

Manuscript

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MAPPLECHRIST SUPERSTAR

Artists are the people among us who realize creation didn't stop on the sixth day.
—Joel-Peter Witkin

Joel-Peter Witkin is a painter and photographer living and working in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and is often perceived to be more clinical and brutal than Mapplethorpe. Witkin however, while controversial, is one of the world's most highly regarded fine art photographers, and a subtle gentleman who four times has been awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. Witkin, who is heterosexual, offers a kind of pacific mysticism that is very understanding of Mapplethorpe's Catholic battle between his two demanding masters, heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Witkin's work sometimes seems directly descended from Darwin's use of photography in *L'Expression des Emotion Chez l'Homme et les Animaux*, In *L'Expression*, Darwin studied wild facial expressions induced by electrical charges on faces. Darwin's work was photographed by Duchenne. Such historic reference offers some idea of how controversial Witkin himself is in some circles because of his aesthetic but unnerving work with cadavers.

Witkin, almost always more shocking than Mapplethorpe, benefits from exposition of the brief history of photography. The camera from the first attracted some over-the-top visionaries. Witkin suggests dramatic descent from the French photographer Emile Bayard, whose outstanding collection of 750 studio photographs of men, women, and children presents a striking artistic document of the human form. Presented in *The Esthetic Nude*, these images—shot between 1902 and 1907—present, according to historian Joe Vasta, a vision unique to the previous turn of the century. Bayard's dramatic-fantasy characters encouraged to varying degrees the work of Mapplethorpe and Witkin. Bayard created fantasy characters: human torsos montaged to papier-mache horses; heroic women pulling a chariot; sea sirens on oversized shells.

Robert Mapplethorpe owned at least seven of Joel-Peter Witkin's extraordinary photographs. One features female body builder Lisa Lyon as a bearded Hercules. Another shows the American mystic Fakir Musafar, the "Mandan," ritually hanging from hooks in his pectorals. Musafar is the inspiration for *Modern Primitives*, which popularized much of the nineties' ritual body piercing.

Mapplethorpe's most outrageous Witkin photograph is *Le Baiser*. Shot in 1982, *Le Baiser* (*The Kiss*) created such an uproar that the negative was destroyed in 1983. In the field of the circa fifteen-by-fifteen-inch photograph, Witkin places the left profile and the right profile of the same severed head in the pose of the kiss of death.

Robert owned print number seven of the truncated run of fifteen.

“I just spent two days at White Sands in the desert photographing this beautiful girl from San Francisco,” said Joel-Peter Witkin, who was exhausted but exhilarated.

“We buried her in the sand up to her neck. What we shot was great, but art and fate sometimes conspire in the most extraordinary ways. We suddenly found ourselves surrounded by a group of French-Italian directors and actors. Our model was so beautiful, they insisted, really insisted, we borrow one of their horses and continue our shoot. I could not say no to the opportunity, gifted to me, to photograph such a beautiful woman on such a beautiful horse. I could not say no, not in the desert.”

The altered alpha-level state of the artist is often equivalent to religious mysticism. Robert titillated the public by playing with the darker side of Catholicism, but he always came back to his calla lilies, making Easter flowers his symbol of resurrection. He was always such a shocker. He claimed his flowers were not ordinary flowers. They were, he said, “New York flowers.” He so wanted to be bad, he wanted his flowers to be Baudelaire’s flowers of evil.

“Robert was very, very talented,” Joel added. “I regret that much of what we talked about over many suppers was less than mystical. I think his ultimate redemption came about through his veracity, because of how he addressed life. His vision was honest. As for his homosexuality, people, no matter how sexually experimental, always come back to that sexual *thing* which makes them feel whole and true and sane.”

“Many people regret Robert’s leathersex period. They wish those photographs would go away.”

Something very powerful lies in the leathersex pictures. Robert cut their photographic paper with a razor’s edge. That edginess makes people uneasy, even those who regard themselves as progressive.

The secret to Robert Mapplethorpe is not in his flowers, not in his figures, not in his faces. The secret is not sex.

The secret is transcendence of the mortal body.

The secret, quintessential Mapplethorpe can be divined by study and examination of conscience looking at his leather work.

In the leathersex photographs, Robert presented what serious artists for generations have sought: a combination of beauty and terror that reveals human alternatives, that strips the denial from the human condition, exposing what humans are capable of when fully turned free of institutionalized cant so they can reach levels of mysticism and godliness.

The year I met Robert, I was introduced to an “incident photographer,” a recently freed ex-con from San Quentin whose job in prison had been to photograph “incidents.”

The incidents were all murder.

As soon as the body hit the cellblock floor, the incident photographer shot the corpse, grisly, bloody, rictus beginning on the face. He caught that first moment of human truth that terrifies humans: the look of the face that was alive only seconds before.

Robert, like the incident photographer, caught the perfect graphic moments when flesh, transcending itself through itself, in often terrifying sexual gymnastics, uses bodily excrescences

and *Kama Sutra* chakra fist-massage as the means to the end of achieving a mystic state.

The Mapplethorpe of the seventies must be understood in the context of his times. His accurate historical images must not be overlaid with latter-day attitudes about sex and drugs, which were both different in the golden age of personal liberation and self-actualization.

Robert was no X-rated porn mogul filming slight variations on the missionary position. Robert, riding high on the seventies' sexual style with slick grace, puts leathersex in your face as an acid shock treatment to demonstrate that the body is the way to physical, emotional, philosophical, and theological ecstasy.

Unlike the incident photographer, whose reportage eight-by-tens had been printed from smuggled negatives he had stolen when released, Robert's work found exhibition in the media of education: galleries, museums, and books. My regret is that I could find no gallery or publisher who would touch the work of the incident photographer, now lost in time, because the truth of his work would have given perspective to Robert's take on the wilding state of humanity. They would have made an ideal dual exhibit in a society that does not censor the true that is beyond the acceptable truth.

"My regret," Joel said, "is that for years I wanted to photograph Robert before he died. I never did it. I don't know whether it was because of his condition, or his not wanting to be photographed by anyone else. I was going to make a trip to New York, photograph him, and make ten prints and give the estate eight."

"That was very generous."

"But he died. If I could question him now, I'd ask, 'Did you make a trade-off between what you wanted to do and what you did?' I read once that 'what you give to the poor is what you take with you at death.' I don't know what he took with him at death."

"He took a life dedicated to art," I said. "He left beauty behind. Also a lot of money for AIDS research. He was a saint of his kind. One of those saints who plays at being bad, so he could have a really terrific deathbed conversion. Like St. Augustine?"

"His work, so prolific and strong, amazed me. Too often the work destroys the artist. What vision Robert accomplished was what he gave, and maybe that's enough redemption. I really believe that. If I had to make the choice between any living person and my work, or between a person and my spirituality, I'd go for spirituality."

"You have a son," I said. "You seem much like Abraham, willing to sacrifice Isaac for spiritual obedience."

"My work, or anybody's work, will not accede to everlasting life. With Robert, I can only hope that in a peaceful way, he did complete his cycle, but I have my doubts."

"Robert," I said, "was more tormented than peaceful, at least the years he and I were close. He had a very multiplex vision of himself and what he thought friends close to him should be. Sam usually caved in to Robert. At the last, I didn't."

"Sam gave me my first major show," Joel said. "I saw Robert's show at the Whitney. I'd never seen any of his shows before. His images were wonderful, but the show was hung terribly. Too much of a mix-up of too many things. Earlier, when Robert and I showed together at the Sam Hardison Gallery in New York, I remember very blatant Mapplethorpe photographs: a blow job. He wasn't mysterious then, mostly basically masturbatory, more okay than aesthetic. I

thought he needed to be edited more.”

Robert had a young boy’s eagerness.

Sometimes, in the early days in San Francisco, I thought it was about getting cash. He was always broke. He seemed always speeding to exhibit almost everything he shot as if in hope that if he pleased enough people, he’d have enough money.

He was very much an art hustler, much like one of those hustlers who needs to turn a trick every hour, not just for the cash, but to prove he’s a stud.

When he came knocking on my door, I had, at that time, more money and notoriety than he, and I was seven years his senior.

I liked his dash so much, the money for taxis and brunch I never held against him, because his obvious talent made me feel like an art patron. My house filled up with photographs and proof sheets that he left carelessly about.

“I release nothing,” Joel said, “unless I know I can’t do it better. Work is an expression of deepest love and mystery and graciousness explaining why people continue to make art and find themselves through art.”

“Once artists mature.”

“I have to ask more questions of myself about Robert,” Joel said. “I’m being honest. Honesty is all I know. Too few artists go honestly into themselves. Robert’s careerism and commercialism, that some people fault, was not a failure of honesty so much as it was a survival factor in an age of the cult of personality.”

“Thank his mentor Warhol.”

“Robert, despite all that, really put his soul on the line, not so much in his advertising work, but in the way his personal aesthetic constantly connected to his sense of self-discovery. When he died, the censorship question seemed to me a cowardly thing: trouncing a dead queer. How can anyone know what he had in his heart? Not that he was a saint.”

“I think,” I said, “Robert was a retro-saint killed by a retro-virus. Robert flourished in an age of retro-truth. In the seventies, lying became a high art form. Lies about Vietnam. Lies about Watergate. All the lies that led to the eighties’ lies of Iran-Contra and the savings and loans. Robert shot the rich and powerful. He was in advertising. He dined at homes elegant in media and politics. He knew he was shooting lies for liars in denial about their lying.”

“That’s a very good point,” Joel said.

“He wanted to photograph liars, because everything in life to him, from Catholicism to militarism, seemed like a lie. He was court photographer to the liars. Maybe that’s why the leather photographs seem so shocking. They reveal truth. Truth, not lies, has shocked us since the seventies. We’ve fallen through the looking glass, and Robert tried to correct our vision through his lens. These are inverted times.”

“If I were a woman,” Joel said, “right now my work would be lauded. Cindy Sherman is a photographer. She’s lauded. She’s good, but she’s in, because women right now are in.”

“I know. I was disinvited from the Gay Games Art Festival in Vancouver—after I had been invited, because, I was told, swear to God, over the phone that I didn’t fit their quota because I wasn’t a French-speaking lesbian.”

“Life now is like purgatory. I fear for the future of my son. Did Robert receive the last

rites of the Church?”

“I don’t know If he did, he did it as an insurance policy.”

Robert’s last days at Deaconess Hospital in 1989, when he was no longer in control, are shrouded in mystery. Does anyone know what the dying really want?

“I wonder about Robert,” Joel said. “That’s why I asked about the last rites. We’ve all chatted with him. We’ve all read about him. But at death, what’s more important: what art you hung on your walls, or what you made of your life? Everybody has to decide what his or her truth is.

“If you’re slammed up against a wall with a knife at your throat, and someone says, ‘In one second, buddy, tell me what your life is about,’ the assault may bring out the truth.

“Was Robert trying to serve two masters? A cock is not going to give you last rites. Money is not going to give you last rites.

“I think Robert handled the major challenge of his reality in a loving, compassionate, spiritual way. He pulled the knife away from his throat, and took a stab, a reasonable stab, at visualizing not the lies of the seventies or even the excess of the eighties, but at his own primordial heroism.

“Robert was a primordial hero.

“Sometimes I’m asked to speak when someone dies. I say that art, the work of art, is a form of prayer and what a person makes of himself, through himself, is what he is and what he is to be judged by.

“Robert’s work had context, yet there’s this multi-billion-dollar edge of the business of art. There is too much art being produced for no reason other than to meet commercial schedules, and it suffers because it’s being produced too fast to keep up with the fast-moving art market.

“The context of art is the human condition.

“Losing context is a dangerous thing. Artists sell themselves out, going for name and money. Cindy Sherman’s early photographs had context. Her early work glowed with the reasons she created it. In the current art market, she seems to have less context. No one wants context. It’s as though she has to play to an audience of empty milk bottles. Artists should become more human, not less, as a result of working with art. I hope that’s what happened to Robert.

“His vision may have been a bit ahead of his times. Five or ten years from now, the take on his work will be quite different.

“In this so-called postmodernist age, Robert was a rebel. He dealt with people in flesh and spirit. These are traditional concerns we can’t escape no matter how postmodern we are. I pick up art magazines and they are increasingly empty and completely inane This minimalist thing is a passing stage that can’t pass too quickly.

“When everything controversial about Robert settles down, and when time’s relationship of social factors gives better perspective, the worth of his work will be seen more clearly.

“The future is on his side.

“His work was not excessive at all compared to his times.

“He wasn’t the Bad Boy he played. He was his own best person.”

“As Emerson would have written,” I said, “Mapplethorpe achieved the Mapplethorpeness of being Mapplethorpe.”

“That is his redemption. If he tried to know himself, to the degree he succeeded, he lived a life of purification and growth.”

“Light and purification. That’s essentially an artist’s life, isn’t it?”

“That’s every person’s life,” Joel said. “Artists are different because they’re hanging by their short-hairs. Artists are the people among us who realize creation didn’t stop on the sixth day. It continues in people of sensibility and vulnerability who risk everything as the tuning fork of a particular society, or as the mirror image of the time they live in.”

“Artists scare people,” I said.

“True artists do.”

“Robert tried to shock and scare people, but he needed someone to scare him, too. That’s why the white boy, Wally Wallace told me, turned to shooting blacks. Robert was afraid of blacks. He met his personal fear head on and characteristically worked through the public fear in his photographs. He knew pictures of blacks could add another level of terror to his shocking work. Not just blacks. But naked blacks. He played with race, its exotic beauty, its sexual threat.”

“I guess Robert and I both would be considered decadents.”

“But not exploitation artists,” I said.

“No. With Robert’s blacks, or with my women, both groups much open to discussion of exploitation, there is a beauty of the work, no matter how gross or dangerous it may seem, as long as the compulsion the artist has to display his obsessions uses the flesh, not as pornography, or maybe even as pornography, to show the beauty of the flesh which is the incarnation of the spirit. That’s what people don’t understand. Sensuality is not carnality.”

“Flesh captures the attention, but the spirituality holds the interest,” I said. “Christ became flesh to illustrate spirituality. Look at the mess he created mixing the two. People still argue if he was man or god.”

“Society needs to sophisticate its symbolic literacy,” Joel said, “so people can see what is on the surface, and then proceed through interpreting the surface to what the surface symbolizes. Not all art is meant for everyone. Robert, I think, worked so hard to make his spiritual point that he misprojected and people got locked into the literal elements of the photographs and never saw the symbolism.”

Is Robert very like Andres Serrano, who also broke the accepted trance and told the brutal truth? Serrano’s *Piss Christ* altered forever the pastel version most Christians hold of what really happened on the way to Golgotha, the *Via Dolorosa* of the human condition.

The suffering and death of Christ, human, but very male, are an iconographic image that Robert, his homosensuality pressed through institutional Catholicism, found at the center of his most religious work, his leather photographs.

The crucifixion obsessed him.

The icon of crucifixion shows up not only in his arrangement of photographs in groups but also in self-portraits.

In some autophotographs, he is a pagan satyr.

In others, he is the Christus himself.

In the first gift he gave me, a very young Robert (*Self Portrait, 1975*) throws his arm across the field of the photograph, as if his arm is laid out for crucifixion. Except for his arm, and

bearded face, and a bit of his right nipple, the photograph is empty.

He signed it “To Jack....Robert ’78”

Robert used this grinning photo as the cover for the poster-sized program for his show, titled, “Robert Mapplethorpe,” at *La Remise du Parc* in Paris June 15 to July 13, and September 5 to 20, 1978.^{1*}

That kind of laughing honesty about his open ambiguity is one of his greatest talents.

“From the start,” Joel said, “every year, as an iconographer, there was always something I would make that would have reference to the Christ. It’s not uncommon among western artists, Robert included?”

“You made a twelve-by-fifteen-foot crucifixion sculpture.”

“Ah! It’s been shown in about thirteen museums in Spain, where they appreciate that sort of art. It almost sold in Leon, but the price was too high.”

“Perhaps you didn’t want to sell it. I have my own series of crucifixion photographs. How does one put a price on art?”

“Right now, it’s in a storage unit. A kind of white elephant. But that doesn’t matter. The passion to create it is greater than the need to peddle it. I made it not for the sake of selling it, but for the opportunity to use my skills and the materials to transcend through.”

“To break on through to the other side,” as Jim Morrison sang.

Robert idolized Morrison.

The only possession, besides my soul, that Robert ever asked me for was a large black-on-silver print of Morrison. It was a limited edition that I found on Eighth Avenue in New York in 1967.

I never gave it to him, no matter how much he begged.

I think I was just disciplining him, knowing how much he wanted it, and how he always got everything he wanted.

Thank God, I never gave it to him. Christie’s would have auctioned it off. AIDS has taught me never to lend anybody anything without a written receipt; I’ve lost things that were sucked up by greedy straight families.

Besides, it was good for Robert’s character, and mine, and for our relationship, not to let Robert have everything his own way.

We got on famously because I often said no to him, and the secret to handling the wild Mapplethorpe was in saying no.

The word *no* thrilled him. He saw it as a challenge to continue badgering until the person said yes.

That’s what stoked his professional ambition even after he was rich and famous. He wanted the whole world to say yes to his every photograph.

Every no, every rejection, was a small, delicious, lubricious crucifixion, pinning him down, so he could think up ways to outfox the naysayer and resurrect himself, turning no’s into

¹ Robert’s self-portrait, also shot in 1975, but *Untitled*, featured a blur of his face over his own frame-filling feet, the soles of which are shown wrapped in a sheet. This Mapplethorpe angle is essentially a view from the foot of the cross of Christ.

hallelujah choruses of yes!

Theologically, Robert, same as all lapsed Catholics, had his psyche wired by Catholicism. Theologically, really more than even symbolically, Robert wanted the *alter Christus* status of the crucified god.

Real nails through his talented hands would have made him happy.

Who's to say that the crucifixion of AIDS, his final torture, might not have been self-induced.

AIDS: the artist half in love with death. Or, maybe, the real motivation, AIDS: the perfect suicide.

AIDS: the perfect way out of a controversial career that he may have suspected had run its course.

Stranger suicides have been devised.

In the self-photographs, the maker of icons becomes himself an icon.

Making way for the next single frame of his next existence.

Ask Shirley MacLaine.

"Mysticism and art," Joel said, "are virtual synonyms."

"A woman who lives near me," I said, "has written a New Age book called *Ordinary People as Monks and Mystics*. She talks as do you about transcending through one's work. If it's true of ordinary people, then is it more true of artists?"

"Transcendence brings clarity," Joel said. "Robert may have burned up, not burned out, with clarity. Clarity, doing the work, is the artist's nourishment. Robert wanted his work to be venerated. I don't. My work expresses a soul in progress. That's all. The only direct connection between Robert and me is that he always dealt with the beautiful. I don't. I intentionally deal with the strange, the exotic, the horrible. I recently created a piece about the difference between a severed hand and a flower. We have all kinds of flowers all over the house, and they're very beautiful. I appreciate them, but I am not obsessed by them."

"Robert preferred cut flowers," I said. "Cut, they were already dying. Cut, they stood as metaphor of human life, which is cut from the mortal start. Their beauty was perfect for the moment. He had limited time to work before they wilted. Their beauty was brief."

"Yet his career wasn't. Even if he had run out of things to say, he couldn't have coasted another twenty years without really being dedicated."

"What was his dedication? It was more than money and fame."

"His dedication," Joel said, "was his personal torment, his anguish that was never totally resolved. The homoerotic aspect of his humanity"

"Was his homosexuality a stumbling block to him?"

"I think it was his driving force."

"You mean because he chose not to follow the biological human urge to procreate literally, he chose, instead, to create aesthetically?"

"That may be."

"Robert was not dysfunctional. He never let homosexuality become his excuse for not joining the world. He contributed more than his share to the common good of the wider world."

"There are degrees of dysfunction," Joel said.

“Without those degrees, there would be no artists. Can a normal person, whatever that is, be an artist?”

“Dysfunction happens in all walks of life,” Joel said. “Robert was gloriously productive. Yet, I think his homosexuality could have been a stumbling block to him. Sexuality itself is a stumbling block no matter one’s sexual preference.”

“I’d prefer to say that normal society is the stumbling block to sexuality” I said.

“In Robert’s case, he was given the off-center homoerotic edge as a personal, artistic problem to be worked out in a predominantly heterosexual society.”

“He carried his cross well.”

“As a minority in a pluralistic society, he dealt with homoeroticism in the most honest, beautiful, spiritual way he could. I think that’s his importance.”

“I think that’s cause for artistic sainthood.”

“You mentioned ordinary people as monks and mystics.”

“Your mention of the missing limb,” I said, “reminds me of George Dureau’s photographs of men with missing limbs. With your interest in what the norm would call deformity, and Robert’s interest in perfection, do you think that homosexuality was his deformity that caused him to try so hard to shock the heterosexual take on life by insisting there were alternative takes on human existence?”

“I’m not going to say no, but, yes, that was his basic struggle. He saw two masters: homosexuality and heterosexuality. This unresolved, perhaps unresolvable, conflict is the essence of his aesthetic.”

“In his personal life,” I said, “he was stressed by his attraction to men and his attraction to women.”

“But in his work...”

“And in that work is where the internal evidence of his outsider’s eye, his outsider’s psyche is absolute...”

“...Robert, stumbling and carrying his homosensitivity,” Joel said, “brought a psychological balance, a giving over, bringing out the best qualities of women and men. He looked for the best in them as he did in himself. His desire was to make the best image possible even in his subterranean world of leather, where, what in reality can be quite rough, he refined with elegance. I don’t refine my work. Robert couldn’t get away from making an image beautiful.

“His personal carousing may have been legendary, but what we know for sure is what we see published. There lies the evidence. His photographs are the highest expression of how he saw life and reconciled life’s alternative plurality. And he did it for public consumption.”

“Then he was a teacher, like Socrates, a teacher who was thought decadent.”

“Robert’s mysticism is not decadent,” Joel said. “A label like ‘decadent’ says more about ineptitude. Many photographers are inept, because the camera is such an easy instrument of instant gratification. Everyone thinks he’s a photographer these days.”

“Robert, although he feigned even more ennui than he really felt, was never boring. His photographs are very crisp and alert.”

“Exactly. Even his commercial portraits of celebrities, although most of them are probably barracudas in life, he presented beautifully. He had to relate to them, get around some

human flaws, and artfully dodge the ugly truth into photographic beauty”

“Robert exerted power over his models,” I said. “He rather overpowered them, even while he brought their beauty to the fore.”

“Robert, I must say,” Joel said, “is a modernist. Postmodernism is an admission that modernism has failed. Unlike postmodernists, Robert was dedicated to the romanticism of finding himself as opposed to pursuing a career through sheer aesthetics. That’s what makes him real, as opposed to people whose goal is to make money through the multi-million-dollar art exhibit. He made a lot of money and he inherited even more, but the amount of work he created, even when he was sick, when he could have quit, shows it was, ultimately, not the money, but the work, the spiritual quest.”

“So he succeeded:”

“Except for one thing. He didn’t articulate what he was doing!”

“The photographs speak for themselves.”

“He should have done more than give interviews,” Joel said. “Robert himself should have written about his work.”

“He couldn’t write very well. That’s why he ran around with writers.”

“He was a frustrated writer,” Joel said.

“The camera was easier.”

“It disappointed me that he never wrote a book,” Joel said. “Robert should have written at least a monograph, because a person should, at one point in his career, make a kind of manifesto. Just to clarify all the other writing about him, so he, not Susan Sontag, or you, or any critic or biographer, can have the last word.”

“Perhaps we’re back to the Seven Last Words of Christ:” I said.

“I want inside other artists’ mysticism. That happens when the work itself resonates in a dialogue. It’s not so much the actual photograph. It’s a resonance from the spirit of the artist to the spirit of the viewer. Sure, the art object exists on its own. But wouldn’t it be wonderful if Robert had been verbal about his work? We know of his dedication, his discipline, his love, his vulnerability, even of the way he tried to reassure the world through his art, but all of this, all of his work, all the critiques are not enough.”

“They’re clues:”

“More than clues, I want to read something Robert wrote about his lesser self and his higher self.”

“Clues are all he left. Mapplethorpe left us in mystery. He asked me to write for him, about him:” I said. “At the time, he didn’t tell me it would turn out to be a detective story.”

“Robert went out, as I do, into life’s darknesses. It takes courage not to be totally seduced by the dark. It takes courage to come back in, unconfounded by the darkness. Without the dark side of the soul, there is no saint.”

“Robert’s life is much like Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.”

“Robert’s life is very much like Thomas Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain*,” Joel said. “As an artist, he went out into the dark and came back with the best of what he saw in humanity and in himself. He was rare. It’s very hard to render emotions through a camera. Robert was a bright light, throwing light on aspects of mortality that society usually denies. He caught emotion.

“Last night, being awakened at ten o’clock out in the desert at Alamogordo, I said to myself, *If I die now, I’d be happy*. From his work, Robert must have felt that. Every artist does when he stands back and looks at something he’s made, and on the most honest, no-bullshit level, realizes he’s transcended his own physicality and has tapped into something of the spirit, and he looks at it and thinks, *My God! How did I do that?*”

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