

Camille O'Grady as Muse

Gay men often find women who add another facet to their lives. I first met Camille O'Grady on a cold January night in New York, before she moved to San Francisco. I was visiting Luc, who had decided to give New York a whirl after he returned from France. He introduced Camille and me at a leather *boite*, the Mineshaft.

Camille, dealing her gypsy cards, planned to follow friend Larry Hunt (a Robert Mapplethorpe model later murdered in L.A.), to San Francisco. Luc suggested a photo shoot once Camille was settled on the West Coast. She agreed. Over a year had passed and I still hadn't set up the shoot with her.

Camille had become to Robert Opel what Patti Smith was to Robert Mapplethorpe. She was crashing with Robert Opel in the living quarters behind Fey-Way Studios. Luc had given up on New York and was staying, for the time being, with me on Clementina.

I felt a tad uneasy approaching la grande Camille for a session. I wanted to use the shots I did of her in a one-man show the Ambush had offered me. I didn't want my approach to Camille, Queen of the Punks, to weaken my relationship with Robert Opel and his Fey-Way Studios. Luc had a solution.

"Camille is trying to establish herself on the West Coast as a singer, a poet, like Jim Morrison, whom she worships," he said. "You need to offer her a package she can't resist and let her sell it to Robert Opel, who considers himself her Svengali." Luc was often a study in *noir*.

"How do I do that?"

"Invite her over to Clementina. Tell her I'm staying here now. She and I haven't seen each other in over a year."

"Then what?"

“Buy a fifth of Southern Comfort. She loves Southern Comfort.”

I bought a fifth of Southern Comfort. We all fucking loved Southern Comfort.

First we agreed the photos I took of Camille would be the foundation of my show at the Ambush. We also agreed that Larry Hunt would be allowed to shoot the setups I did of Camille, with his camera, for her personal publicity kit. Luc was uneasy with this, but I agreed.

It was also arranged for Camille to perform live in the Ambush at the opening reception of my photo show there. What sealed the deal was a three-by-four-foot close-up of Camille that would dominate the show. Since Robert Opel already had shows booked at his Fey-Way Studios into the summer of 1979, there was no problem.

The day of Camille's shoot my flat on Clementina was bedlam. I had draped heavy black velvet, once part of a theater curtain, both up the wall and onto the floor in a nook next to the fireplace. Here I could get smoky light from the streaked unwashed bay window, intense hot light from two theater spotlights mounted on the ceiling, as well as focused light from clip-spots on a tripod. Props were ready. Most I hadn't used before. They included a human skull I'd picked up at an occult shop on upper Divisadero Street near the Haight, a nickel-plated gambler's pistol that had belonged to my great-grandfather Thornton, a square bronze bell a friend of mine had cast in Colorado, an antique leather-bound edition of Byron's *Childe Harold* I'd found in a used bookstore on Clark Street in Chicago, and my grandmother Stewart's tall walnut candlestick, with beeswax dripping from a small stub of a candle.

They all would work as props for Camille's dark Irish beauty. Camille herself was busy expertly applying makeup with soft brushes as her multiple bracelets and necklaces jingled like the lifetime wealth of a Celtic gypsy. She was dragged out all in black, with a beautiful black silk fringed shawl from the 1920s of Isadora Duncan draped over her shoulders.

Larry Hunt, unaware he would later fall prey to a serial killer

in L.A.'s Griffith Park, was busy tweaking his own camera equipment. He had been instructed to keep out of my way but could take as many shots of Camille as he liked.

Tom Hinde, a great artist whose work had been in shows both at the Ambush and Fey-Way Studios, suddenly showed up unannounced in full leathers. Tom and I had had sessions in The Other Room but never with a camera. Tom Hinde was a fuck-buddy of Jack Fritscher's as well as one of his Super-8 film models. Fritscher had dubbed Hinde a mystic. Tom wanted to watch me shoot. With a camera.

I could see this shooting session would go into part two and last all day. This was great. Luc was being especially helpful as my gofer. The phone rang.

"It's Joelle," Luc said, as he held out the long-corded receiver from the kitchen.

"I'll be right there," I said, as I headed down the hall. I hadn't seen Joelle for weeks but this was not a good time to chat.

"What am I up to?" I repeated into the receiver. "Well," I said, "I have this little *chanteuse* from Manhattan and I'm about to begin shooting some very San Francisco pictures of her."

"Better not let Camille hear you call her a little *chanteuse* or she might walk out on you," Luc whispered.

"What kind of pictures?" Joelle needled over the phone. "For feelthy postcards?"

"Yeah, feelthy pictures that predict her future. I'll leave the rest up to your imagination. Gotta go."

The photo session spun through a dozen rolls of film. Camille gave me everything she had and I harvested what I wanted. I was able to capture on film several high-contrast black-and-white shots of Camille with subtle allusions to mythology, religion, witchcraft, death, and a hidden hint of kinky sex. What more could I want from a single session? From a single model? Once Camille left, and Luc Alexandre and Larry Hunt headed out for beers, Tom Hinde and I initiated our session in The Other Room.

It started as a photo shoot setup with black-leather hood, motorcycle jacket, and open-crotch chaps with Tom's cock and balls posed atop two human skulls. This I captured on film.

Tactics and sensuality turned to cigarette burns and razor blades. This I did not capture on film.

A week later Tom gave me one of his new pencil sketches featuring red and blue scars when I gave him proof sheets of our session. I still have that Tom Hinde original. It exists in an ecstatic world beyond Tom of Finland and Go Mishima.

Opening night the Ambush was packed for Camille's performance. My photos of Camille and Daddy Doug sold well. It was the first time I featured a female model. The three-foot by four-foot closeup of "Camille as Atropos," the ancient Greek fate ready to cut your thread of life, remained unsold. Too *vagina dentata*.

Later that spring of 1979, Robert Opel came over to Clementina one afternoon. He was thinking of starting a magazine called *Cocksucker*. He wanted to know if I had any good photo illustrations for such a publication. I did. I pulled out some candid shots I had taken one Sunday afternoon when Sheldon Kovalski and I were fooling around in a secluded area of Golden Gate Park out near the Pacific.

Before we knew it, Robert Opel and I were fooling around. I pulled out my camera. Quite unintentionally we started an informal photo shoot. Everything we did was art. He asked, almost wheedling me, about the human skull and nickel-plated gambler's pistol I'd used in the Camille shoot. I got them out. I captured a few shots of Robert fooling around with the pistol. Then I shot a few of Robert Opel, like Hamlet, contemplating the skull.

Little did I know to read the portents. Little did Robert Opel know that, less than a hundred days later, with Camille tied up on the floor at his side, he would be murdered. Assassinated. Shot to death in Fey-Way Studios. Camille would escape to go live underground.

Not too long after the photo session with Robert Opel, during that rainy winter, suddenly—I don't know why—I fled the vibes of Clementina Street, like Christopher Isherwood fleeing Berlin, fearing perhaps the speed trip, the speed trap of the 1970s, fleeing SoMa on instinct, and moved up to the Russian River, 69 miles north of San Francisco in Sonoma County.

I scored a job at the Russian River Lodge, remodeling tourist

rooms. In the communal room one night, in May, on the 21st, we watched the news coverage of the “White Night Riots.” This was the evening of the afternoon a minimal “manslaughter” sentence was handed down to ex-cop, ex-fireman and ex-supervisor Dan White for the assassination of Mayor Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk.

We watched as TV nightly news showed gays rioting in front of City Hall, six blocks from Clementina Street. Twelve cop cars were set ablaze. The rioters headed for Castro Street. The cops followed, removed their badges, and had their own riot, stomping down Castro Street, beating everyone in their path. The cops chased gay men, straight women, and anyone else they saw into bars, beating them over the tables, in the bathrooms, where 20 people were crammed, suffocating, into spaces meant for one.

A few days after the “White Night Riot,” I got a call from Robert Opel. For a performance piece, he wanted to borrow, as a prop, the antique gambler’s pistol I had used in the photo shoots of both him and Camille. I had no idea where it was since I had packed most of my stuff and put it in storage when I subleased my flat and ran to the River.

In response to the farcical trial of Dan White, Robert Opel announced to all and sundry that he was staging a mock execution of Dan White. It was to take place after the June 1979 Gay Pride Parade, in front of City Hall, where the “White Night Riot” had occurred. I myself did not see Robert Opel’s performance piece where he, costumed as “gay Justice,” shot “Dan White” to death.

Two weeks after the Gay Pride Parade, on the night of July 7, 1979, two men entered Fey-Way Studios and, in front of Camille O’Grady and Anthony Rogers, shot Robert Opel to death. Like Akira Kurosawa’s 1950 film *Rashomon*, there was much freak-out and gossip over exactly what had happened. Robert Opel had been murdered, no doubt about that. Was it a political assassination or a drug deal gone wrong? Did it involve drug dealers or murder for hire? Or San Francisco cops? Who was behind it? The alleged killers were arrested, “escaped” and then picked up again.

Camille O’Grady and Anthony Rogers went underground.

Others fled the City, following in the stampede that had carried me out of town. Where gays were once safe, suddenly we no longer felt safe. American culture was in full tilt.

As in all good horror stories, sometime later I ran into Anthony Rogers at the Rusty Nail, a gay roadhouse near Forestville, on River Road. I took him home. We fucked. He stayed with me a few days in my cabin under the redwoods up Canyon One just outside the village of Rio Nido. Then one day he was gone. I never saw him again.

I saw Camille O'Grady only once again, briefly. I had crashed at some long forgotten trick's place on a quick trip down from the Russian River to the City, which took me back to Clementina Street and another man's flat.

In the morning, as we were having coffee and cigarettes, Camille emerged from behind a closed bedroom door wearing only a man's permanent-press blue button-down oxford-cloth shirt. She was like Venus rising from the semen. I wanted to reach for my camera but—bad artist!—I had left it up at the River.

Following her out of the bedroom was an extremely handsome naked man I had never seen before. He gave her a loud slap on the bare ass with his big hetero hand, as he kissed her.

"What a crack," Camille said.

"That's what I thought last night," he said.

She turned and kissed him back.

My three-by-four-foot blow-up of "Camille as Atropos," the Fate of Death, hung for awhile in the Balcony Bar on Market Street. It hung longer in a private collection on Kissling Street, three blocks from Clementina. Then it disappeared forever, as did much gay art during the AIDS holocaust of the 1980s and 1990s.

The 1979 loss of Robert Opel to an assassin's bullet was more than the loss of a friend, a member of the leather community, an inventive artist. Robert Opel's death also spelled the death of Fey-Way Studios, a showcase for homomascuine artistic endeavors, a part of the SoMa Salon Jack Fritscher continued to build through *Drummer*.

The loss of Robert Opel was emblematic of the loss the greater gay community was about to experience 12 months later when the

fates suddenly caused our community to drop like flies.

Because of that art salon on Clementina, and because of all of us knowing one another's works, one of the shots I had taken of Robert Opel—when he and I were fooling jackanapes with my nickel-plated pistol, the skull, and my camera that spring day in 1979—became part of the Robert Opel legend. Jack Fritscher published my “Robert Opel with Skull” with Opel's obituary in *Drummer*, issue Number 31, 1979. It was seen around the world. It was a pictograph of the way we were. Of what once was.

Decades later, in 2010, the photos “Robert Opel with Skull” and “Camille O'Grady with Skull” were hung at SF Camerawork in “An Autobiography of the San Francisco Bay Area, Part 2: The Future Lasts Forever.”



Three Toilets

“Double Exposure,”

Open Studio Gallery Invitation, October, 1978

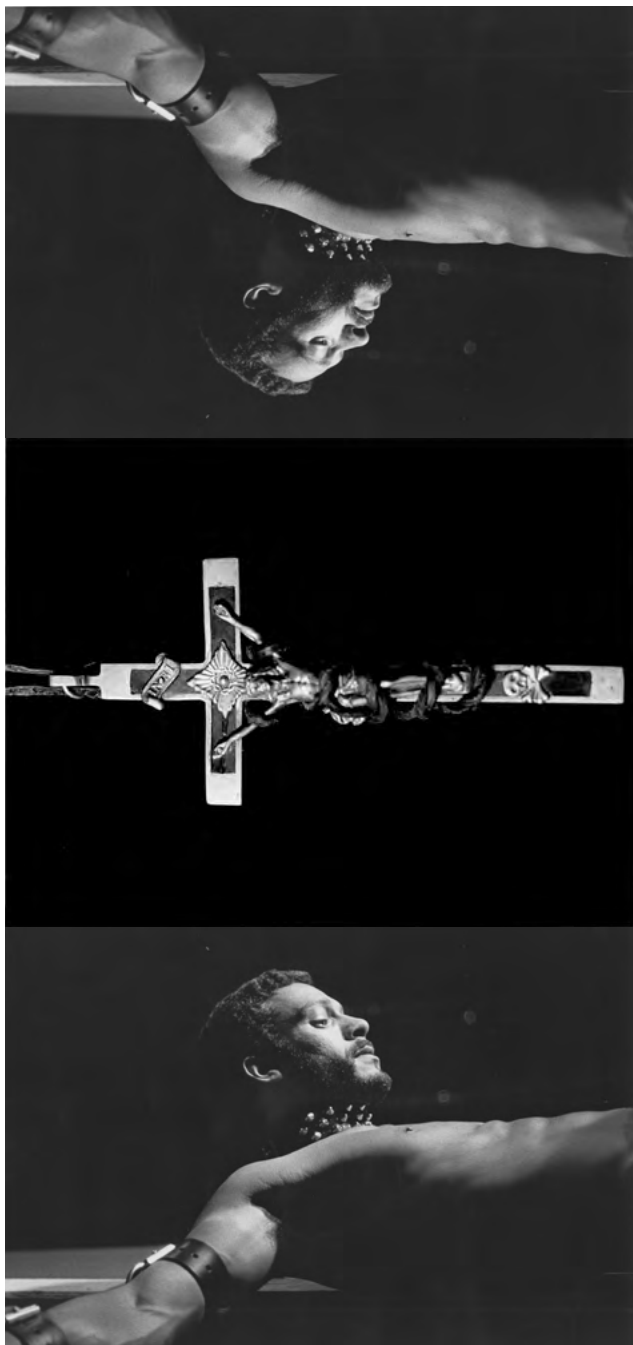
photos by Jim Stewart, line drawings by Gregg Coates

Malefactors with Bound Crucifix

1977: model Rocky the Bartender

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**JIM STEWART
PHOTOGRAPHS**

MARCH 3-27, 1979
at the
AMBUSH



**Special Guest Performance:
Camille O'Grady**

Opening Reception MARCH 3rd, 4 pm

Jim Stewart Photos at The Ambush

Special Guest Performance: Camille O'Grady, 1979
Photo exhibition announcement

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Camille O'Grady with Skull

1979: photo by Jim Stewart. Note: This photo was at the SF Camerawork in "Autobiography of the San Francisco Bay Area Part 2: The Future Lasts Forever" in 2010.

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Dancer David Studach

1978: photo by Jim Stewart at 766 Clementina Street

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Daddy's Glove and Pistol

1979: photo by Jim Stewart of chain mail butcher's glove
and nickel plated gambler's pistol

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Drugs, Sex, and Leather

1979: model El Paso Ric, photo by Jim Stewart
in "The Other Room," Clementina Alley

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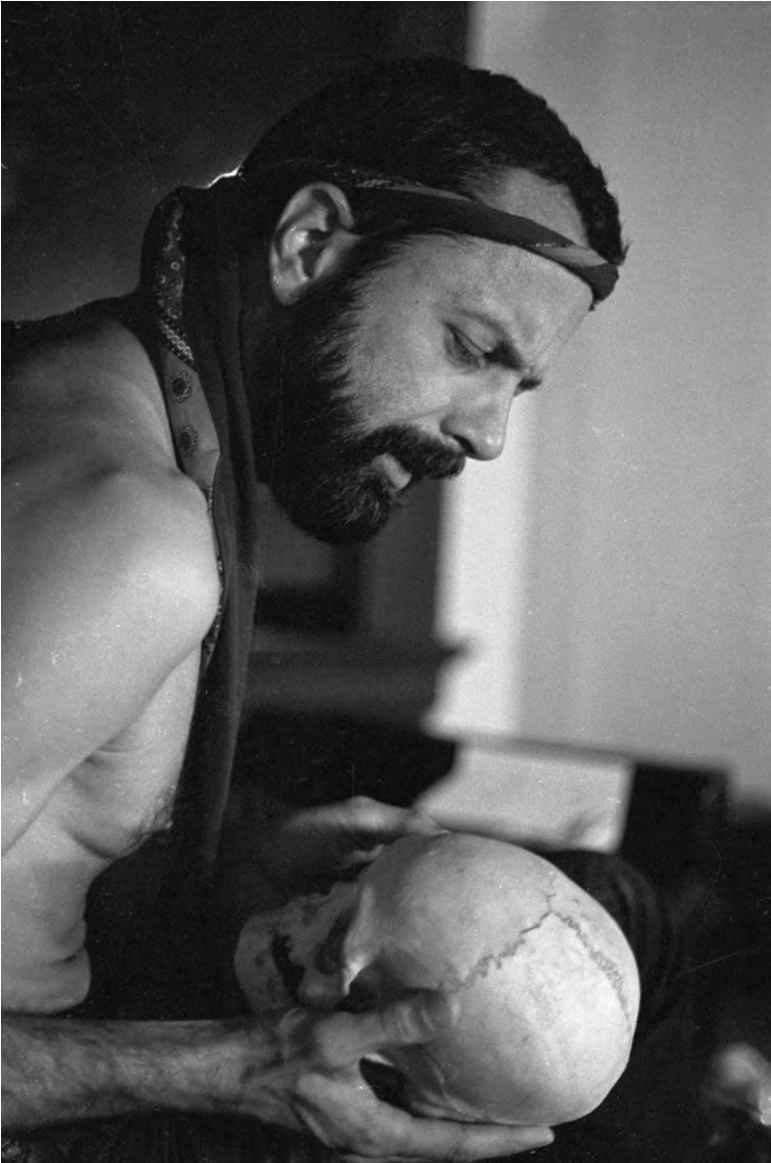
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Putting on the Ritz: Top Hat and Blow

1978: photo by Jim Stewart. This top hat was placed by Paul Hatlestad on Harvey Milk's coffin when it lay in state at City Hall after his assassination by Dan White in November, 1978.

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Robert Opel with Skull

1979: photo by Jim Stewart. Note: This photo was at the SF Camerawork in “Autobiography of the San Francisco Bay Area Part 2: The Future Lasts Forever” in 2010.

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