks*, where the ‘normal’ woman, surrounded socially by the physically impaired, realizes that in that group, she is the freak,” I said.

“Exactly. ‘Now you’re one of us.’ I love to watch people making decisions about my photographs. That’s why I prefer to sell them out of my own home. Robert loved the thrill of the sale in a different way. The thrill of the sale became the thrill of adulation. When he shot a scary picture, he saw it in the eyes of the beholders, rich people who would have to buy it, look at it, swallow it, live with it on their rich walls. I look at my pictures from the point of view of the people I photograph. I get all nervous they may not like their pictures. If there’s one that’s rude or shocking, I worry they won’t like me anymore. Robert never understood any of that.”

“At first, I hated the solo portraits he did of me. He didn’t care. He liked the photograph and said he was revealing the scary side of me. The shots he took of the two of us together I like much more.”

George looked at me closely and said, “Are you black?”

“I think I’m white. I resemble my family, but I’m so dark they’ve told me for as long as I can remember that I was switched in the hospital with Baby Mounds.”

“Who’s Baby Mounds?”

“He was the son of a black band leader my parents often danced to. My dark complexion and kinky hair have always bemused them. They saw Baby Mounds the last time when he was three, playing drums in his father’s band. It’s a long-standing family joke. Especially in the summer, when I tan with iodine and baby oil. I’m sometimes asked if I’m part black. I always say I’m an octoroon. No one knows what that means anymore.”

“Are you handicapped?”

“No. I’m homosexual.”

“You’re worse than Robert.”

“We were two of a kind for a while.”

“Because you knew Robert, you must be shocking. Your novel is shocking,” said George.

“Robert was very helpful while I was writing it.”

“People were talking about it the other night.”

“It’s about the seventies, and nothing is more shocking in the nineties than the seventies,” I told him.

“It’s strange fate that Robert became more famous and more shocking after he died.”

“He left us to enjoy the circus.”

“Nothing would have made him happier than to be the ultimate scandalous person,” said

George. “I was always a bit fascinated by his slightly repulsive taste in clothing and demeanor. All that leather-wear made him look like a boy groupie with a band. He tried to dress ‘dangerous.’ He used dangerous, bad-boy fashions to substitute for dick size as motorcyclists and ghetto gangsta’s do.”

“I remember him looking at my photographs, which are entirely too enlightened and instructive and noble. I could see him thinking, ‘How can I do this and make it unacceptable?’ Aloud, he’d say, ‘Don’t you want to make some cocksucking pictures?’ I said, ‘I have one here.’ A sort of tough-looking guy who always wanted me to photograph him sucking my dick—which was hysterical. ‘Is that what you mean, Robert?’ And he’d go, ‘Aaah! You don’t even want to talk about art. You’re just being nasty. I want to tell you about art.’ He was really possessed with how he could make a picture shocking.”

“What do you think will happen to Robert’s reputation in the future?”

“I think it will drop, because he shot his wad. There’s not a lot more to say or think about his work. He had his glory on earth. He shoved it down everybody’s throat. He was very good at editing and figuring out what was most bombastic and best. He did so much cropping and editing, that without him, the single frames aren’t much good. Robert wasn’t saying enough to make his pictures live on. His work is too derivative of others. Many Mapplethorpes are just George Platt Lynes. Robert, for all his creativity, seemed to have lifted everything. He wasn’t comfortable with just the object or the person in front of his camera. He had to frame it in terms of an historical style. Maybe I’m wrong, but there always seems to be reference in his work.”

“Is this Dureau the painter, or Dureau the photographer, speaking?”

“People ask me: Is photography really as good as painting? As a painter, I have to say, no, it ain’t. Photography is an editorial art. It’s not a creative art in the sense that painting and drawing are—in which you start with nothing. The camera will give you too much, so all you have to do is shut it up. The camera is just a mindless lunatic. More precisely the camera is an *idiot savant*. No direction. No brain. But it remembers *everything!*”