Hollywood Royale: Out of the School of Los Angeles

Introductory Essay 2 of 3:

Art and Commerce: The Photography of Matthew Rolston

By Colin Westerbeck

FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS PUBLISHING THEIR WORK IN MAGAZINES THE challenge is to create an image that will have an immediate impact on viewers who spend only a few seconds with each picture. The demand on your image is greater still if you're a portraitist making studies of celebrities whom the public often feels they know already. Only the rare photographer capable of appreciating the paradox inherent in making such portraits succeeds in creating a photograph that's truly significant. The paradox is that for images appreciated only momentarily to become truly durable, the insightful photographer has to be capable of spending a lot of time in making them. The more thoughtful the process, the more immediate the impact. The result is an image that can be grasped in an instant and then pondered in perspective—one that, though initiated as commerce, is ultimately appreciated as art. The gift of being able to achieve this requires not only a unique amount of both imagination and ambition, but an intuitive ability to be in sync with the times in which you are living and working.

That Matthew Rolston is the rare photographer who has this sort of talent became apparent as soon as he established his signature vision with a 1980 image of Motels pop star Martha Davis. He had Davis recreate the scene from Billy Wilder's Sunset Boulevard in which Gloria Swanson, as Norma Desmond, lies in bed with bandaged wrists after her suicide attempt. Just five years later, in 1985, Rolston's preeminence as a celebrity portraitist was acknowledged when a single issue of Andy Warhol's Interview featured his allusions to classic Hollywood fare in 24 double-page spreads. The magazine used Rolston's title, The Bad and the Beautiful, because all his studies of emerging stars evoked the 1952 Kirk Douglas-Lana Turner movie about Hollywood that had had that title.

Rolston's work may have appealed to Warhol because they shared a nostalgia for the leading men and women of an earlier era. Instead of photographing movie personalities at home, out of character, or letting their hair down, Rolston went to great lengths to represent the emerging talents he photographed as heirs and, especially, heiresses, to the star culture of the '20s and '30s. He ransacked historic warehouses full of pre-war props, furnishing and costumes, particularly the Western Costume Company. He also reassembled sets from the heyday of studios like Paramount and Metro (aka MGM). If a period prop or set he'd wanted couldn't be found in a studio warehouse, he'd have it fabricated anew.

In that 1985 spread in Interview, Jennifer Jason Leigh appeared in a stunning '40s-inspired dress with big shoulder pads and was coiffed exactly as Lana Turner had been in a 1940s production still. Leigh and another young actress dressed as if in a '40s weeper, Nicole

Fosse, were just beginning to attract attention, as was one of the male stars, Robert Downey, Jr. A figure straight out of a Dashiell Hammett whodunit, Downey is holding an antique Mont Blanc pen and wearing a tie so loud it could only have been from the ’40s. Behind Downey stenciled on the pucker-pattern glass door to the office, just legible in reverse type, is the word “PRIVATE.” Downey’s own homage to the pre-war era would be the 1992 biopicChaplin.

Maybe the most outlandish portrait Rolston made in the ’80s was one of Cyndi Lauper that was on the cover of a music-themed issue of Interview, trans-formed (as all covers were) into a painting by Richard Bernstein. The full composition of Rolston’s photograph shows Lauper vamping in a 1920s headdress as big as a chandelier, a contraption very like (and inspired by) one that ’20s silent-screen star Mae Murray had worn in one of her films. Why Rolston has become famous for his lighting effects is also apparent in this study where the backlighting of Lauper in her headdress is so distinctive that it’s as crucial to the overall effect as a key light would usually be. It too, perhaps, takes its cue from the ’20s shot of Mae Murray.

Rolston’s susceptibility to the influence that glamor in pre-war movies had on post-war style was also an aspect of gay culture, which was only openly acknowledged in a couple of magazines, Interview and After Dark, when Rolston was young. He had first realized he was attracted to gay culture in the 1970s. He was, he says, “slightly obsessed” with David Bowie in Bowie’s “Ziggy Stardust period.” The 1975 cover for Bowie’s Young Americans album had a portrait of the singer in harsh backlighting countered by softer effects on his face. This became something of a prototype for Rolston’s own signature lighting. “As a young art student and a person dealing with his own gender imaging issues,” Rolston says, “David Bowie’s persona gave me ‘permission’ to explore alternatives to gender normative, white-hetero-male imaging.”

Rolston began to understand that his attraction to “Old Hollywood” was not just a question of fashion, fads or gender, but of who he was in the most basic sense. One song on Bowie’s album also proved to be prophetic where it’s title “Fame” was concerned:

“Fame, it's not your brain, it's just the flame

That burns your change to keep you insane.”

Today Rolston takes the long view of the obsessions that have fueled his success as a photographer. He admits that “it is impossible to separate my creative development from the history of gay culture and its intersection with pop culture. . . It’s worth noting that the cultural trend of the ’80s known as ‘gender bending’ (think Boy George, Annie Lennox, Prince, Grace Jones, of course David Bowie, et al.) began as a pop-culture response to gay oppression. My fascination with powerful female figures was part of a larger gay fascination. Yes, it’s camp. But it was also a response to white-hetero-male cultural domination and gay oppression.”

Rolston might never have heard of “camp” when he was establishing his career in the ’70s. Yet his interest in reviving the past, and most of all that part of the past once dismissed as kitsch, couldn’t have been better timed. In her 1964 essay “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag set the stage for the new take on culture both high and low that would follow in the ’70s and ’80s. Camp is, she wrote, “seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon . . . not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization.” Her essay anticipates not only the general program of Rolston’s photography but some of the particulars, as when she observed, “The most refined form of sexual attractiveness consists in going against the grain of one’s sex. . . . What is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine.” Then, a few pages later, she got down to specifics: “Camp is the outrageous aestheticism of von Sternberg’s six American movies with Dietrich.”

Even though he hadn’t read Sontag’s essay, Rolston couldn’t have agreed more, as a 1986 study of Madonna demonstrates. Madonna as Marlene shows her cross-dressed in a man’s jacket, shirt with French cuffs, and a necktie. The scene by von Sternberg evoked here is one Rolston knew well from Morocco(1930), a pre-Code melodrama that caused a sensation when Dietrich, in a high hat and tails, kisses another woman on the lips. The scene to which Rolston alluded with Madonna is a later one in which Dietrich sits ruefully before her make-up mirror on which her true love (Gary Cooper) has scrawled in lipstick the same message at which Madonna stares in Rolston’s version: “I changed my mind Good luck.” This tagline from the movie was a sly allusion to Madonna’s own reinventions of her persona. Rolston came closer to evoking the controversial von Sternberg scene, however, in another image included in Hollywood Royale – Wendy and Lisa, Top Hat and Tails, 1985.

Because of its validation of kitsch as a legitimate (or, anyway, significant) part of the history of culture, Sontag’s essay paved the way for postmodernism in the following decades. In the visual arts, postmodernism led to the conviction that all the original images possible had already been created, so all artists could do now was to “recycle” the imagery already out there.

The most theoretically orthodox were the most literal-minded practitioners of postmodernism like Richard Prince, who copied Marlboro ads from magazines, and Sherrie Levine, who photographed reproductions of Walker Evans’ work from a Museum of Modern Art catalogue and presented the copied reproductions as her own work. The fact that this was a very degraded version of Evans’ prints was, in part, the point she was making.

Other photographers celebrated as postmodernists—Cindy Sherman, for instance—actually hazarded a certain originality in their work. (More on Sherman’s career later.) But the pioneer of recycling avant le lettre who unwittingly encouraged such postmodernist practice was of course Rolston’s patron and mentor, Andy Warhol, when he lifted photographs of celebrities from mass media and reproduced them as multiples. Like Warhol, Rolston was essentially oblivious to postmodernist precedents and influences. The only form of the movement to which he was drawn was its original one, as a theory of architecture, for he was a fan of the architect Michael Graves. Yet even with Graves, it

wasn't the theory that impressed Rolston but, he says, the way that Graves "was very tongue-in-cheek and playful" in his allusions to architecture's past.

Rolston was put on the path to his mature work not by art-world trends like postmodernism, but by having been unhappy with the world as he found it as a child. Around when Rolston was born in Los Angeles, Robert Frank was making the bleak photographs of the city seen in his classic book The Americans. Those pictures (and ones by other photographers) show LA to have been the "smoggy, horrible" place young Rolston felt it was. Only when he visited the waiting room of a Beverly Hills physician, who happened to be his grandfather, did the boy get a glimpse of an alternative reality more attractive than the one he lived in. There he found framed portraits signed to the doctor by his patients, who were, Rolston learned, "almost exclusively Metro stars."

Rolston later realized that "these were all from the Metro portrait studio, which means that they were Hurrell, Ted Allan, and Laszlo Willinger photographs." Before he knew any of that, he was already fascinated with the world such images evoked: "the confection of the skin, that otherworldly realm of studios and lighting—all that velvety, shadowy mystery attracted me."

This discovery led him to a gloriously misspent youth haunting all the little repertory movie theaters that were, before the era of video-rental stores like Blockbuster dawned in the mid-1980s, the only place where you could still see a decent print of classics like von Sternberg's work. The other place where he could indulge his passion then was The Late Show, for which he would set his alarm clock at 3 a.m., if necessary, to catch a broadcast of a film he'd not seen before. Decades later, he was an innocent abroad when his ability to recreate in photographs the period movies that he'd loved landed him in the middle of a postmodernist era that was receptive to such flashbacks.

It should also be noted, though, that some of his best period portraits are less specific about their sources than the movie allusions discussed above. Having used in his title for this book the French term Royale(rather than plain old English royal), Rolston is purposely poking fun at himself; he's acknowledging the high camp aspects of his book with that "e" on the end of his title. We see what he's getting at when, in his function as haberdasher to the stars he photographed, he placed a crown on certain heads. Rolston's 1984 portrait of film and television actress Joan Collins (which made the cover of Interview) is an example, and a more important one is his 1985 study of Michael Jackson.

The crown Jackson wore in 1985 wasn't a specific reference to what Jackson was doing at the time or to a particular period source, but it did establish his image as The King of Pop years before Elizabeth Taylor bestowed the title on him in 1989. "With Michael, I was working in a collaborative way," Rolston says. "I applied some of my Royale imagery to him, and he picked up on it from there and wanted to be shown fully as a king. . . . In this picture, the crown, the props—everything came from Paramount, from Western Costume." In 2007, Rolston would do the last photo session Jackson ever had, shortly before the pop star died at age 50.

Jackson became a pivotal figure in Rolston's career. In retrospect, Rolston feels that the collaboration with Jackson was "really the beginnings of what became a more established aesthetic of mine." For the first shoot that Rolston did with him, Jackson borrowed some of the photographer's clothes as well as rhinestone brooches and embroidered crests that can be seen in the resulting photograph, which was published in Interview in 1982. By the time he wore that crown in Rolston's 1985 portrait of him, Jackson truly was The King of Pop, the most famous musical performer in the world. Looking back on those days, Rolston says (again with mock self-deprecation), "If you're going to have a billboard for your ideas, make it a big one."

In the end, it's hard to know just where to put Rolston's career. The generality of work like the Jackson portrait, its lack of a specific historical reference, reminds me of Cindy Sherman's strategy in the Untitled Film Stills. Strange as the comparison may sound at first, I think one could describe Rolston's career as a mirror image of hers. She started out to be an artist and has been much celebrated for her postmodernist tropes in the Film Stills that established her museum career. Yet like Rolston, she has always distanced herself from academic, art-world theories. "I wanted to make something which people could relate to without having to read a book about it first," she says. In 1983, she traded in a failed project commissioned by the insider art-world journal Artforum for commissions fromParis Vogue and Harper's Bazaar, and she has continued to do work for the fashion magazines ever since. She is that rare artist who has been able to move back and forth comfortably between art and commerce.

While Sherman has gone from art to commerce, Rolston has commuted in the opposite direction, going from commerce to art. When Warhol discovered him, Rolston was a student at Pasadena's Art Center College of Design, an institution that gave him an Honorary Doctorate in 2006. But from the beginning he was fixed on a career as a commercial photographer. From Interview he went on to commissions from Rolling Stone, for which he's shot over 100 covers, and to Vogue, W, Harper's Bazaar, Vanity Fair, the New York Times, et al. At the same time, he's also maintained an art-world presence through his representation by the renowned Los Angeles gallery Fahey/Klein.

Like Richard Avedon and Irving Penn, to whom Rolston was compared by Robert Sobieszek, the late Curator of Photography at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, he has never made a distinction between commercial work and personal work.

Two recent, self-assigned projects of Rolston's are Vanitas: The Palermo Portraits, which are studies of mummies in the Capuchin catacombs of Santa Maria della Pace in Palermo, and Talking Heads: The Vent Haven Portraits, color photographs of ventriloquists' dummies. These projects are more concerned with ars longa, vita brevisthan with the "now" of commercial work, or with how he might fit into whatever the hot new fad is at the moment in the art world. Rolston is just going his own way, a course that has always served him well.

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