Hollywood Royale: Out of the School of Los Angeles

Introductory Essay 1 of 3:

Matthew Rolston: Warhol's Post-Modern Glamour Photographer

By Pat Hackett

WHEN I FIRST MET ANDY WARHOL IN 1968, NOSTALGIA FOR THE GOLDEN age of the silver screen was in full swing at his 33 Union Square West Factory. In addition to the hip new breed of Hollywood stars who came by to check out the scene, genuine screen legends from earlier eras would, on occasion, turn up. I once stepped into the bathroom and a woman intoned, "One moment, please," as she emerged from the stall. I backed out and told Andy that I'd just walked in on "some lady wearing scarves." He said, "Oh, Pat. That's Hedy Lamarr!!" Paul Morrissey, Andy's frequent filmmaking collaborator, chimed in, "Yes, and she's very intelligent, you know. She invented radar."

Vintage Hollywood glamour was also prominently represented on the Factory walls. The front of the loft may have displayed industrial-size color photos of Warhol superstars like Joe Dallesandro and Viva, but on the white walls above the Moviola editing table, hung in gallery layout, were beautifully framed and matted color photos of such screendom royals as Ginger Rogers, Katharine Hepburn, Jean Harlow, and Kay Francis. Shirley Temple (whose autograph Andy had sent away for when he and Shirley were both thirteen years old) was part of the line-up, and although she necessarily lacked the sophistication of her older movie star contemporaries, her dimpled image conveyed the perfect artifice central to the concept of glamour in Hollywood's heady heyday.

Why in the world would these Hollywood Glamour Girls have been placed above the Factory editing table, where images of male hustlers on Third Avenue, drag queens on a shoestring, or fashion models on Thorazine were daily cut and spliced together in Andy's ongoing campaign (almost a crusade, really) to deconstruct the Hollywood movie and replace it with a new, raw, improvised—i.e., a more "real"—New York City-based cinematic language? There were always two sides to the Andy coin: Heads, he loved things that were really Real; Tails, things that were really Fake. "Glamour" is completely fake. It's the promise of everything you can never really have because it doesn't really exist. But a glamorous photograph or film can make you believe that it does.

Andy modernized the concepts of both glamour and fame. Has any prediction in the modern era been more quoted or more prescient than, "In the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes"? And while his canvases of Marilyns, Elvises, and Lizes may have exalted classic celebrity glamour, on the other side of the fame coin were his darker themed canvases of outright tragedy and notoriety: the Car Crashes, Electric Chairs, Suicides and the F.B.I.'s 13 Most Wanted Men. Andy understood that you could also be famous for one moment—the time it might take to jump out a window or smash a car into a

telephone pole or rob a bank—when that moment is luridly captured for the front page of a tabloid.

In the mid-1970s Andy met Paulette Goddard, the movie star who was as famous for the husbands she landed—Charlie Chaplin, Burgess Meredith, and the novelist Erich Maria Remarque—as for the part she didn't, Scarlett O'Hara. Her life seemed so glamorous to Andy that he suggested they collaborate on a book that would be a series of taped interviews of her by him. The undertaking of this project launched an exciting routine of Andy and Paulette going to openings together and having four-star restaurant dinner dates as he tried to get her to spill her life story ("her beans," as he always put it) to his tape recorder. But Paulette was never willing to divulge anything "real." She understood glamour far too well to get caught up in any facts. "Andy, you're an artist," she'd tell him, implying that he should just go off and create something. In the end, he couldn't even squeeze enough out of Paulette for an article in Interview, the ground-breaking monthly magazine he had created in 1969.

Interview had fairly quickly established itself as a culture-changer and a career-changer. Being featured in it came to be regarded by celebrities as an image-enhancing rite of passage because its pages had so much to offer that wasn't found anyplace else: large format marquee photography and "retouching for everyone over twenty," as its most high-profile editor, Bob Colacello, once assured a reluctant subject of a certain age.

In the February 1977 Interview, a much-remarked upon photograph appeared, in which the oil-and-water worlds of flawlessly rendered 1930s Hollywood movie star portraits and Andy's anything-but-flawless Factory films were stunningly mixed. John Kobal, the film historian and renowned collector/curator of Hollywood glamour photography, whose insight and wit on film-related matters was boundless (Andy and I interviewed him once about "party scenes" in films for our Party Book collaboration), in partnership with Paul Morrissey, was encouraging George Hurrell, the nonpareil photographer of Hollywood's glory days, to collaborate with them in producing limited-edition portfolios of prints from Hurrell's vintage negatives. Paul somehow persuaded Hurrell to haul out his big original camera for the purpose of shooting an LA-based fashion designer, Tere Tereba, who was fresh off a supporting role in Andy Warhol's BAD(a film I had co-written), which was scheduled to open at LA's FILMEX '77 the next month. Paul, with his connoisseur's eye for film-worthy faces, recognized that Tere's classic contoured features would lend themselves perfectly to such an occasion.

Hurrell's resulting portrait was every bit as glamorous as any he'd produced back in the day of Joan Crawford or Jean Harlow; it was just as legibly, and indelibly, a Hurrell. The image was dramatically yet subtly lit, and he printed it, in his unique customary fashion, from a negative that he had rigorously retouched with razor blades. This stylistic reboot demonstrated that Hollywood glamour photography was not some irrelevant, outmoded art form, but that with the right eye, the right camera, and the right retouching and printing, a "starlet" of 1977 could embody all the unreachable promise of a bona fide 1930s Hollywood star. That portrait in and of itself threw down a gauntlet for a new crop of bold young photographers.

One of those young guns, Matthew Rolston, began shooting portraits for Interview a few months later, but it wasn't until early 1980, when he photographed Martha Davis, the lead singer of the New Wave group The Motels, that he executed his first real Hollywood glamour portrait. Upon delivering his prints to Interview, Rolston explained that Davis' song lyrics about unhappiness and romantic betrayal had inspired him to recreate the scene from Sunset Boulevard where Gloria Swanson/Norma Desmond, having attempted suicide in a bid for sympathy from William Holden, is lying in bed with bandages on her wrists. (When Rolston, years later, asked George Hurrell how he would define glamour, Hurrell pricelessly told him, "Oh I don't know, kid—I think it's kind of a suffering look.")

From this point on, Rolston was often inspired to present his subjects (Cyndi Lauper, Madonna, Cybill Shepherd, Kelly LeBrock, etc.) as vintage characters in classic cinematic tableaux. He sometimes operated as his own stylist, providing outfits and accessories from his personal wardrobe or rented from the Western Costume Company, the final resting place for all of the vintage inventory from Paramount Studios. In 1985, when Andy had just seen an Interview photo spread of new young Hollywood actors—Rolston's The Bad and the Beautiful—he told his diary: "Matthew is our best photographer now . . . . He made these kids look stunning—like stars—he gave them all class."

That spring Andy agreed to be on an episode of The Love Boat on the condition that the producer, Doug Cramer, who was a major art collector, commission him to do a portrait of the 1000th guest star, Lana Turner. Of the day he photographed her at the Bel Air Hotel, Andy told his diary, "I closed my eyes and it was like being with Paulette, that kind of attitude. [Lana] said, 'Give me a kiss.'" There had been an even bigger dose of that Old Star vibe going around at the huge Boat gala that I went to with him the night before in the ballroom of the Beverly Hilton. If you stood in one spot, just about every old movie star who was still alive and who had been in an episode—which was almost one and the same thing—would walk by. Andy got to gab with Ginger Rogers, Mary Martin, Alexis Smith, June Allyson, et al. Then at dinner we were seated at a table with Cesar Romero, Stewart Granger, and Troy Donahue. Afterward, Andy reflected upon how great it was, on the one hand, that they were all still working, but on the other hand, how sad it was that these once-gorgeous stars, whose faces had been immortalized by the old masters of light and shadow, had all wound up under the brutal lights of a television show.

In 1986, when the whole TV-watching world was in the grip of Miami Vice mania, I went to Florida to write Interview's September cover story on Don Johnson. The show had influenced fashion even more than it had television, and Don, with his pastel jackets, no-socks loafers, and five o'clock stubble, was the style icon of the hour. When Interview's editor, Gael Love, had informed Andy that the photographer was going to be Rolston, his response was definitive: "Good. He'll do something different."

Another photographer might have dragged Don down to the beach, or thrown him under a neon sign and shot a literal "concrete under your feet/you're a man of the street" theme (as the moody Glen Frey Vice song went). But Rolston whisked him off to Vizcaya (the Italian Renaissance villa built on Biscayne Bay in the early 1900s for International Harvester

heir James Deering). There he dressed Don in polo garb and accessorized him with all the paraphernalia of the sport, slicked back his hair, and, against those baroque interiors, transformed Sonny Crockett into Douglas Fairbanks. (Willie Nelson was the guest star for the episode filming that week, and I couldn't help wondering what Rolston might have turned Willie into, if only he'd had the chance... Trevor Howard?)

The following week, back in New York, I watched Andy go slowly through each finished Rolston print, one by one, taking in the face, clothes, stance, and the opulent setting: "This is so glamorous. Wow . . . wow . . . wow . . ."

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