STUDIES IN ANDROGYNY:

THE WORKS OF KOLLWITZ, CARAVAGGIO AND MAPPLETHORPE

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In the beginning, humanity consisted of double beings, spherical, with four arms and legs, and two identical faces, back to back on a circular neck. They had double sexual, organs, too, either masculine or feminine, or one male and one female. The first kind proceeded from the Sim, the second, from the Earth, the third from, the Moon, which shares; something of the nature of the other two heavenly bodies. These beings were of extraordinary strength and vigour, and their pride was such that they took it on themselves to find fault with the gods. To bring them to their senses, Zeus decided to punish them by cutting each one through the middle. This cut divided each natural being into two.

Each of us, therefore, is the half of a single thing; as a result, each of us is constantly searching for our complementary fraction. Those men who come from a mixed being are lovers of women, and the women of men. As for the women who are a section of a feminine being, they pay no attention to men, but their inclination is towards women. Finally, the man who is a section of a male being seeks; out males... If one of them chance as to find the half from which he has been separated, he is possessed by feelings, of intimacy, kinship and love, so much so that he refuses to let himself be parted from the other, desiring to mingle with his beloved so that their two beings may again make one.

-Plato's Symposium *1*

This paper began as an attempt to explore the 'blurring and transcendence of gender definition in art. Armed with an ample list of artists spanning centuries whose work dealt in one way or another with androgyny, and with a general notion of what actually defined androgyny, this work began.

Ancients, used androgyny as a tool for facing and exploring sexuality as a force responsible for human existence (procreation, relationships: between humans; and the gods, between humans and nature's forces, between males and females).

Later Greeks used it in a more narrow, sexual framework. It has swung back and forth constantly, with different cultures, and perhaps the different sexes offering different uses for the concept.
As our need to define our world in primal terms receded with our accumulation of knowledge and sophistication, there was a shift. Prom the boundaries of ere action and procreation, androgyny rose to be what it is today; a description, an analogy, an explanation of humanness at its broadest.

Initially conceived as a comparative study of literature as well as art, the focus on this topic was triggered by a reading of "Orlando" by Virginia Woolf, with its obvious elaboration of true androgynous perspective. Borrowing from, the Greek legend of Tiresias ("born a boy, who was to become a woman and die a man, fabulously old" 2), Orlando, once having been a man, becomes a woman, and lives for several hundred years, having seen life from both sides, so to speak.

More importantly, however, my interest in the issue of gender role transcendence or ambiguity had its roots in my own recent work, which has dealt with male/female drama (grounded in explorations of an extremely personal nature), and the viewing of males in particular from a less restricted perspective.

The focus of this paper became one which dealt with artists, whose work reflected a naturalistic approach to figurative work, partly because in choosing artists whose language was more akin to my own I could more fully comprehend their meaning and intent. More importantly, I could further and enrich my own quest with the study of theirs. The decision was somewhat reluctantly made to focus primarily upon visual artists, due to practical limitations, being contented with noted references to relevant

literary works or figures.

Caravaggio, Artemesia Gentileschi, Rosa Bonheur, Kathe Kollwitz, and Robert Mapplethorpe came to mind. Caravaggio's seductive young men and luxurious flowers, Artemesia's powerful and violent young women, Rosa Bonheur's even more powerful bulls and horses, Kathe Kollwitz' early raging women of poverty and late androgynous self-portraits, and lastly, Mapplethorpe's male nudes and strange flowers, all called for further scrutiny.

The list of artists narrowed further, with investigation; personal preference, intuition and time constraints, affecting the process of elimination. What is most exciting is that, beginning with no preconceptions, the investigation led the way and conclusions ultimately presented themselves.

We will be examining and comparing the work of Kathe Kollwitz, then Caravaggio and Mapplethorpe, with regard to their use of androgyny. All three, for all their assorted similarities and differences which will be discussed further on, have at least one basic common thread. They presented men and women as they viewed them, sweeping aside the common definitions of gender for a larger perception, one which they could little distinguish from themselves.

The role of sexuality is certainly linked to the issue of androgyny, although it is not manifest in all illustrations, interpretations or uses of it. Initial questions arose: are all who explore androgyny in some inherent or latent fashion necessarily bisexual? Does bisexuality allow the artist to have an expanded view of humanity, or is the former the fruit of the latter? It is clear that both Caravaggio and Mapplethorpe were bisexual. One of the surprises unearthed in this research is that Kollwitz considered herself bisexual as well. Are there reasons why some artists seem to cling to a narrowly defined, purely sexual exploration of androgyny, while others use it in the larger, social sense of an expanded humanity? Why did both Caravaggio and Mapplethorpe devote a fair amount of their efforts to erotica, whereas Kollwitz apparently only touched upon it, in private? What are the roles that the different sexes play in establishing the above distinctions? And different epochs?

At various points in this paper, reference will be made to gender

characteristics; human qualities categorized as "masculine" or "feminine". Obviously, from the point of view of androgyny as a desired, more whole human condition, these categorizations are ultimately false. When they are used, it will be in reference to the undeniably dominant (and anti-androgynous) classification of gender behavior found in our own culture, and indeed, through much of the world. The discussion of the sources or causes of these gender distinctions must find its outlet at another time. Commonly, then, "masculine" defines the human qualities of strength, power, competitiveness, aggression, violence, hardness, lack of sentimentality, reason, intellectuality, etc.; "feminine", those human qualities of nurturing, gentleness, sensitivity, warmth, sentimentality, intuition, delicacy, passivity, weakness, etc.

First, we will look at Kollwitz. Although there is a stream of feminist perspective in her representations of strong women, fighting women, stalwart women equal to men in life's struggles and pains, it is the work done at the end of her life which is most profound. For if she saw women as equal to men in the fight of life, she clearly saw women and men indistinguishable in their own personal relationship to death.

However, the earlier images were extraordinary, certainly; not only in that Kollwitz presented women and men as equal partners^ in life's pain, or that often women were seen as the stronger, actually leading men, as in the portrayal of Black Anna in "The Assault" (1903). Most importantly, through her description of women's lot, she describes that of humanity. Woman is no longer the "Other" as described by DeBeauvoir, in "The Second Sex". Remarkably for those times, and even now, the experiences of woman become the Universal. Her intense commitment to truth through realism led her to describe what she saw: women and men stripped of everything but the essentials of human existence. Armed with this vision, she went straight to the heart of androgyny. Kollwitz' work is a powerful blend of feminism (the quest for "political" - in the largest sense of the word - realization of women's equality) and androgyny (the transcendence of the confines of gender definition by combination of "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics in one person).

A word about the relationship between feminism and androgyny. They are not by any means synonymous, but are inextricably intertwined. Feminist political analysis can lead to comprehension of the origins and

tenacity of the existing order, and of the oppressive nature of the political gender restrictions. This understanding can allow an unfettered (androgynous) fullness of human experience to develop.

It is no surprise then, that Kollwitz was a socialist (giving her a foundation for understanding the workings of oppression), nor, that she was bisexual(allowing for a personal sensitivity to gender transcendence).

In her early "Weaver" and "Peasant War" series, women "manned" the barricades of her visual revolution, because she, in order to represent it, had to "be there". Her self-identification was (unlike the French writer George Sand, whose bisexuality resulted in a confused rather than an expanded self-image), with women, not with Universalized male. And yet, woman seizing the weapons, woman mourning the defeats, didn't isolate, but unified. Again, what she felt was human, not "feminine". In short, Kollwitz was using images of women to represent humanity as a whole - a truly radical move, and for her time, extraordinary. (An interesting comparison of a similar Universalization of woman could perhaps be made with the character of Jane in "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Bronte, who was portrayed as a human, being in life's quest for self-knowledge, not as "woman").

Examining her prints can further clarify this point. In the "Weavers" series, completed in 1896, she describes an uprising of weavers, triggered by the starvation of a child. In the first two plates, the poverty and despair of the workers centers around a dying and dead child. The revolt unfolds to avenge this tragedy and the tragedy of the workers' lives. Kearns, in her biography on Kollwitz, emphasizes this significance of the child as the force that drives the workers to revolution.[3]

In "Weavers on the March", alongside the men, is the marching figure of woman with child, staring ahead, fixated with rage. In "The Attack", the women, again with children, are there, pulling up the cobblestones at the gate of the factory owner's mansion. Again, a deadly determination is readable on the women's faces. In "The End", the woman stands, mute, with fists clenched rigidly at her sides, as she witnesses the dead and the end of the revolt.

"Raped" (fig. 1), part of the "Peasant War" series completed in 1908, is a graphic depiction, unusual in Western art and certainly for her time, of a female rape victim from the woman's point of view. Vigorously and

unsparingly executed, the harshly foreshortened limbs barely distinguishable from the chaos of undergrowth, this is not the relationship between woman and earth that we are used to seeing. The fact that Kollwitz included a depiction of a rape in her "Peasant War series points to her equation of plight of woman with plight of all people; the peasants were as violated as the rape victim of this particular plate, ground into the very earth that they ploughed. (The more factual connection between war and rape needn't be elaborated upon).

In "The Assault" (fig.2), it is the outraged figure of the peasant agitator, Black Anna, who urges the revolt on. Her figure, alive with rage, dominates the picture. Everything about this image; the distorted figures of the crowd, wild with fury, the coarse, harshly described sky, the painful angularity of figures and weapons, brings a tremendous power to this print.

"Whetting the Scythe" (fig.3) pushes that dark power even further. In this print, a horrifyingly vengeful woman glares into the future out of the corner of her eye, as, she prepares the blade for its unforgiving task.

Although some of the earliest prints, such as "Weavers on the March", and "The Attack" of the "Weavers" series are strongly illustrative (Kollwitz herself expressed some embarrassment at their complete reliance upon the narrative, later in life), others, express, through their heavy use of chiaroscuro, an oppressiveness; inherent in the subject. "The Peasant War" series already sees a departure from that earlier reliance on the illustrative, for those pieces are filled with alternatingly, an overpowering sense of doom, and a fierce and deadly anger unleashed in the quality of line, the intensity of the drawing, and the urgency of her extraordinarily virile technique.

"From Many Wounds You. Bleed, Oh People" (fig. 4), is a singular image, done in 1896, and reworked in "The Downtrodden" (1900). In the first version, the nude women framing the center image of Jesus are nothing less than crucifixion figures themselves. Given the titles of both plates, the implication is clear; women bear the burdens of humanity, as did Jesus. A rather self-conscious image, extremely reliant upon the narrative element, it is nonetheless powerfully drawn. Its significance for us lies in the portrayal of women as that most venerated of male

roles, savior.

Studying these works one can see that Kollwitz's dominant use of women stems from a truly androgynous- perception, and results in something entirely different, therefore, than those female images so commonly enjoyed. One need only call to mind the works of a Mary Cassatt, only twenty-three years her senior, to allow Kollwitz's power to strike. Basically conservative, although certainly beautiful, Cassatt's imagery described a contentment within confinement, and wholeheartedly embraces the gender definitions which Kollwitz's work transcends from beginning to end. (An extremely interesting comparison could be made between the mother/child images of the two artists:, but other than commenting that Cassatt's are contented, within a confinement of wealth and gender, while Kollwitz's cry out with an almost animal brutality from within the prisons of class and physical hardship; this must be left for now.)

In Kollwitz's work, woman's relationship to children was almost animal-like. In "Woman with Dead Child" (fig. 5), a modern pieta, a nude female almost devours her fragile dead baby, taking us back to the most primordial, most human elements of motherhood. The bond which results from bearing children somehow manages, in Kollwitz[1] work, to transcend gender, and becomes connected to the almost tribal sense of the familial within us all. Drawn with a delicacy of line and an almost transparent use of tone, the picture is, at the same time, brutal in its physicality. The dead child looms large, as we have seen, behind the sense of desperation in Kollwitz's work.

Kollwitz's background, beginning as a family member of the Free Congregation, a somewhat Utopian religious, community founded by her maternal grandfather, was a mixture of middle-class German propriety and an interesting variant of freethinking liberalism, at the end of the nineteenth century. Her father, a lawyer turned stonemason, was a fervent socialist. He and his wife educated their daughters as well as their sons, didn't believe in corporal punishment, and left their children a wide berth of personal freedom. Karl Schmidt decided early in Kathe's childhood that she possessed artistic talent, and that she would be trained in an artist's career, rather than be married. The older women members of this religious community were strong, independent, well-educated and often single. With these influences, Kathe developed a strong sense of self.

She commented in her writings, "I was keenly ambitious, I wanted to become an artist, I had a clear aim and direction..."*4*.

Countered to this was a more typical lack of sexual education, a stoic and remote mother, and a childhood of inexplicable fits of crying, prolonged dark, silent moods, nightmares with strange almost hallucinogenic perceptions of objects, or herself, shrinking or enlarging, feelings of suffocation, intense fear of abandonment, etc.*5*

As she matured, she became more involved with socialist causes and organizations. She was active in the Social Democratic Party, knew major socialist figures of the day such as Clara Zetkin, Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg. She was, however, no ideologist. Indeed, her socialistic beliefs were based on a youthful moral and aesthetic attraction to the proletariat. She said that it was in the working people that she could find real beauty; that the middle class did not interest her.*6* Her husband's medical practice serving these lower classes gave her an intense exposure to their lives. What began as an almost idealized, romaticized admiration of the workers, became a deeper kind of attraction. "When I became acquainted with the difficulties and tragedies underlying proletarian life", she wrote, "I was gripped by the full force of the proletarian's fate. Unsolved problems...grieved and tormented me, and contributed to my feeling that I must keep on with my studies... Portraying them again and again opened a safety-valve for me; it made life bearable".*7*

With familiarity with their pains, struggles and strengths, a kind of identification, then universalization took place in her imagery. Perhaps her identification with the women as mothers and wives, perhaps her attraction to women, increased her connection.

All her life she was pulled towards what can only be described as the darker side of life. "...my temperamental core semblance to my father strengthened this inclination in me. Occasionally even my parents said to me "after all, there are happy things in life, too. Why do you only show the dark side?" I could not answer this. The joyous side simply did not appeal to me. As Zola or someone once said, "Le beau c'est le laid".*8* Her propensity towards darkness began with her childhood fits, and her vision as an artist persisted in this vein. With a perhaps self-protective instinct, she explored this darker side only in her work, constructing for

herself a stable, middle-class life (in contrast to Caravaggio or Mapplethorpe, who could not separate their work and self, but had to explore the extremities of their darkness with a brutal personal involvement).

As with the other artists to be discussed, she made intense utilization of the self-portrait throughout her oeuvre. From her earliest etchings of youthful self-exploration, such as the ones of 1983 (fig. 6), 1904 (fig.7), and 1910 (fig.8), to her last dark ruminations: on death of 1924 (fig. 9), 1934/35 (fig. 10), and 1938 (fig. 11), Kollwitz used her own image as a means of probing her own humanity. Self-portraiture at its height is an expression of the human condition with which we are most familiar; again, a universalization from the particular. At least thirty-five self-portraits were done in prints alone, and more in drawings and sculpture.

From the very first, an inherent androgynous, even "masculine" quality is present in these self-images. This brings up interesting questions. Often having been told that my own self-images were "harsh" or "unkind to myself", etc., I always assumed that this quality came from the intensity of concentration and its resultant hard gaze; from the relaxation of the facial muscles, again, resulting in a severe expression. However, this study of Kollwitz's androgynous nature points to a perhaps more accurate reading of complex personality in self-portraiture.

The question of sexuality of artists has been raised earlier, and it is worth discussing in some depth regarding Kollwitz. She was, as has been described, a product of a politically liberal, and intellectually and religiously non-conformist upbringing, in a conservative time. Yet she was nonetheless also a product of a typically repressed society regarding emotion and sexuality in her personal life.

Inclined to fall in love (she described it as a "chronic condition")*9*, she nonetheless committed herself to an engagement at the age of seventeen, to Karl Kollwitz, a dear friend with whom she was not, however, in love. During this seven year engagement she pursued her artistic studies, encouraged by her father who saw marriage as an obstacle to her success as an artist. She expressed some misgivings about relinquishing the free life of the artist, yet did not alter her plans. The marriage, in Kathe's words, at first "endured stormy fights and lacked

sentimentality...". *10* This was explained, in her mind, by the tensions of the new couple's relocation to the unfamiliar city of Berlin.

One could debate whether the decision to marry Karl Kollwitz was a manifestation of her sexual repression, a way of balancing a potentially excessive and disruptive emotional inclination, or whether, as Martha Kearns maintains, hers was the pragmatic decision of an independent woman at a time when women could hardly exist independently.
Kollwitz explicity discussed, in a brief autobiography written for her son late in life, her bisexuality:

> "As I look back upon my life I must make one more remark upon this subject; although my leaning toward the male sex was dominant, I also felt frequently drawn towards my own sex — an inclination which I could not correctly interpret until much later on. As a matter of fact, I believe that bisexuality is almost a necessary factor in artistic production; at any rate, the tinge of masculinity within me helped me in my work".*11*

Whether she ever acted upon this attraction to women is not known. At one point in her life she spent a great deal of time with an Englishwoman named Costanza "Stan" Harding; "slender, athletic, artistically talented and fearlessly independent; she wore her hair unfashionably short... This woman had, at twenty, run away from her wealthy father and supported herself by-tutoring English and copying Florentine art. At the time Kathe met her, Stan was in a state of misgiving and distress. She had wanted to continue her independent life; but social custom, economic necessity and the devoted love of a stable man had pursuaded her to marry".*12* She and Kollwitz hit it off, and the two of them spent an entire summer hiking through Italy alone, Stan armed with her father's revolver.

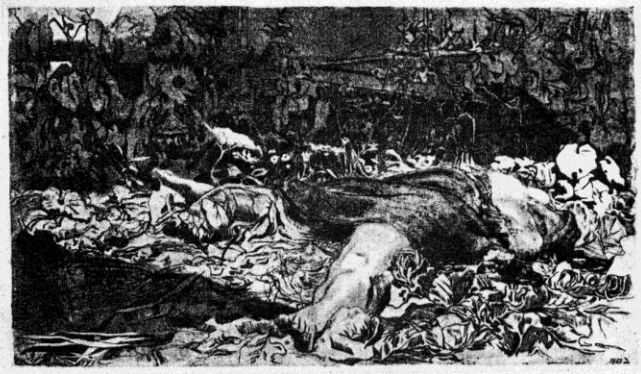
This episode might offer certain insights and possible interpretations of Kollwitz, her own marriage, her relationship to woman. Clearly, at any rate, Kollwitz did see her bisexuality as a strength-giving quality, and understood that her androgynous nature had a direct impact upon her work.

A series of erotic drawings has emerged; only seven still remaining, the rest being "destroyed while in the family's possession".*13* How many there really were, and what they might have revealed regarding her

personal sexuality, or her use of sexuality as an artistic expression, will never be known, Kollwitz would not allow them to be shown in her own life-time. She chose not to publicly express her androgynous nature in terms of its bisexuality, but instead, used androgyny to elaborate upon her social consciousness, (fig. 12.)

That she did not expand upon this apparently limited body of work may well reflect her sexual upbringing as a woman. Women did not have open to them the freedom to explore sexuality, no less to express themselves through it in imagery. Kollwitz was not a rebel as regards her lifestyle. In many ways, she was a modest but firm member of the very middle class that she found so dull, relying on a full time housekeeper and her husband's income to achieve her independence. Yet her nature was complex and layered. She was no Suzanne Valadon, and chose not to express openly that which she experienced privately. In that sense, she was her mother's daughter.

That women artists have tended to limit, or even block out a more purely sexual expression of androgyny is part of a sad story; although perhaps this sublimation has resulted in work of a more profound and universal nature than might otherwise be created. On the other hand, with fewer works being "destroyed while in the possession of the family", a truer, fuller expression of human sexuality could be open to us all.



1907

"The Rape"

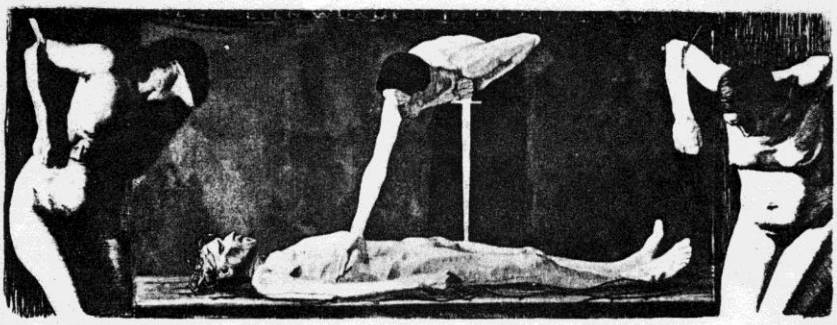
figure 1

"The Assault"

figure2

WHETTING THE SCYTHE.

figure 3



1896

"From Many Wounds You Bleed, Oh People"

figure 4

1903

"Woman With Dead Child"

figure 5

SELBSTBILDNIS AM TISCH II. Fassung

figure 6

SELBSTBILDNIS EN FACE

1904

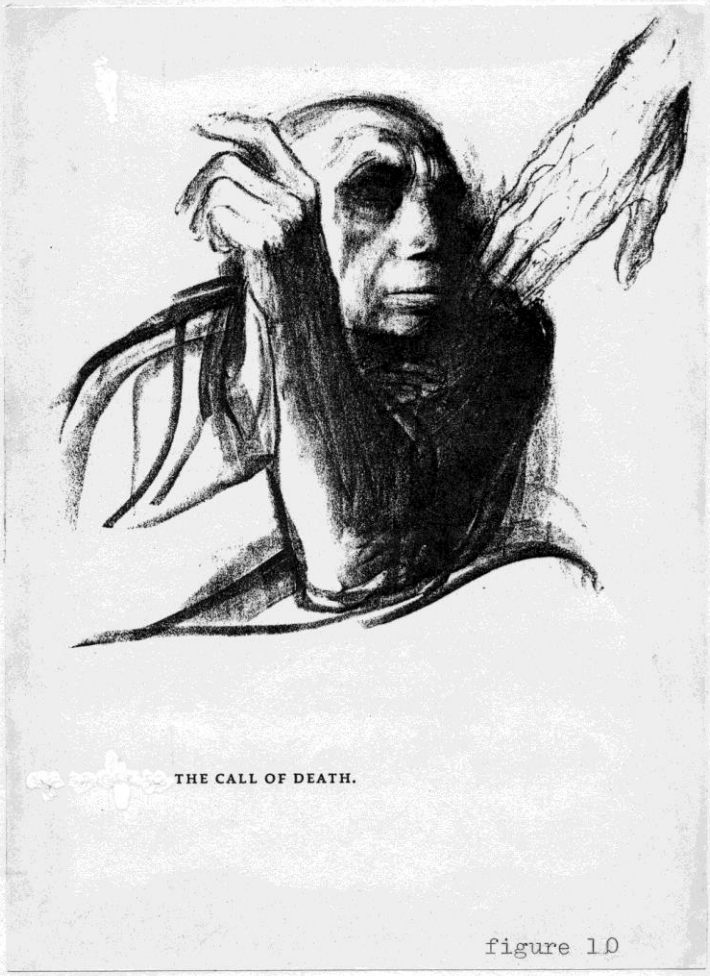
figure 7

SELBSTBILDNIS MIT DER HAND AN DER STIRN

1910

figure 8

figure 9



THE CALL OF DEATH.

figure 10

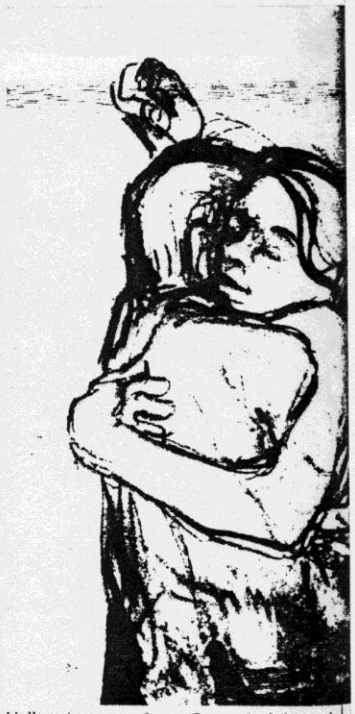
SELF-PORTRAIT, HALF-LENGTH IN PROFILE.

figure 11

A SECRET LIFE

One of the great graphic artists of the twentieth century, Käthe Kollwitz is best known for her expressionistic treatment of the urban poor, her self-portraits, and her antiwar posters, including *No More War.* Few people know that dour Käthe was also into erotica.

The two drawings above are from *Secreta,* a series Kollwitz would not allow shown in her own lifetime. After her death, in 1945, most of them were destroyed while in the family's possession. But seven drawings resurfaced in the definitive catalogue of her 1,317 drawings, published in German in 1972. These two, which are making their first printed appearance here before an English-speaking public, are rich in eroticism and sublime sensuality. As commanding expressions from a woman's perspective, they testify most eloquently to the artist's belief that sexuality can make one "almost suffocate for the joy it brings." —*Martha Kearns*



Kollwitz's steamy Love Scene I *(left) and* Love Couple.

figure 12

NOTES

Marie Delcourt, "Hermaphrodite". p.73

Ibid. p. 33

Martha Kearns, "Kathe Kollwitz, Woman and Artist". p.75

Hans Kollwitz, "The Diary and Letters of Kaethe Kollwitz". p.24

Ibid. p.21

Ibid. p.43

Ibid. p.43

Ibid. p.44

Ibid. p.22

Kearns. p.62

Kollwitz. p.23

Kearns. p.100

Martha Kearns "A Secret Life", Connoisseur #215. p. 22

Caravaggio and Mapplethorpe are two artists for whom comparison is very fruitful, both to each other, and to Kollwitz. All three were bisexual, each in their own way dealt with the darker side of life, each dealt at times with varying degrees of violence (Caravaggio and Mapplethorpe being more complicitous in their use of violence, certainly, than Kollwitz). All used self-imagery with profundity and frequency. Most importantly to this exploration, all, as has been pointed out, approached the issues of androgyny; again, each in their own way.

Caravaggio and Mapplethorpe were both active bisexuals, and used homoerotic imagery, in all its potency. Both represented flowers as well, explored portraiture in different contexts, and both evinced a concern for beauty as a formal issue. Both lived with extravagance of style, and unlike Kollwitz, forcefully expressed their sexuality in their lives and their work. Both died young; Mapplethorpe, at 42; Caravaggio, not quite 39.

There is not a wealth of biography on Mapplethorpe and even less on Caravaggio. The former is too much a man of the present to yet have a history; the latter, too much a man of history for his past to have survived. Neither appears to have been a person of letters. Therefore, the largest part of our knowledge of these artists comes from interpretations of their works. In the case of Caravaggio, art historians have done much to help us. In the case of Mapplethorpe, critics have come in droves, to praise, damn and interpret his work in a myriad of ways.

So this part of the paper, devoted to the works of Caravaggio and Mapplethorpe, will of necessity, focus primarily on their works for an understanding of their use of or approach to, issues of androgyny.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was born at the close of another century, the sixteenth, and worked at a time when art was in a period of flux. The art of the high renaissance

was still a mighty force, as was the Mannerist style which had sprung up in reaction to it. In fact, the other, more famous Michelangelo is said by some to have straddled the two, in some senses. Other artists, such as Annibale Carracci, were attempting to regain some of the contact with the ideal, and with life, than was evinced in the Mannerist work. All forces were very current when Caravaggio was developing his own sense of aesthetic. Caravaggio was singular in that he came to employ a much more naturalistic mode of painting than had appeared previously. This realism did have visual roots in the Lombard tradition of Italian painting (the region from whence Caravaggio hailed)*1*, and his persistent use of common men and women within a context of religiosity could be said to have connected with aspects of certain religious movements in Rome at the time.*2* These influences, combined with a defiance (at least equal to Mapplethorpe's so many centuries later) helped to form the singularity and force of Caravaggio's imagery. However, it is not this aspect of naturalism present in Caravaggio's oeuvre that we now will explore.

Among Caravaggio's early secular works, are "The Concert of Youths" (1595), "Luteplayer" (1596), "Bacchus" (1595-96), and "The Boy Bitten by a Lizard" (1596-1597) (fig. 1), although there is some question as to the chronological placement of the last painting. With their classical concerns, use of still-life elements and apparent homosexual imagery, they were youthful explorations of male sensuality done in the language of the time. Painted for the Cardinal Del Monte who was Caravaggio's first patron, they catered to this patron's tastes as well as to Caravaggio's.

Were these works to be viewed in isolation, the artist's personal connection to the homoerotic qualities could be brought into question. After all, Del Monte was Caravaggio's very supportive patron, and one painted for one's patron, be it the Church, or a nobleman of particular tastes. Caravaggio had produced earlier works; some fine genre

paintings ("The Cardsharps", (1594-95), "The Gypsy Fortuneteller" (1594-95, prior to the sensual youths, and had already launched his efforts into religious, works as well. Del Monte's attraction to Caravaggio's work was based at least partly upon the earlier genre pieces, as he apparently had a copy of "The Gypsy Fortuneteller" made expressly for himself.*3* On the other hand, the earliest pre-Del Montean religious pieces, such as the "Rest on The Flight to Egypt" (1594-95) (fig.2) did have clear homoerotic overtones, as evinced in the sensual boy angel, with his "implied, frontal nudity"*4*. In short, the Cardinal probably had both aesthetic appreciations, for Caravaggio's talents as well as a proclivity for his budding homoerotic imagery. In fact, Caravaggio's erotic imagery continues to emerge again and again, even within the context of his later, more serious efforts, underscoring the point that the early erotic androgyny was reflective of Caravaggio himself.

For our purposes, Del Monte's apparent bisexuality, rather than explaining the androgynous nature of these erotic works, serves simply to underscore the character of those times. Men of great power were possessed of a flexible sexuality, were great lovers of music, art, as well as science, and perceived a unity of intellect and spirit in life. They knew how to appreciate life with an ebullience and sensuality, as well as with a forcefulness. In short, these were very androgynous times.

As Caravaggio[1]s work progressed, and he left Del Monte behind, his efforts, moved further into serious- religious painting.

One of the remarkable aspects of Caravaggio's work is that explorations of an intensely personal nature could always be read in it, in contrast to most art of his time. He was accused by some of merely painting what he wished (or in contemporary terms, what he needed) to paint, and tacking onto the works a sacred iconography. In some sense, this is true of everything that he did, although one could assert

that generally he did not do it out of deceit or irreverence, but perhaps unconsciously, and in response to his own sense of spirit. Cn the other hand, his own defiant, rebellious ego occasionally did dominate, as in the case of the "St. John the Baptist With a Ram"(1601-02) (fig. 3.) The provocatively sexual youth, combined with the ram which symbolizes a highly charged male sexuality seems to mock the Sistine Chapel nudes of the other Michelangelo. There is some dispute as to whether Caravaggio intended it to be a St. John at all;*6* it is certainly much more sexual than religious, and seems to connect closely to the style and roguish sentiment of the even more outrageous "Victorious Cupid" (also of 1601-02).

In general, however, angels and sensual young boys peep out from otherwise serious works, as if Caravaggio was unaware of the apparent incompatibility, simply could not restrain himself for some reason, or had no wish to.

Not yet twenty-five when they were painted, his charming "Rest on the Flight to Egypt"(fig.2) and the moving "Ecstasy of St. Francis" (1594-95 as well) were the earliest examples of the existence of erotic androgynous imagery within the framework of sacred works.

Although the androgynous young boys and angels persist intermittently throughout all but the latest works in a less innocent fashion: the first, rejected "Inspiration of St. Matthew"(1602) (fig.4), the aforementioned "St. John with a Ram"(fig.3), the "Victorious Cupid", the "St. John in the Wilderness" of the Borghese (1605-06, or possibly 1610), the "St. John" (of 1605, in Kansas City), the "Madonna di Loreto" (1604-15), the "Madonna and Child with St. Anne" (1605-06) (fig. 5 - detail), we begin to see emerging, in contradistinction, a darker, more malignant eroticism; something more akin to the sadomasochism of Mapplethorpe's early work.

One need only look at the eruption of beheadings and martyrdoms, crucifixions, etc. which commence around 1599 to realize that there are additional forces at play in Caravaggio's imagery and life. "Judith Beheading Holofernes"(1598-99), Medusa"(1597), "Betrayal of Christ", "Christ Crowned with Thorns", the "Martyrdom of St. Matthew" (1599-1600), the "Crucifixion of St. Peter" (1600-01), the "Sacrifice to Abraham" (1603), "Doubting Thomas" (1600-02) (fig. 6), the "Entombment of Christ" (1603-04)(fig. 7), the "Crucifixion of St. Andrew'[1] (1607) , the "Flagellation of Christ"(1607), the "Beheading of St. John the Baptist"(1608), the "Burial of St. Lucy"(1608), the "Resurrection of Lazarus"(1609)(fig.8) the "Martyrdom of St. Ursula"(1610), the morbid, "Sleeping Cupid" (1608), and the final, horrible "David with the Head of Goliath"(1609-10) (fig. 9), all were done in the final decade of the artist's 'brief life, and offer a thought-provoking contrast to the earlier gentle eroticism.

Now, these subjects reflected the text of the day, and simply doing crucifixions and martyrdoms does not necessarily signify something about the artist; indeed, some were specified commissions. However, the grimness of the interpretation, the predominance of gory beheadings and open wounds such as in the "Doubting Thomas:" (fig. 6) and the "Entombment" (fig. 7), makes one wonder about Caravaggio's tastes and inclinations. It appears hard to reconcile these images with a sense of androgyny. But these elements of strangeness or perversity, if you will, do not exist in isolation but in combination with both the aforementioned erotic androgyny, as well as other elements which we will now examine.

There is something to be said regarding the persistent refrain of androgyny in Caravaggio's; work, even within the context of the violence, the darkness. For if his work moved

away from the explicit sexual androgyny of his youthful representations of young men, it began to reflect an androgynous quality of a more generalized, human nature, interwoven within his more violent, aggressive energy. Some of his finest pieces, those of his latest period, drew away at times from the violent and the strange, and embraced qualities which in contrast, could only be called "feminine". In the "Entombment" (fig. 7), the depiction of the dead Jesus, for all its realism, is filled with a sorrow, a tenderness, a sense of love and pity for the frailty of humanity. The fingering of the wound is the only hint of the bizarre element of Caravaggio 's nature.

The "Madonna di Loreto", the "St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness's'(1605-06 or 1610) (in the Borghese), the "St. John the Baptist" (in Kansas City), the "Madonna arid Child with St. Anne" (fig. 5 detail), while all employing the nude bodies of young males (representing that persistence of homoeroticism mentioned earlier) seem to blend a somewhat more veiled sexuality with a, gentle melancholy. Both the "Madonna di Loreto" and the "Madonna and Child; with St. Anne" explore female sexuality in relation to young male children. (Perhaps at this point Caravaggio was touching on the wounds left by his mother's early death).

Perhaps one of his greatest works, the "Death of the Virgin[1]"(1605-06) (fig. 10), is filled with a sense of the same tender sorrow, a profound mourning for the mortality of humanity and the fragility of spirit. From the womb-like red hangings enveloping the whole scene, to the submissive, introspective humility of the crowd of elderly men surrounding the dead woman, this painting reflects a kind of androgyny more akin to some of Kollwitz's[1] work than Mapplethorpe's. Although Caravaggio could not prevent his violence and strangeness from resurfacing, right up until his last horrific self-portrait (fig. 9), a more profound, asexual androgyny has become the dominant force in his later work. The beheadings, murders, martyrdoms, crucifixions

continue, but, as we saw, they were the iconography of his day, and a text he could not, or chose not to, stray from. However, the tenor changes. In the "Beheading of St. John the Baptist", there is a great deal of human pathos expressed; from the horrified figure of the old woman, to the sense of scale itself, with the oppressive, somber, enveloping space imparting a quality of passivity rather than active involvement. (This same sense of scale exists in the "Death of the Virgin" as well). The blood is there, but the tactile delight of the earlier pieces, the vigorous physicality, is gone. We are observers of tragedy, and our participation consists of mourning and repentance. The same mood and vision pervades in the "Burial of St. Lucy", the "Resurrection of Lazarus" (fig.8), the "Adoration of the Shepherds", and the "Martyrdom of St. Ursula". In the last, even as the king of the Huns pierces Ursula's breast with his arrow, there is a fleeting sense of self-knowledge and despair in his, face (fig. 11 detail), out of keeping with the story; the same quality that we find in David's expression in the last, terrible self-portrait. The head of the King of the Huns has a remarkable softness and humanness which begins to approach a Rembrandt.

It would be valuable to say a few words about Caravaggio's use of self-imagery. One can find his visage over and over, in documented and undocumented cases, throughout his oeuvre. In this, way, he was always a participant in the narrative of his paintings. With the documented self-portraits as a guide, we can peruse Caravaggio's paintings, and come up with image after image which resemble the heavily bearded face framed with dark hair, with the curved eyebrows, deep-set heavy-lidded eyes, straight nose, brow creased into a perpetual frown, and sour mouth. This extraordinary personal involvement seemed to underscore the more private messages in the works. It is true that one must be cautious in making such sweeping claims; after all, artist have often used their own self-images, as sources of information, as cheap models, and of course, unconsciously, the self-image can make its way into an artist's work. However,

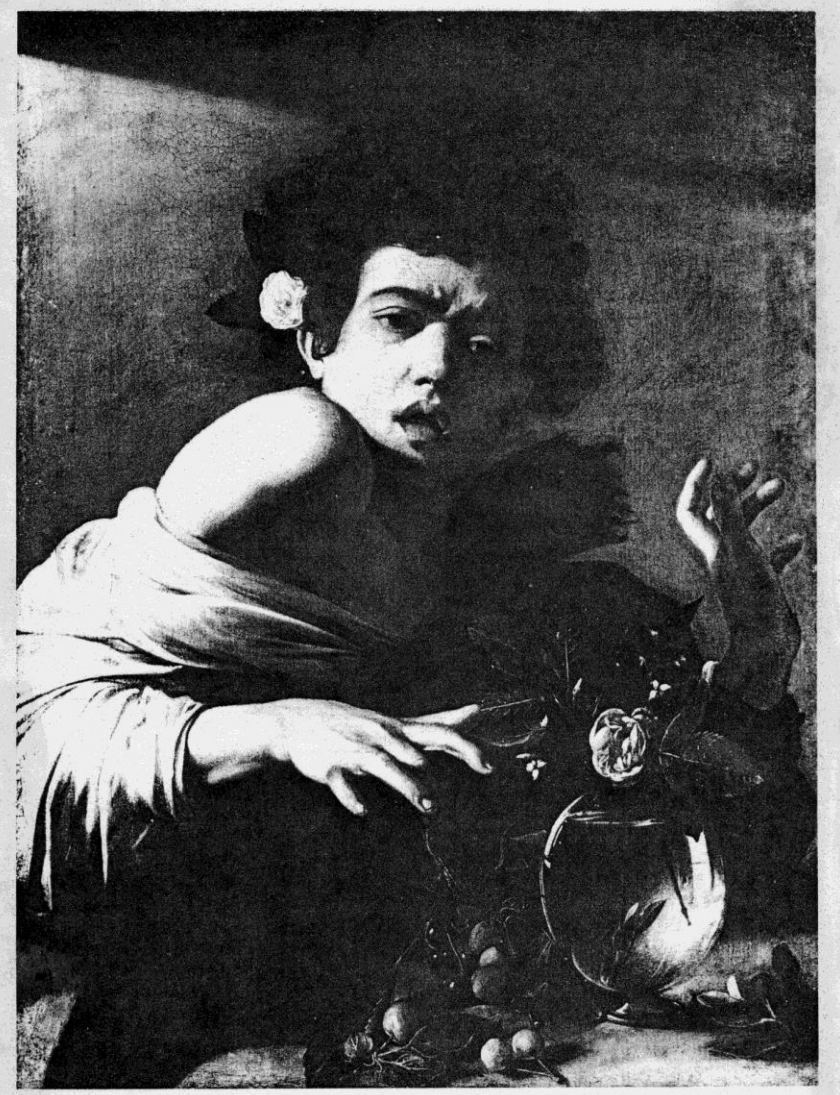
the persistence of Caravaggio's use of his own face, and the pattern of usage which begins to emerge, point to a significant involvement with self-portraiture within the works.

This use of self-portraiture moved from a youthful preoccupation with obvious sexuality in the "Bacchus" and the "Concert of Youths" (very early possible self-images), to a bold identification with the chosen in the "Ecstasy of St. Francis". Soon, however, the self-images began to connect with grim violence, and they grew darker with the years. He was beheaded first as Holofernes (1598-99), surrounded his features with snakes in "Medusa" (1597), was an onlooker during the "Betrayal of Christ", was an active participant in the torture in "Christ Crowned with Thorns", was King Hitacus observing the martyrdom which he had ordered,(1599-1600), was beheaded but alive in the Prado "David" (1605-16), watched directly over St. Ursula's shoulder as the arrow pierced her breast(1610), and finally, in a terrible expression of despair, was decapitated again, and held, knowing and alive, blood streaming from his severed neck, by an equally knowing, sorrowful image of his own youth.(fig. 9).(1610).

It is fascinating to comment that in ancient Celtic mythology, cutting off the head of an ogre, an evil enchanter, or a bewitching monster of some kind was the action which would break the enchantment and free the person held under its spell. Now it would be impossible, certainly, for Caravaggio, living in late sixteenth century Lombardy, and early seventeenth century Rome, to be touched by this mythology. However, there is, in that mythology, something more universal, and perhaps relevant to Caravaggio's imagery. After all, the myth of David and Goliath is very similar to the earliest Celtic myths; of the power of decapitation and triumph over evil.

Again, it seems difficult at first to juxtapose this violent self-imagery with the concept of androgyny, but I believe the last "David, with the Head of Goliath" (fig.9) gives us the key with which Caravaggio's androgyny can be comprehended. In this painting, the adolescent David, beautiful

and partly clothed, looks with compassion and heart-rending sorrow, at the head of Goliath which he grasps by the dark hair. Goliath, or Caravaggio, for it is he, is still alive; eyes and mouth open in an expression of deepest horror and despair. Blood streams from his severed neck. The diagonal downward thrust of David's sword echoes another diagonal in the upper left corner; perhaps a drape, or maybe a sad echo of Caravaggio's early "cellar light". At any rate, Caravaggio is there, in both David as well as Goliath. Beautiful, youthful "femininity" has finally met the aggressive, violent "masculinity", and both images are filled with a profound and mournful knowledge of loss. This dark picture is truly an androgynous lament, from, the depths of Caravaggio's soul.

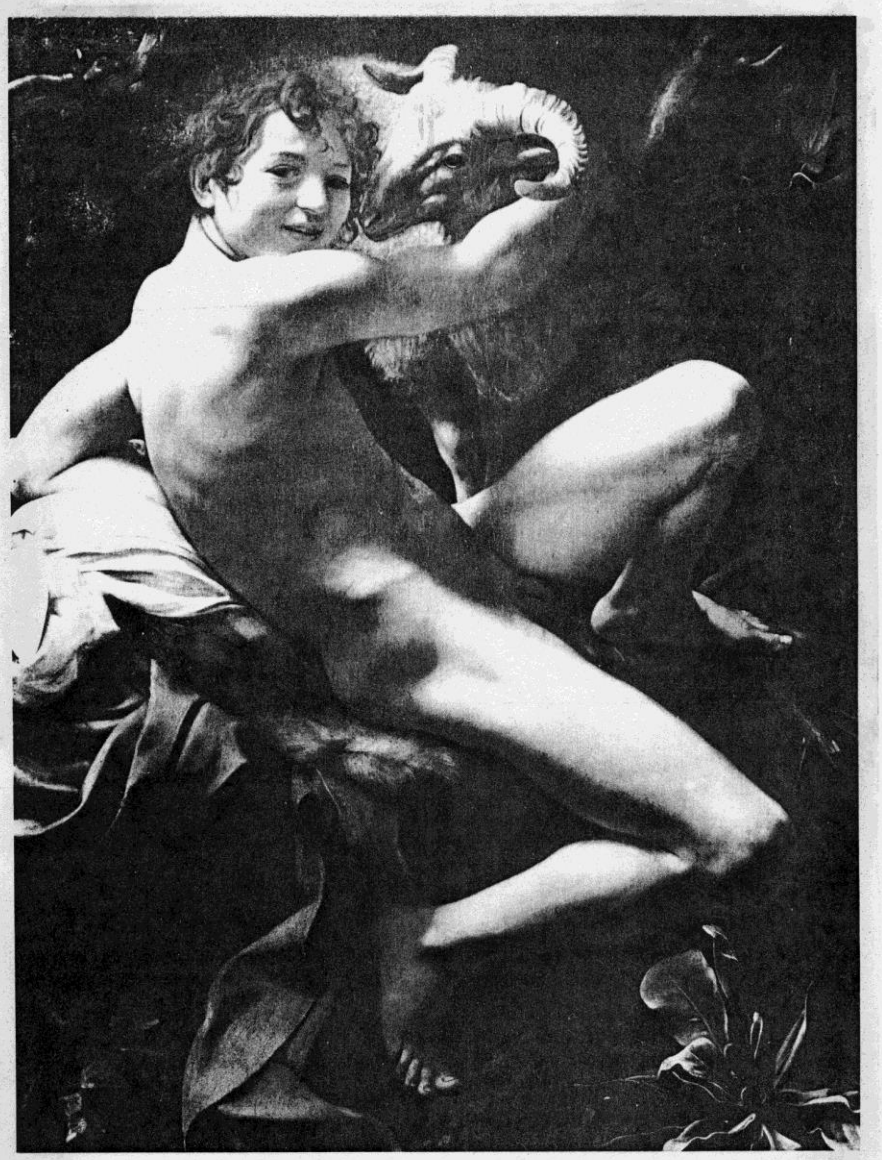


25. *Boy Bitten by a Lizard.* London, Korda Collection. c. 1596–97?

figure 1

29. *Rest on the Flight into Egypt.* Galleria Doria-Pamphili. c. 1594–95?

figure 2



96. *St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness* (?). Pinacoteca Capitolina. c. 1601–02.

figure 3

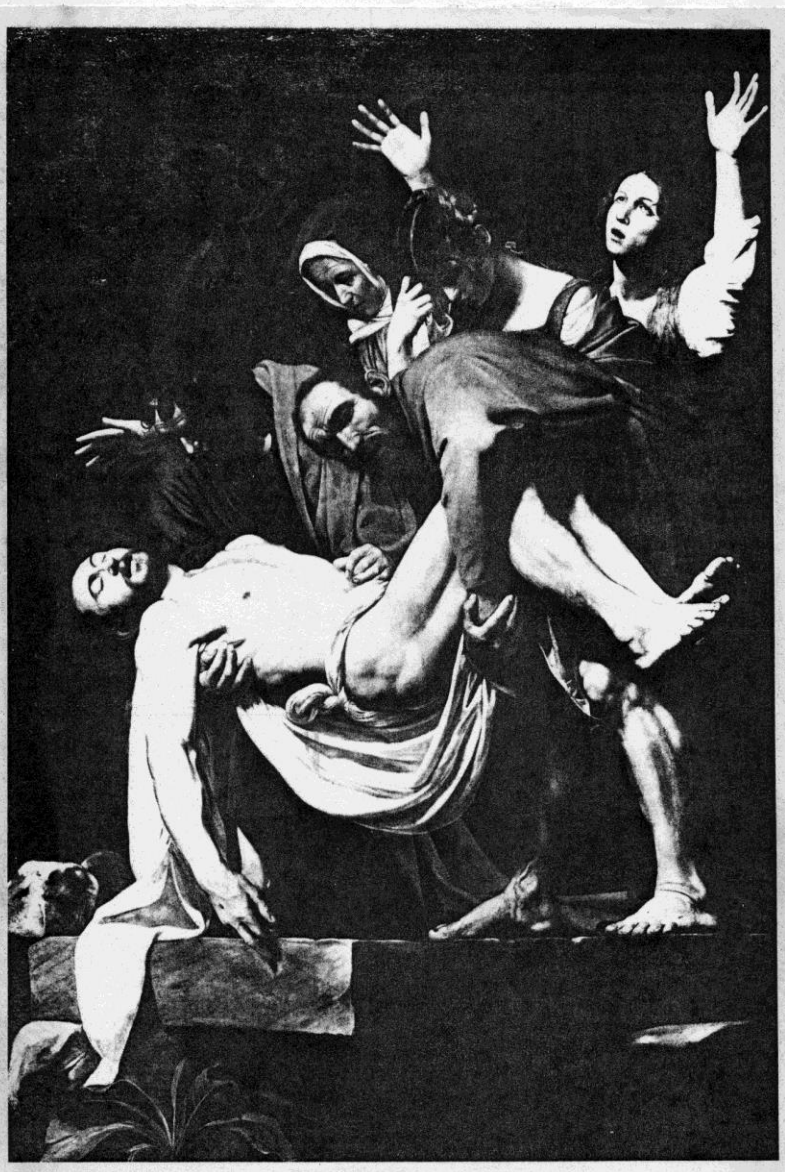
87. *Inspiration of St. Matthew.* Destroyed. 1602.

figure 4

figure5

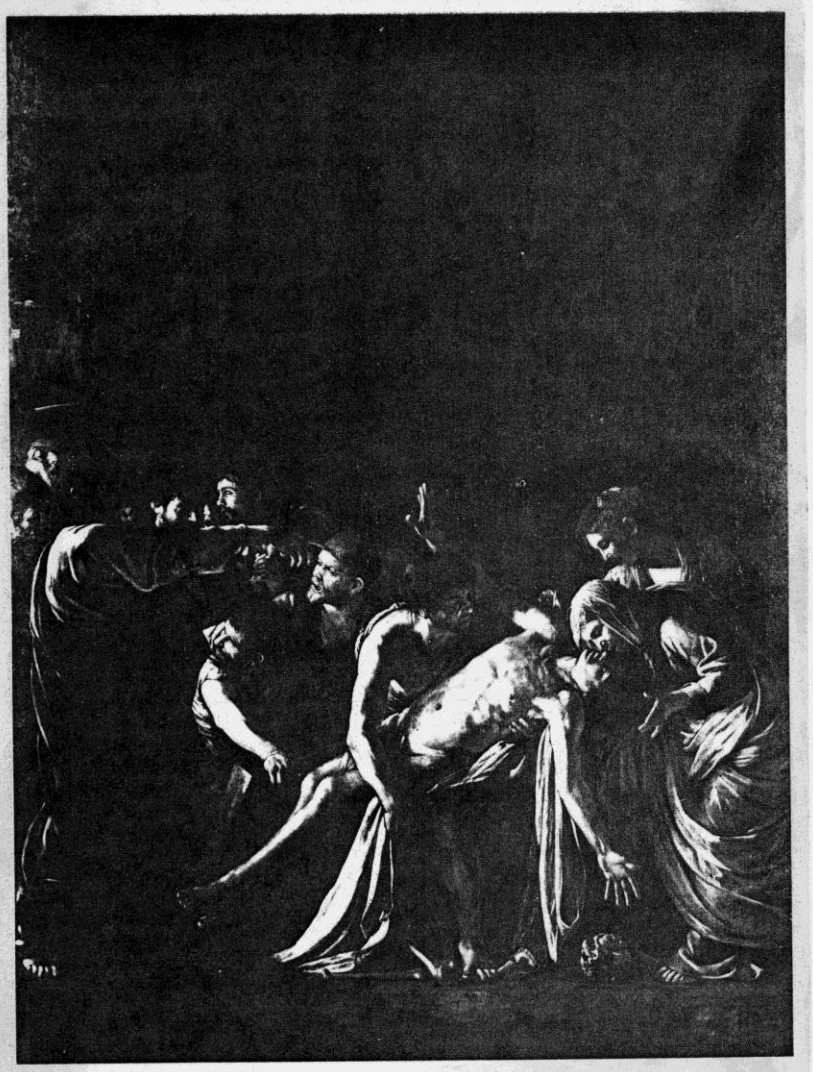
104. *Doubting Thomas.* Potsdam, Staatliche Schlösser und Gärten. c. 1602–03?

figure 6



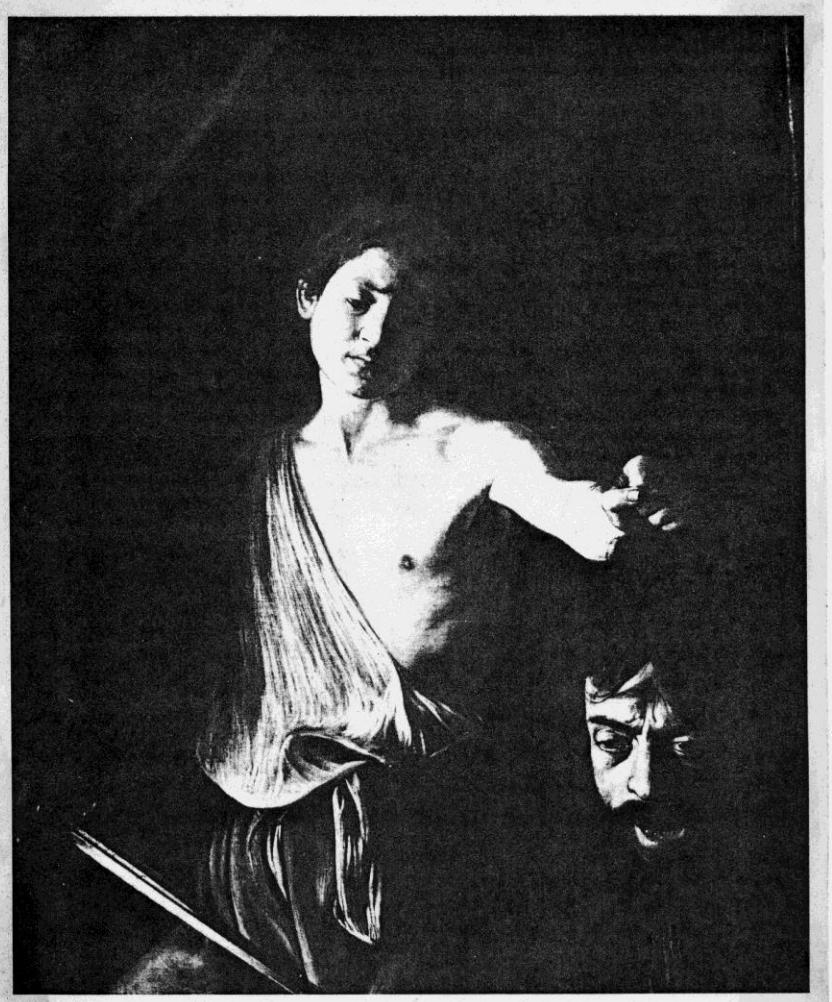
107. *Entombment of Christ.* Pinacoteca Vaticana. 1603–04.

figure 7



163. *Resurrection of Lazarus.* Messina, Museo. 1609.

figure 8



173. *David with the Head of Goliath.* Galleria Borghese. c. 1609–10?

figure 9

133. *Death of the Virgin.* Paris, Louvre. c. 1605–06.

figure 10

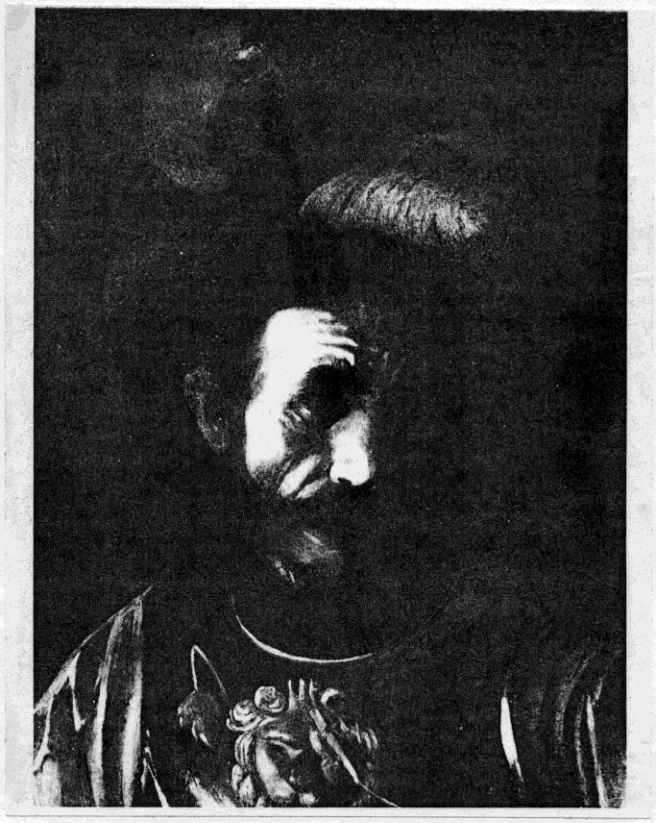


figure 11

NOTES

Walter Friedlander, "Caravaggio Studies". p.37-43
Howard Hibbard,"Caravaggio". p.219
Ibid (Friedlander). p.121-126
Hibbard. p. 53
Ibid. p. 55
Carol Zemel, seminar lecture.
Hibbard. p. 151-152

I approached Mapplethorpe not knowing what I would find. His strange blend of sexual defiance and stark beauty attracted me, and he seemed a logical subject for investigation in regards to the study of androgyny. An open mind will bear the fruit of unforeseen conclusions, and the inevitable comparison to Caravaggio reasserted itself in my mind, as I examined Mapplethorpe's images. The conclusions which followed surprised and excited me; for they stretched much farther than these two artists, so similar in content, yet so dissimilar in vision.

At first it seemed a certainty that Mapplethorpe's work reflected a strong sense of androgyny; after all, the content of the work struck a powerful pose of sexual ambiguity, from the first to the last. His early collaged work, his homosexual sadomasochistic images, his work with Lisa Lyon the female body builder, his self-portraits, his infamous and controversial Black nudes, his seductive flowers, and many of his portraits, dealt with sexuality, gender, and a defiance (sometimes roguish, sometimes much darker), in the face of the norm.

Yet as Caravaggio's text was not, in finality, his vision, neither is Mapplethorpe's. This work is less about sensuality, or even sexuality, than it is about objectifying the strange, and Mapplethorpe's obsessive need to achieve that, over and over again. In this sense, all the talk about his quest for perfection is precisely on target. Janet Kardin, in her introduction to the newest text on Mapplethorpe, "Robert Mapplethorpe, The Perfect Moment", comments, "Mapplethorpe uses the medium of photography to translate flowers, stamen, stares, limbs, as well as erect sexual organs, into objects d'art". She continues, and is telling in her choice of words (the underlining is mine), "Dramatic lighting and precise composition democratically pulverize their diversities and convert them into

homogeneous statements...different subjects, one feels, do not alter the essence of his photographs, the perfection with which he cloaks every subject."*1*

There is a morbidity to his work, which struck me again and again; sex without ecstasy, flowers without innocence, intimacy yielding only cool distance and a myriad of angst-laden emotions. The frames lined with voluptuously colored cloth, at first seem simply erotic in a decadent style, but upon deeper analysis, actually are funereal, with their black borders and velvet beds.

Mapplethorpe's flowers, post-0'Keefe, post-Freudian, are not unpremeditated, and thus, are often forced, spoiled, self-conscious. There are some exceptions. The color work, when it doesn't succumb to a commercial thinness, can be extraordinarily beautiful and sensual, the color, in large part, contributing to the sensuality. One magnificent example is "Poppy", whose closed, adjacent bud is uncanny in its resemblance to a soft testicle, and whose snake-like, entwining stems, softly covered with hairs which the glow of the light picks up, are stunningly alive, (fig. 1). In another piece (black and white) entitled "Tulips" (fig. 2), the framing, decadent and funereal as it is, somehow does something to bring an unearthly power to the already haunting image. When they do succeed, the flowers give us Mapplethorpe's sinister edge; his contemporary vision. (He declared, and he is right, that they were not "fun" flowers).*2*

Much is said of his sense of timelessness, and it is true that he aims to push this illusion to its zenith by reaching for the quiddity of his subjects. Yet his frank distain for art forms which take time, betray the force with which time imposes itself upon his life's experience. It is true that the camera is an apt tool for such a vision, and the fact that he initially embraced the Polaroid and the fact that he at no time did his own darkroom work are in harmony with his artistic nature. Yet, ultimately, what one

does not experience, one cannot express; it can only be feigned, or achieved with a degree of superficiality. What Mapplethorpe attempts to do in this regard, has been done by so many photographers already (Edward Weston, Irving Penn, and many others) that this quality seems to be an inevitable fruit of a certain kind of photographic vision. Additionally, Mapplethorpe, along with much of this culture, confuses the transitory with the timeless.

Claims are often made that the active concern with the creative presentation turns the viewer into a participant by engaging the viewer in an interaction with surface. Actually the contrary can be true. By keeping the viewer fixated upon the surface, the viewer never manages to pass through that visual turnstile into the image, for a greater, more significant involvement. More significant, that is, unless the surface engagement is the point (which is so often the case in "post-modern" art).

A good comparison may be made "between "Bill, New York" (1976-77) (fig. 3) and "Man in Polyester Suit", (1980) (fig. 4). Both are about, among other things, penises. It can be said that the arrangement of the two images of hand-held erect penises into a "triptych" format in "Bill", mirror filling the center frame, has a point: viewer as voyeur, viewer as participant, viewer's reaction as part of the piece itself, etc. However, all of these things could be said with equal conviction, about the latter print. This potent, and unsettling image is even more confrontational, more demanding of the viewer than the earlier piece, with the reassuring distance of all its self-conscious surface play.

Of course the presentation of environment has always been a concern in art. Caravaggio made use of placement in his "Conversion of St. Paul" in the Cerasi Chapel, for example, planning his painting so that the light streaming through the window above coincided with the light source (God) in the painting. Bernini pulled out all the stops, in his presentation of St. Teresa, where statues of the patrons filled the audience

and gilt shafts of light streamed down from God as Teresa gasped in ecstasy. One wonders about the Bernini, but one wonders with perhaps greater anxiety, about postmodernism.

The works Mapplethorpe did in the early seventies, emerging out of his experimental, conceptually oriented background, were "pieces" more than "images", (just as the Bernini orchestration could be called theatre, rather than sculpture). Mapplethorpe was still primarily a manipulator of fragments. The whole purported to be more than the sum, so to speak. Gradually, however, a shift begins to take place, and the persistent sensitivity to presentation becomes just that; a sensitive presentation harmonious with the image; the latter undeniably taking precedence over the former. The frames, the decadent velvet, serve to enhance, underscore, remind, comment upon the image, and of course, make it more beautiful. In "Robert Mapplethorpe" by Richard Marshall and put out by the Whitney in 1988, the prints reproduced from the eighties often do not include frames; we do not know whether those images have the characteristic frames or not. The clear implication is that the images can stand alone, and they do.

As Mapplethorpe's work moved away from object as manipulated parts, the imagery itself became obsessed with object; nude as object ("Phillip Prioleau, N.Y.C.", 1979, poised atop a pedestal) (fig.5); flowers as object ("Tulip", 1988)(fig. 6); sitters as object.(Paloma Picasso, 1980, gilded with her jewelry and her name, along with just about all of his other upper crust portraiture)(fig.7); sensuality objectified (just about every one of his images of Ken Moody)(fig. 8); sexuality objectified ("Man in Polyester Suit" (fig. 4), "Mark Stevens, Mr. 10½" (fig. 9), and his countless other penis pictures); Mapplethorpe objectified (his self-portraits exploring various self-images and labels; self in drag (fig. 10), self with horns, with whip in ass, with machine gun (fig. 11), etc.)

Although every person, whether in black-leather get-up, nude, or posed for portraiture, is named in the titles, the

reality of the image belies that gesture. These are not people, they are actors. In fact, Mapplethorpe has almost always managed to draw out the actor or actress in his subjects, making them partners in his charade.

There are some exceptions; the fantastic portrait of Louise Bourgeoise holding a phallic sculpture under her arm and grinning like the devil (fig. 12); the ethereal portrait of Alice Neel near death; the picture of Bill Jones, poised, light and swift, eyes closed, dancing (interestingly, one of the few black males not nude, but done in portraiture); and the haunting image of Mapplethorpe himself, clutching a staff topped with a skull, his own approaching death looming large in his eyes. (fig.13). Then there is also the picture of the little girl "Rosie" (retitled, provocatively, "Honey", in "The. Perfect Moment") a veil of troubled incomprehension clouding her eyes as she unknowingly exposes her tiny vagina to the camera's eye. This is an extremely disturbing and revealing print; and is a high price to pay, perhaps, for obtaining truth.

Actually, Mapplethorpe's other photographs of children, most of them self-possessed and privileged (as are most of his portrait subjects), offer a real insight into the artifice which permeates his work. The children are posed, they are false. He plays with that falseness, apparently, in "Sam and Max Sullivan" (1981). Two white boys, with dull, penetrating adult gazes, point and look off afar; the older boy's arm encircles the younger in a thoroughly unconvincing gesture of protective friendship. In "Sebastian and Nda" (also 1981), one can only begin to guess what Mapplethorpe had in mind, as the smaller Black boy is frozen in the act of slapping the white boy; again, the artifice is so strong as to not possibly be accidental. "Sarabelle Miller", a young girl at the piano, again, is frozen and silent. She sits at the huge piano, in her full dress and elegant slippers, poised, face hidden, remote. There is something truly unnerving about Mapplethorpe's imposition of his

vision upon children. One almost feels that a stronger taboo has been broken here than in all his, sexual explorations, childhood symbolizing innocence of artifice.

It is telling that Mapplethorpe had recently returned to statues; marble (Apollo, 1988) (fig.14), and nineteenth century bronze. In the "Apollo, chosen for the cover of the Whitney book, one almost feels more blood, more softness, than in all Mapplethorpe's exploration of flesh. It is perhaps a significant and sad note to end on; an artist who objectified people throughout all his work, could perhaps only find life in objects.

It is obvious that something outrages in Mapplethorpe's work; not, ultimately, his bold sexuality (which is one of his strengths). The early preoccupation with presentation and surface manipulation is shallow, but as mentioned earlier, this finds a certain harmony with his images as the work matures. Rather, it is something in the images themselves, which leaves one feeling betrayed.

After looking at Mapplethorpe for hours and hours, I am sated; weary of penises, of obsession, of the constant pretense, formality, and artifice; of the lack of softness. Although he works with a text of gender issues, Mapplethorpe really does not use androgyny. There is not a hint of the "feminine" in him; his vision is solely of the strange. His beauty, be it nude or flowers, his truth, be it of personage or form, is cold, bloodless, objective; the quintessence of post-modernism, and really, extremely "masculine".

And so, parenthetically, is the post-modern age, in the last analysis, an entirely "masculine" one? Is that why the post-modern field is so dominated by men? Have those few women artists who are the current post-modern starlets been coopted into giving up their "feminine" half, to transform themselves into the "masculine", in order to communicate in this epoch?

How different than Caravaggio, who, in early erotic works, dealt with "feminine" men, (the gender crossing of

his era), with the ripe, lush eroticism of 'blooming flowers, and later, expanded to a larger tragic vision; also dark, but very full. Is it the medium (painting versus photography), or the era which makes Caravaggio's imagery so human, and Mapplethorpe's so cold? Or were their visions formed by their positions in the societies: in which they lived; Mapplethorpe as fringe, Caravaggio as mainstream? Or is it, as I, in conclusion, assert, the very nature of these different cultures themselves, which molds such similar natures into such antithetical artists; turn of the sixteenth-seventeenth century Rome being truly androgynous, and our turn of the century culture, entirely, and unhappily, "masculine".

figure 1

POPPY 1988

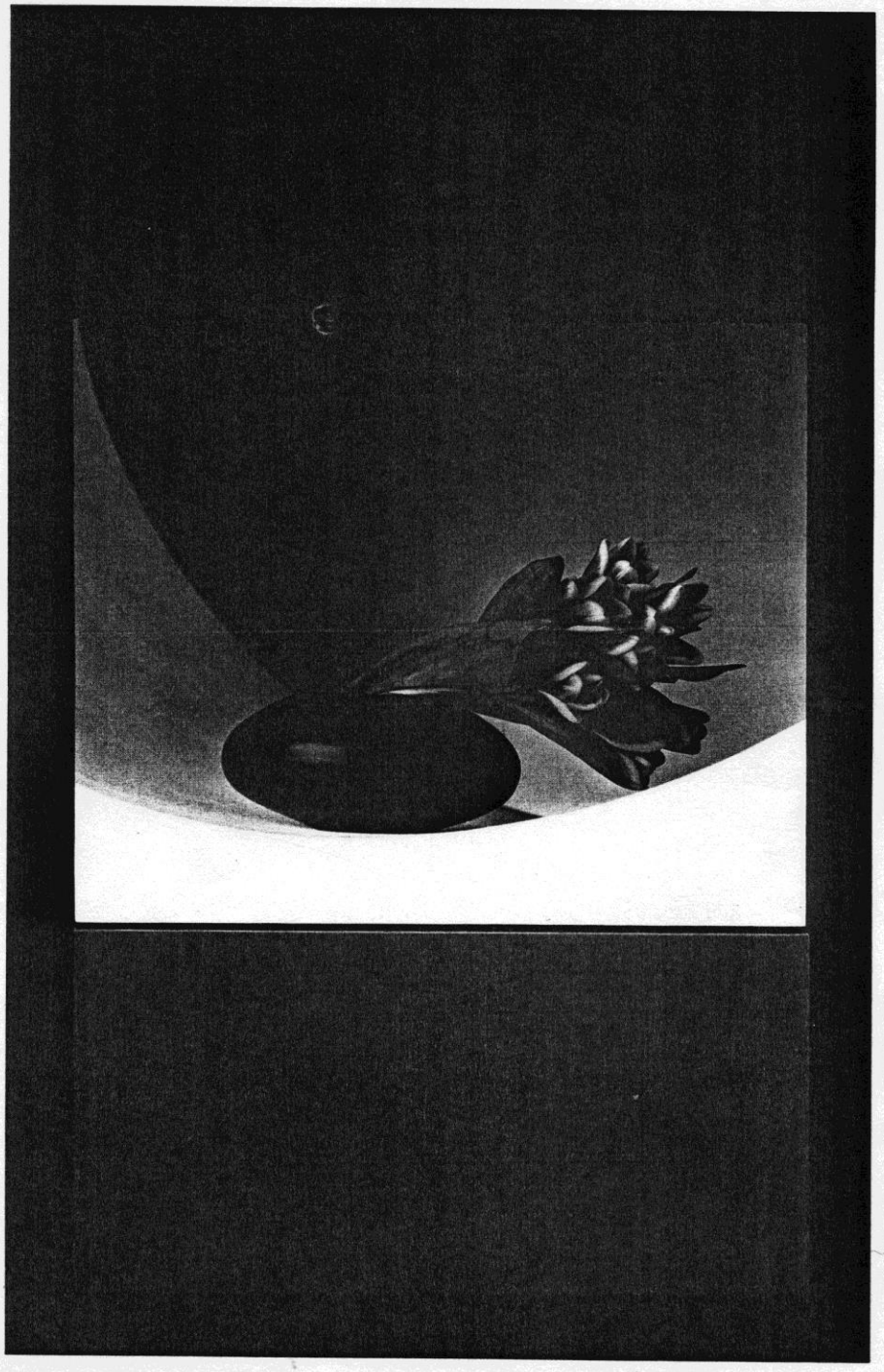


figure 2

TULIPS 1987

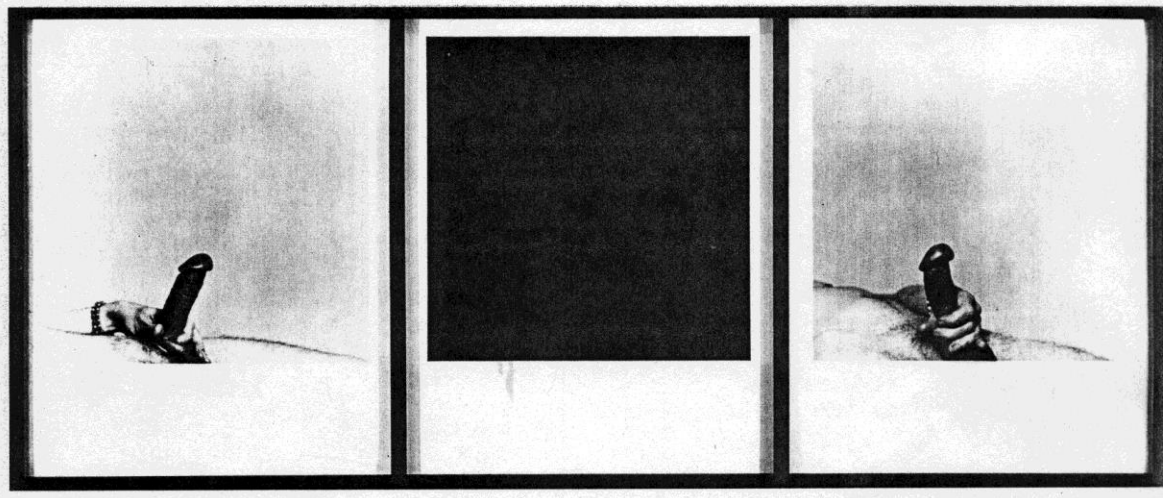
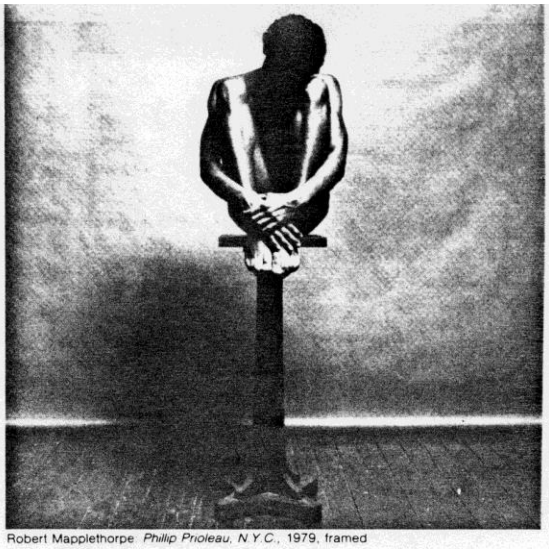


figure 3

BILL, NEW YORK 1976-77

figure 4

MAN IN POLYESTER SUIT 1980



Robert Mapplethorpe *Phillip Prioleau, N.Y.C.*, 1979, framed

figure 5

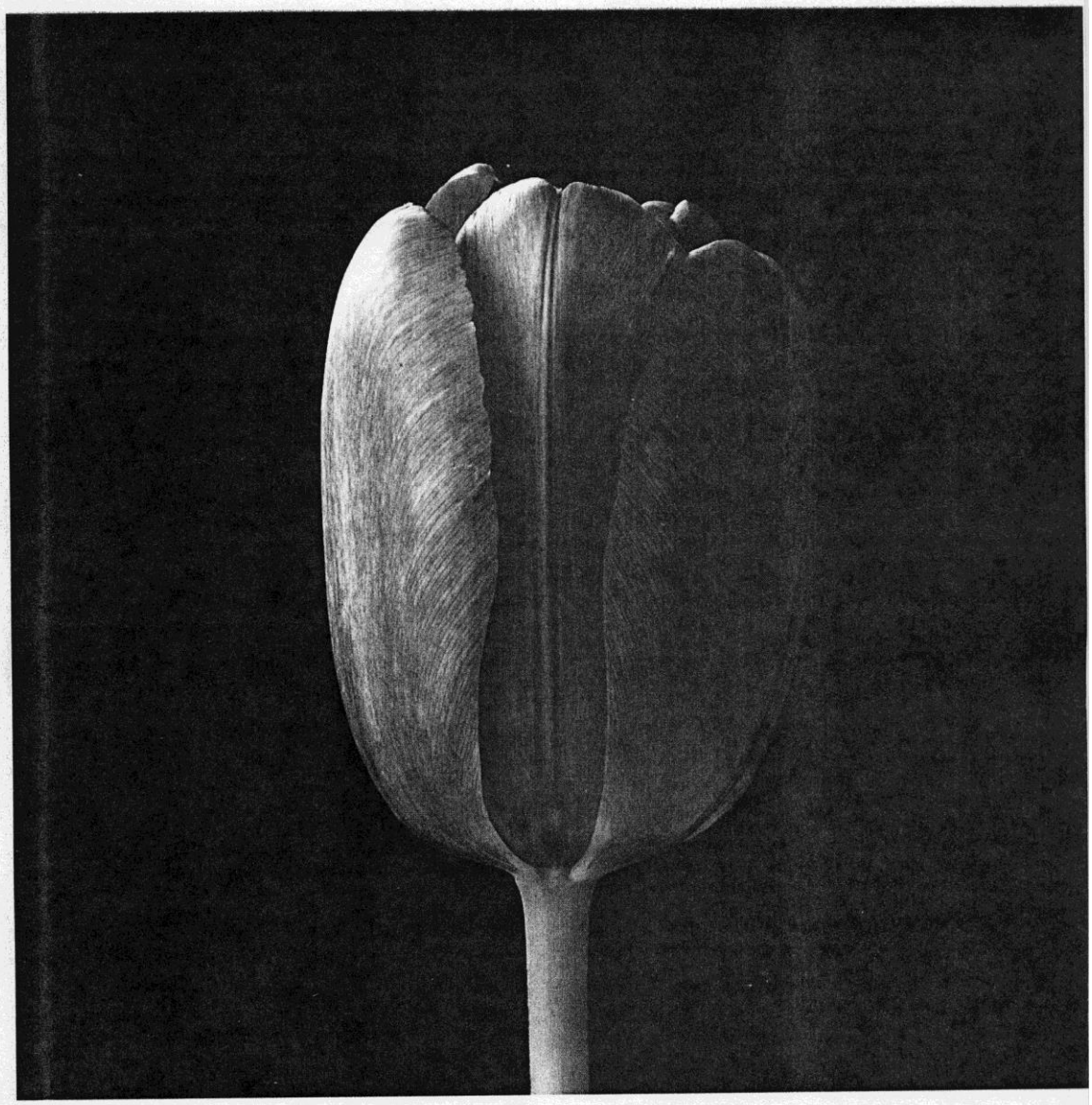


figure 6

TULIP 1988

figure 7

PALOMA PICASSO 1980

figure 9

MARK STEVENS (MR. 10½), 1976

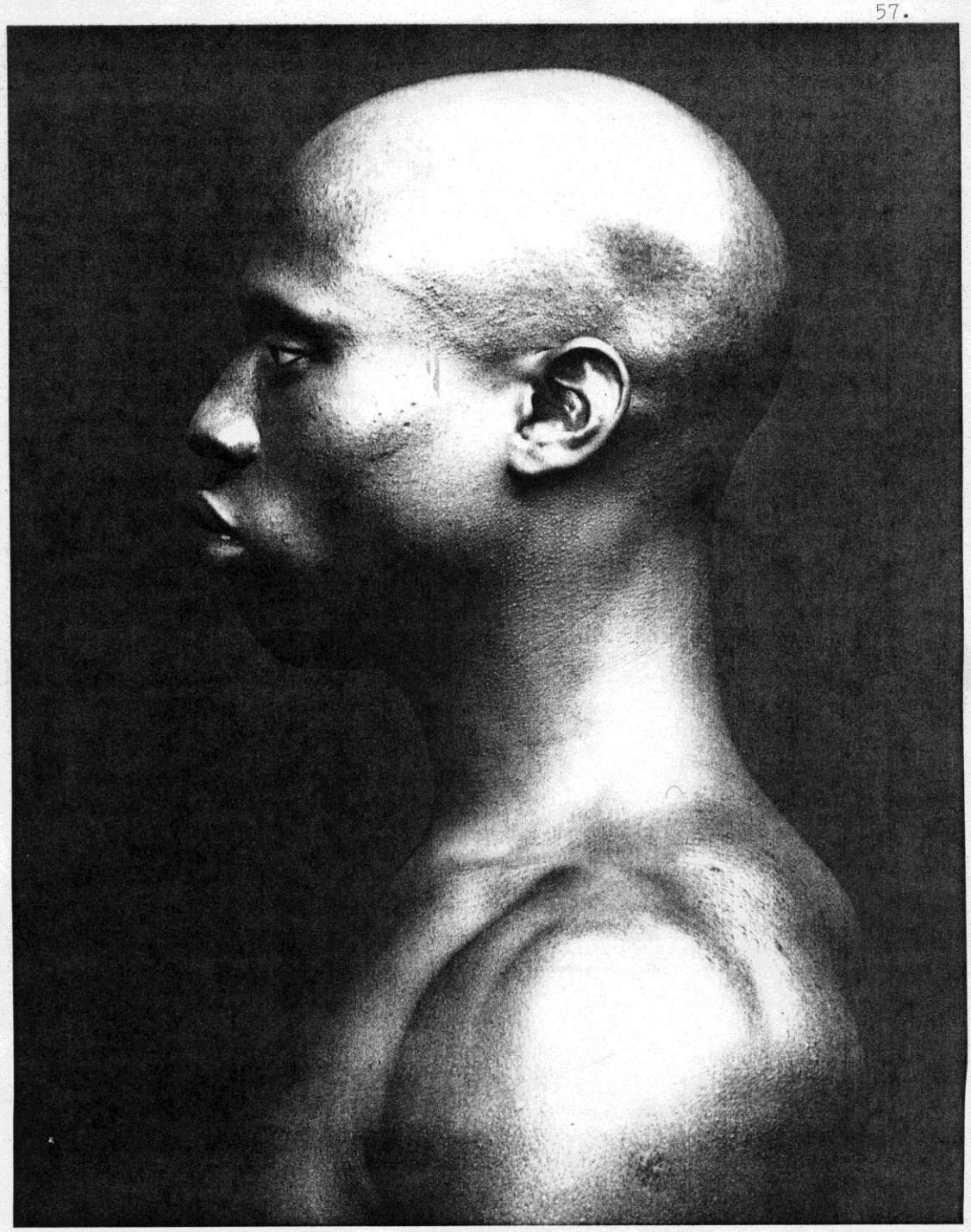


figure 8

KEN MOODY 1983

figure 12

LOUISE BOURGEOIS, 1982

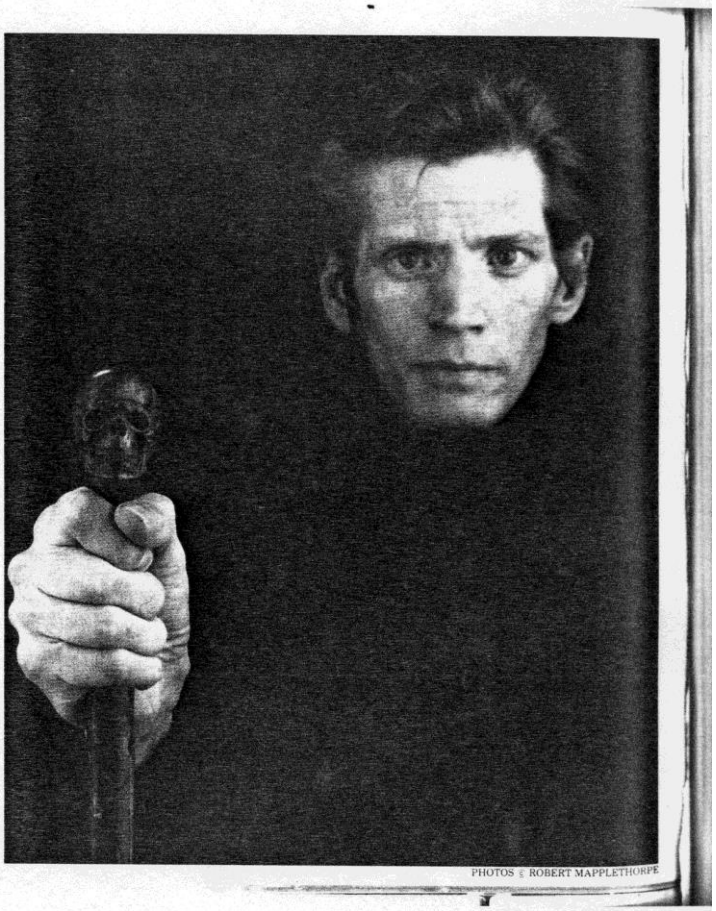


figure 13

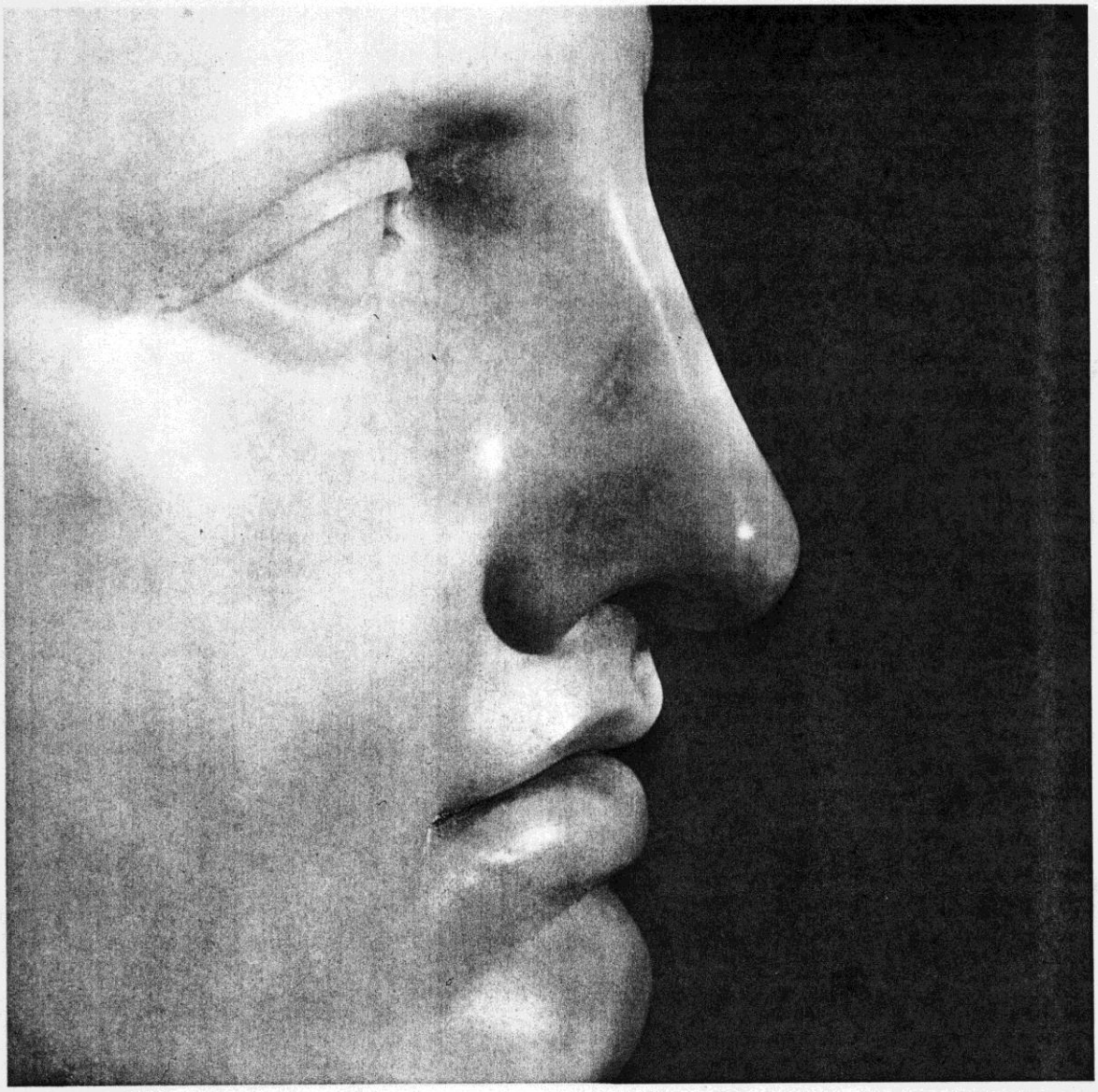


figure 14

APOLLO 1988

NOTES

Janet Kardin, "The Perfect Moment. introduction

Ibid., interview with Mapplethorpe and Kardin.

This paper, of necessity, has been something of an overview, picking and choosing particular artists, and particular works with intent to raise questions and begin challenges, rather than to resolve and conclude. Much has been omitted in the way of biographical detail, psychological probing, and artistic scrutiny. Comparisons between the three artists selected have been fairly elementary, and could, be pursued with even greater depth.

On the other hand, this survey has provided, me with a great deal of understanding about the nature of the artist in relationship to society, the impact of sexuality upon the artist and art, and finally, my own position, as artist in those regards. Specifically, the issue of androgyny has proven a sharp and effective tool for probing of those issues.

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