G E O R G E D U R E A U

By Philip Gefter

> I must tell you that we artists cannot tread the path of Beauty without Eros keeping company with us and appointing himself as our guide.
>
> —Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*[1]

A Streetcar Named Desire was not simply the name of a play. Until 1948, an actual trolley rattled through New Orleans's French Quarter to Desire Street, on a thoroughfare near the apartment in which Tennessee Williams would write his masterpiece of the stage. He plucked his title from the flow of daily life in his own neighborhood in the mid-1940s[2], a title that levitates with metaphor and double meaning, and conjures still today an excursion to paradise. While Williams's characters were grounded in a specific locale, his play was crafted—as if with wings—to soar into the cultural legacy of the twentieth century.

"Tennessee Williams didn't have to make up characters and settings because New Orleans is so rich in those," said Kenneth Holditch, a distinguished Williams scholar. "But he was able to make the reality around him larger than life and more meaningful." According to Holditch, the same can be said of the artist George Dureau.[3]

George Valentine Dureau, born in New Orleans under the sign of Capricorn in 1931, relied on the variety of disparate characters he came to know throughout his life in the French Quarter as the subjects of his drawings, paintings, and photographs. He welcomed them into his home; he became sexually intimate with many of them; and some became lifelong friends. His photographs of these individuals are clear-eyed, humble, and sincere; whether clothed or nude, they appear natural and unselfconscious before his camera.

While he portrayed his models with a tender regard—his gaze steady and tinged with a playful eroticism—their poses equally evoke classical figures of allegory and myth. Dr. Holditch, professor emeritus at the University of New Orleans, believes that Dureau's "creativity, his philosophy, his encompassing view of life, are all entwined with that mixture of contradictory elements that constitutes the carnal atmosphere of his native city."[4]

Dureau was rarely tempted to leave his hometown, that most exotic of Southern melting pots: its combination of antebellum architecture and filigreed wrought-iron balustrades, the plaintive saxophone an enduring echo through its narrow streets, its Cajun cuisine tropical and piquant, its verdant flora laden with Spanish moss dripping from the branches of the live oaks. The city has long maintained a reputation of tolerance for those who indulge in the sensate pleasures. Lafcadio Hearn, the nineteenth-century chronicler of life in New Orleans, arrived at a conclusion about its allure in 1878 that still holds true today: "There are few who can visit her for the first time without delight; and few who can ever leave her without regret; and none who can forget her strange charm when they have once felt its influence."[5]

To say that Dureau was a beloved fixture of New Orleans understates the sweep of his Rabelaisian persona. He was a bon vivant with a heart of gold, grand in manner yet not at all bourgeois. The allegorical frieze of stylish decadence he painted across the wall at the Café Sbisa in the 1970s is still renowned among French Quarterites; his cast bronze nudes are a cunning ornament on the gates of the New Orleans Museum of Art. Dureau's operatic stature in the Big Easy was the accepted wisdom in town, whether seated at dinner beside an elegant hostess in the historic Uptown district or lounging, happily inebriated, in the louche bars of his neighborhood. "George," as he was known wherever he went, invariably held court with oratory charm, a twinkle in his eye, and an ever-present sincerity of artistic purpose.

Often he could be found preparing an impromptu Dionysian banquet in his apartment on the upper floor of a quaint antebellum mansion, its broad balcony overlooking the trees that bestowed upon the street a languid sort of

grace. A generous host, he loved to cook for a carnival-like assortment of friends, patrons, and collectors. Artists, writers, and musicians of the French Quarter mingled in his studio with those who had been cast at the outer margins of the social contract: disenfranchised African Americans, amputees, dwarves,[6] drifters, and "street people." All were welcome at George's informal "salons," and some were also his models.

Everything Dureau did served his art-making, which was, above all else, at the forefront of his activities. He approached his work with focused curiosity and a rigor of method and practice. Productive throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Dureau equated his New Orleans with Paris in the nineteenth century, where artists were of a cohort, and their subjects were drawn from the communities in which they lived. Dureau took great pride in knowing the residents of his own neighborhood over the decades: his grocer, the proprietors of his local cafes, and the many subjects of his photographs. "I know the sons of people I photographed in the 1970s," he said with relish in 1991, when he was sixty years old. "If you're a classic art creature like I am, I live my life. It's reflected in my art; my art tells what I've learned or failed to learn about life. It's very hard to give that up and go someplace else."[7]

Bradley Sumrall, chief curator of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, who organized a retrospective of Dureau's work in 2012, had been a good friend of the artist during the later years of his life. Sumrall had arrived in New Orleans in 1993, a young gay man and aspiring poet in search of bohemian camaraderie in the storied French Quarter; he was disappointed to discover that that culture had all but vanished. "Then I met George Dureau," he said. "He was, to me, the last frontier of bohemia in New Orleans."[8]

THE ARTIST AND THE MODEL

For Dureau, being an artist meant that he was defined not by the respective classical mediums in which he worked (paint, charcoal, ink, graphite, or the camera); rather, it was a "way of being" that incorporated the circumstances

of his daily life into a set of visual concerns he derived from straightforward perceptual observation. His life's work was the insistent attempt to realize a classical idea of beauty in contemporary terms—and, also, on its own terms.

Dureau's life and art were fluid and inextricable, a gestalt that is fundamental to any consideration of his work. He chose his subjects from an ever-fluctuating circle of intimate friends and casual acquaintances over the course of a lifetime. "I'm the artist I grew up thinking an artist is supposed to be," he said. "I live a warm, involved, humanist sort of life. There are lots of people passing through it. I have exciting experiences and learn things about people. They always go into my art. I cannot have an experience and it not go into my art."[9]

The male nude figure is Dureau's photographic subject, whether a conventionally beautiful specimen of human anatomy or the dwarves, amputees, and people with birth abnormalities he sought out and included among his friends. In photographic sessions that would take up an entire afternoon, Dureau's interactions with his models were like casual, drawn-out conversations; he worked on the pose while trying to capture something authentic about the individual. "It's like the candor in a Manet portrait," Dureau said, rather fancifully, about what he was aiming for in his pictures. "That candor took Manet six months or six years to accomplish. You have to work at the candor, build it. . . . Sometimes I'd take two or three rolls of the same pose because I knew the pose was right. I just had to get the eyes right."[10]

He made many figure studies of the Apollo-like David Kopay, for example, the first National Football League player to announce he was gay, in 1975, and a regular visitor to New Orleans. In one series, Kopay appears as a classical nude, seated in profile, hands crossed around his knees—a direct visual reference to *Study (Young Male Nude Seated Beside the Sea)* by Flandrin, a neo-classical painting of the late eighteenth century that features a young man in the same position. Dureau would photograph other models in the Flandrin pose, as well (pp. TK).

In 1982, Dureau met a street hustler named Troy Brown, a handsome, white, classically proportioned young man who would prove to be anything but the wholesome boy next door. Dureau would photograph Brown off and on for years, while they also carried on a tumultuous relationship of a romantic nature. Brown was the irascible muse who required rescue, often from his own sordid demons.

The majority of Dureau's male subjects, however, were the antithesis of the straight, white American ideal. Since childhood he had been drawn to people who were handicapped, in particular those who were triumphant over their physical disadvantages. One such subject is Roosevelt Singleton (also known as Sonny Singleton and La Lubi Ali), an African American whose arms and legs were shortened by dwarfism. Singleton worked in a local garage near Dureau's apartment on Esplanade Avenue when they met in the early 1970s. In his sessions with Singleton, Dureau explored not only the visual properties of tone, light, and texture in the photographic image, but also those elements that pose challenges when rendered with paint: the way light and shadow fall on the figure, or fabric drapes across a shoulder. His nude studies of the well-toned Singleton provide, too, a forensic examination of proportion: Singleton's beautifully muscular torso and shortened legs are presented in classical poses that defy our instinctive grasp of nature's design (p. TK).

Dureau was often quick to point out that he did not consider himself a photographer, but rather a painter. Yet drawing seemed to be the backbone of his artistic practice, from which he would veer in one direction to the canvas or another to the camera. He equated drawing with the handwriting of the artist, and his own drawings to be the very signature of his visual experience. When he turned to the canvas, his subjects became "more operatic," he said. "If, on the other hand, I decide that I'm fascinated by the person I'm drawing or thinking about, I'll turn to the camera—the clinical talent the camera has for capturing things."[11]

Dureau seasoned his oratory with a kind of grandeur of thinking, bordering not infrequently on the tendentious. Still, his proclamations were

insightful. Describing, for example, the significance of drawing in his own work, he cited Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Rubens to highlight the simplicity and honesty of their drawings, in contrast to the expansive performance of their paintings. Drawing comes closest to what the artist's eye sees in the immediacy of the moment, the intimacy of hand on pen or pencil affording an innocence that is difficult to sustain in the slow deliberation of paint to canvas.

"I love drawing and I draw everyday," Dureau said. "It is the link. Line and form as they are in my drawings are always going to hold the whip on everything else. What I draw in the morning is going to influence the way I pose someone in the afternoon. The contour from the head down to the leg in a drawing is going to come up in a pose in my photographs."[12]

Drawing is an invention, Dureau liked to say. The lines in a drawing don't exist in nature; line is created to serve two-dimensional representation on the page. In equal measure he considered "the photograph" an abstraction. "That may explain my tremendous attraction to black-and-white photography," he said. "You're taking only line and form and the shapes between things, the positive shapes and negative shapes and making them into your picture."[13]

Drawing might have been the perceptual exercise that inspired Dureau when posing his photographic subjects, but his paintings were prone to evolve into elaborate mythical and phantasmagorical tableaux, which he then accented with references from one era of art history to another. Some figures are rendered proportionately and, at times, with striking realism—but, then, a limb will turn into the leg of a Louis Quinze chair. His photographs, however, render a purity of classical line and compositional balance. The picture frame is stripped of objects and the focus is solely on the figure: natural, unadorned, presented with matter-of-fact authenticity, which affords Dureau's models symbolic resonance as the gods and heroes of his art historical—and erotic—imagination.

Edward Lucie-Smith, the notable British art critic, likened Dureau's paintings to the Great Altar of Pergamon, with its battle of Greek gods and giants,

and the mosaic of Pella, which formed part of a Macedonian palace that may have been known to Alexander. Yet these allusions apply equally to his photographs as figure studies: “These Hellenistic motifs are autobiographical,” Lucie-Smith writes of Dureau’s work. “A triton may also be a portrait of the legless B.J., a beautiful young godling takes on the likes of Troy Brown.”[14]

Dureau’s photographs compose a substantial portion of his oeuvre and exemplify the tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian forces he was working out in every one of his pictures—by his own admission, the Romantic ideals of Théodore Géricault’s boldly expressive paintings, versus the restrained, neoclassical precision of Ingres. His visual quotation of *The Bather* by Ingres, for example, is apparent in the photograph of Louis Goins sitting on the edge of a draped platform, his back to the camera, which he titled *Goins Does Ingres* (p. TK).

In the late 1960s, when Dureau was given an inexpensive camera, he began to summon the underprivileged, multiracial teenagers in his neighborhood up to his studio, offering them something to eat if they would pose for him. He considered his pictures nothing more than reference material for his paintings. But, in the early 1970s, as he became increasingly interested in the properties of the photographic medium, he bought a Hasselblad and started to compose his photographs with greater attention to the subtleties of natural light on film, the optical accuracy of line and description, and balance within the photographic picture frame.

Dureau liked to cruise for sexual partners while riding his bicycle around the French Quarter, and this is how he sought out photographic models, as well. It was while riding his bike through the district that he first acquainted himself with the so-called “midget wrestlers” of a national wrestling circuit, some of whom would later stay with him when they were in town. Some agreed to pose for his photographs; some would have sex with him, too.

It was while riding his bike one day that he first encountered B.J. Robinson, in the 1970s, lying on his skateboard and paddling through the

streets with his hands. Robinson was a well-built young man who had been born with stumps for legs that had to be amputated early in his life. Robinson became one of Dureau's regular models; he photographed him over the course of twenty years. The musculature of Robinson's well-proportioned torso tapers quite abruptly at crotch-level, where his body simply ends. Here, the photograph does not lie; there is no manipulation. Dureau presents Robinson as he is (p. TK).

Dureau's photographs celebrate the people of his community who are not usually given a platform of such honest regard. He acquaints us with deformity not as something "freakish" and "other," but, rather, as something natural, presenting his models with unflinching visual clarity while also rendering what resonates as truthful about them as individuals. At the same time, he was ever in pursuit of a classical representation of the human form—in any permutation. "My models are people who are beautiful and sexy and the fact that there's a stump where an arm or a leg should be doesn't mar their sexiness or their beauty," Dureau said. "You don't say, 'Well, let's throw out this little Roman sculpture because it's partly broken.'"[15]

Dureau's munificence was apparent in the egalitarian spirit with which he welcomed everyone. "He would take a wounded bird from the street and help him," said William Fagaly, a senior curator at the New Orleans Museum of Art.[16] Dureau fed his models when they posed for him. He provided shelter for them, too, if necessary, and even paid their electric bills or their doctor's bills. His respect for his models is evident in the tenor of mood captured in a subject's expression or gesture—the "candor in a Manet portrait." Yet, despite the careful deliberation of position, composition, exposure, and tone, he still considered his photographs to be a means to an end, references for his painting. His photographs, then, levitate between "the portrait" and "the figure study."

"Those familiar with the photographs of George Dureau easily recognize his distinctive style, the intimacy and respect apparent between the subject and photographer, and the reserved, traditional approach to the process," wrote

Bradley Sumrall in the introduction to his exhibition of Dureau's work at the Ogden Museum, further observing that "the classical composition creates an environment where the figures become iconic—an amputee becomes a broken Hellenic statue, a neighborhood hustler becomes a warrior bronze."[17]

THE GAY SENSIBILITY

In the early 1970s, not long after the Stonewall riots—the symbolic beginning of the gay liberation movement in America—gay life in New York became more visible, and the media seized on homosexuality, for so long a social taboo, as a controversial subject of debate. Simultaneously, photography's stature was growing in the realm of the fine arts. These two phenomena may have occurred as a coincidence of history and timing, but by the end of that decade, the "gay sensibility" would become an indelible ingredient in photography's coming-of-age. It was in the early 1970s, too, that Dureau would bring a greater consistency of purpose to his own exploration of the photographic image.

Before the gay-rights movement in America, homosexuals walked a tightrope between oppression and desire. Gay men and lesbians were painfully isolated, constantly fearful of being found out, obsessively protective of their fundamental secret—a revelation certain, if discovered, to destroy their lives. It's worth noting that until 1963 the *New York Times* used the words "pervert" and "homosexual" interchangeably.[18]

In 1964, Dureau was the victim of police harassment for homosexuality. The vice squad raided a party in his apartment on Esplanade Avenue and arrested him and seventy-two guests on the pretext of disturbing the peace. The police sergeant called it a "scene of Communist propaganda, homosexual parties, and integration agitation." Another officer described the attendees as "mostly homosexuals. There were lots of beatniks, strumming guitars with no tune for hours and things like that going on. Intellectual conversations without any point." True to his rebellious nature, Dureau was booked additionally with resisting arrest.[19]

Until the rise of gay liberation, the eye of the homosexual had been trained in a code of furtiveness, unable to roam freely on the street or in the public or private rooms he occupied. To underscore the point, until 1965 it had been illegal to send photographs of the male nude through the U.S. Postal Service. *Drum*, a physique magazine, was the first publication in which a full-frontal male nude appeared legally in print, in 1965.[20] It would be a radical gesture, then, to exhibit photographs of the male nude in the 1970s.

The art historian Richard Meyer, writing about an early Robert Mapplethorpe assemblage, identifies the tightrope between oppression and desire that so many homosexuals walked before the early years of the gay-rights movement in America: "[Mapplethorpe] presents the naked male body as both a target of prohibition and a source of pleasure, as both an example of censorship and a defiance of it."[21] These dualities are at the core of the gay sensibility, which came out of the homosexual experience of alienation from society. The carefully protected secret of forbidden desire required the homosexual to lead a double life, not only for social acceptance but also for purposes of safety. Out of this partitioned existence emerged a number of survival mechanisms: irony became a lingua franca, paradoxical wit a salve for pain and longing, and aesthetic idealization a surrogate for sexual pleasure.

In the 1970s, as the gay-rights movement became more visible, the coded protections of the closet, such as the notion of "camp," slowly fell away. Homoerotic desire was more directly manifest in the work of Dureau and his contemporaries: Mapplethorpe, Peter Hujar, Duane Michals, Arthur Tress, and, later, Jimmy DeSana and David Wojnarowicz. Yet, the ease with which George Dureau began rendering the male nude in the late 1960s anticipated all of them. Dureau was a pioneer among his contemporaries; however, Mapplethorpe would be first to show his homoerotic work in a New York gallery, in 1977, eclipsing them all with his nearly immediate fame.

In 1981, Dureau had a one-man show at the Robert Samuels Gallery, the only gallery in New York at the time to show homoerotic work exclusively. Gene Thornton reviewed the show in the *New York Times*:

> Like Irving Penn, Dureau knows how to organize figures, background, and props into compositions that are formal, even classical, without ever seeming unnatural, and he uses natural light to achieve monumental sculptural effects. Many of Dureau's sitters gaze out at the world with a bitter defiance that dares the viewer to try to get closer. Yet Dureau, with gentle tact, penetrates their defenses and reveals the true strength, as well as the weaknesses, that they can feel.[22]

Nudity served many purposes for Dureau. "The human body is eternal, but clothing styles change from day to day," he said, "so painting a person in contemporary clothing reduces the painting to pop art or to a clothing store advertisement."[23] As a sensualist and a gay man, Dureau relied on nudity to serve his own libidinal desires, as well. The naked model—whether Caucasian, African American, or physically deformed—was in a position of supplication as Dureau, in the studio, instructed him to move in one direction or another. Somewhere deep in the coding of the sexual impulse is a need to be worshipped by a lover; conversely, the unbridled worship of an object of desire is at the very heart of carnal lust. Dureau seemed to reflect both sides of this psychosexual dynamic while photographing the male nude figure, driven as much by aesthetic veneration of the model as by his artistic and erotic control of his subject. Despite the fact that many of his models defined themselves as heterosexual, Dureau was quite vocal about letting people know that he was a dominant sexual partner.

It was not braggadocio with which Dureau proclaimed that he was "capable of entertaining affairs with everyone on earth at the same time." The erotic was an ingredient he was particularly attuned to in establishing human contact, whether it resulted in sexual activity or not. It helped him to identify some essence of his subjects during his photographic sessions. "I make love to them while I shoot them," Dureau told Jack Fritscher, the founding editor of Drummer magazine. "I play with people a lot. I downright seduce them. I grease them with heavy Vaseline. I got that from my kickboxer friends." Dureau believed that if he contributed anything to photography, "it's my ability to picture the model's sexuality in their brain or in their life as told through their face."[24]

Charles Baudelaire, the French poet, believed that art resided outside of morality, but was not amoral. His prose poem, "A Heroic Death," examines the balance between aesthetics and ethics that art, according to Ludwig Wittgenstein, necessarily strikes. The poem is about the friendship between a clown and a prince, one symbolizing art and the other power. Baudelaire's description of the clown, Fancioulle, might describe the level of reverence Dureau brought to his subjects:

> The buffoon went, came, laughed, wept, contorted himself, with an indestructible halo around his head, a halo invisible to everyone, but visible to me, and in which were blended, in a strange amalgam, the rays of Art and the glory of Martyrdom. . . . Fancioulle proved to me, in a peremptory, irrefutable way, that the intoxication of art is more apt than any other to veil the terrors of the abyss . . . [25]

DUREAU AND MAPPLETHORPE

Any discussion of Dureau's photographic oeuvre is incomplete without acknowledgment of his complicated friendship with Robert Mapplethorpe, his peer and intermittent rival. The cross-pollination between the two is of art historical significance. Both were pioneers in photographing the male nude; both photographed African American men; and both were indifferent—at times defiant—about the cultural taboo against homosexuality, which, in the years they overlapped, was still a virulent societal force to be reckoned with, despite the growing visibility of gay culture in the 1970s.

Dureau began photographing the male nude in the late 1960s. Mapplethorpe, a decade younger than Dureau, claimed photography as his defining medium in 1972, roughly the same time Dureau had begun to photograph his models with his newly acquired Hasselblad. Both were working simultaneously, but independently, without awareness of the other. It was not until the mid-1970s that Mapplethorpe, in New York—with the support of Sam Wagstaff, the influential curator and photography collector who was his lover, mentor, and patron—first brought homoerotic

representation in photographic imagery to the museum and gallery wall. Mapplethorpe's reputation as an enfant terrible with explosive subject matter—the homoerotically infused male nude—grew rapidly, and internationally. He and Dureau wouldn't meet until 1979, after Mapplethorpe first saw Dureau's work in a group show at the Robert Samuels Gallery in New York,.

George and Robert shared similar cruising practices even before they met. Just as George's bicycle expeditions through the streets of the French Quarter served dual purposes, so too did Robert's nightly forays through the gay bars of the West Village in New York: he would pick men up, take them home to have sex, and then, in the morning, insist on photographing them.

Throughout the 1980s, Mapplethorpe visited Dureau in New Orleans with increasing frequency. He bought Dureau's pictures; sometimes they swapped photos. Specifically, Mapplethorpe was interested in Dureau's African American male nudes, and he would observe the way George worked. At night, they would go out and cruise the bars together. Mapplethorpe had photographed black men only sporadically before seeing Dureau's images, but, increasingly, he sought black men as sexual partners and photographic models.

It is worth pointing out that Mapplethorpe would become a consistent target of criticism over issues of racial exploitation. Cited as a gay white artist, Mapplethorpe's "fetishization" of black men was epitomized by one picture, in particular: *Man in Polyester Suit*, 1980. The black model appears in a three-piece suit, his head outside the frame; only his hands are visible, and, also, his immense, protuberant penis dangling from his open fly. In 1990, Essex Hemphill, a gay black poet, attacked Mapplethorpe (after his death) for this picture, writing, "What is insulting and endangering to Black men is Mapplethorpe's *conscious* determination that the faces, the heads, and, by extension, the minds and experiences of some of his Black subjects are not as important as close-up shots of their cocks." In fact, Mapplethorpe had honored the wishes of his model, Milton Moore, who did not want his face visible for fear of being identified by his

family. That said, Hemphill goes on to write, accurately, that racist conditioning rendered gay white men no different from heterosexual white men: "Coming out of the closet to confront sexual oppression has not necessarily given white males the motivation or insight to transcend the racist conditioning."[26]

While Dureau and Mapplethorpe both photographed the male nude, their respective formal concerns and artistic intentions distinguish their bodies of work. "Perhaps our photographs of black men, where some people see similarity, is where we were most divergent," Dureau told Jack Fritscher. "My photographs look like my paintings and drawings. I'm very much a humanist. I'm very involved with the people I shoot." Of course, Dureau's noble intentions cannot fully erase his own racial exploitation—especially in the context of New Orleans's previous role as America's largest slave market. "When cotton was king," it has been noted, "New Orleans was its queen city."[27] As a major hub of the thriving cotton industry, plantation owners in the nineteenth century flocked to New Orleans to purchase slaves. Today, those numerous slave auction sites are an essential attraction on any guided tour throughout the French Quarter. Yet this lingering remnant of racial inequality, in such close geographic and historic proximity, is a conspicuous rebuke to the lack of circumspection with which Dureau boasted of sexual—and, inadvertently, racial—dominance: "I'm an old-fashioned Greco-Roman patriarch queer, not a flip-flop queer," he said. "I'm the dominant male about the house. I have gorgeous young men who work for me. My house is a kind of genteel colony of the underclass, but I'm Big Daddy always."[28]

Despite the complexity of Dureau's chauvinistic approach to his beloved models, he photographed them in a simple and unstylized manner; he did not use strobes or artificial lighting. He wanted the artifice to fall away as he photographed his subjects, as if the camera was not in the room. Mapplethorpe, by contrast, utilized the studio elements of artifice—lighting, backdrop, and props—to formalize the subject, to create a photographic event. His models are lit with intention; the human form becomes sculptural, the body inanimate, as if a minimalist object. Mapplethorpe's magazine-style use of strobes and lighting was

“too MGM,” Dureau said. “I don’t do that. I don’t want to scare my darlings, or my tricks, to death.”

While Mapplethorpe had romantic relationships with several of the men who modeled for him, it was his general practice to keep a professional distance from most of the people he photographed. Although he might initially become acquainted with them in the most intimate manner, his engagement with them as models would remain impersonal. Photographing his conquests in the morning light allowed the lingering physical passion and tactile experience of the night before to inform his visual scrutiny of the subject in the clear light of day. The camera gave him a measure of distance to view the model objectively. The absence of emotional connection was necessary for him to achieve the aesthetic idealization he was after—the arctic elegance he is known for.

Artists necessarily borrow from one another, and Dureau and Mapplethorpe were no exception. Each liked to take credit as the predominant influence on the other, but the truth is that they both influenced each other in the end.. Over the years, as Mapplethorpe’s reputation grew and he was increasingly defined by shocking subject matter in the public sphere, signatures of his work could be seen creeping into Dureau’s photographs. For example, in one picture that departs from Dureau’s natural style, Troy Brown appears against a black background, standing naked in profile, adorned with S&M paraphernalia, his musculature highlighted, his perfect proportions and classic beauty alluding to ancient Greece. The lighting and abstract idealization is pure Mapplethorpe—in the very “MGM” manner that Dureau had disparaged (p. TK).

At the same time, Dureau’s influence on Mapplethorpe is manifest in the Mapplethorpe photograph of Ken Moody from 1983: the model stands with his back to the camera; stumps appear where his arms have been folded in front of him—a direct reference to Dureau’s photographs of amputees.

In the end, the greater artistic affinity resides between the work of Dureau and Peter Hujar, who lived only blocks from Mapplethorpe in the 1970s and 1980s. Dureau and Hujar share a humanity of spirit and an absence

of artifice that distinguishes their work from Mapplethorpe's, despite the fact that all three manifested the "gay sensibility" at a particular moment in time.

Perhaps their independent art-making practices exemplify the Jungian idea of "synchronicity," when a new idea pops up in different regions simultaneously. It is clear today that Dureau, Mapplethorpe, and Hujar, among their contemporaries, were making work that, collectively, embodies the deep current of social and sexual change that rose so powerfully to the surface of their era in the 1970s and '80s.

HISTORIC LEGACIES

The male nude figure appears throughout Greco-Roman antiquities and, also, in the history of Italian painting and sculpture. The phallus, however, was rarely—if ever—rendered with the detail and natural proportion seen in a photograph. The invention of photography afforded an optical precision with which life was captured in facsimile. For some, this would be reason enough to banish such clear description of male genitalia. Male nudity—often infused with the homoerotic—appears in the photographs of Thomas Eakins in the nineteenth century, F. Holland Day and Baron von Gloeden in the early twentieth century, and George Platt Lynes in the mid-twentieth century. However, because of the strict laws against homosexuality in America, photographs of the male nude were not exhibited on the museum or gallery wall until the 1970s.

Mapplethorpe was a pioneer in that regard, perhaps the first among his contemporaries to exhibit work that crossed several cultural boundaries in the depiction of sexual contact between men—which had been illegal only ten years earlier—and of sadomasochistic activity. He and Dureau, in particular, crossed additional boundaries in their representation of African American men in a society that privileged whiteness; Dureau's other transgressive subject matter included, of course, the physical abnormality of so many of his models, whom he presented naked, not as freaks but as human beings worthy of

respect. Peter Hujar's work was transgressive because of his matter-of-fact photographs of men with erections, men reaching orgasm, and, also, people engaged in eccentric, parasexual activity—such as a nude figure sucking his own toe.

Dureau's photography, as well as the work of Mapplethorpe and Hujar, must be considered within the genre of portraiture, as well. The legacy of portraiture in the history of photography formulates a visual pantheon that reaches back to Nadar's (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon) refined portraits of artists and writers in nineteenth-century France; Julia Margaret Cameron's romanticized portraits of poets and thinkers in nineteenth-century England; Berenice Abbott's stalwart portraits of her expatriate circle of artists and writers in 1920s Paris; and August Sander's typological portraits of professionals at every level of German society, in the early twentieth century. In the 1930s and '40s, Edward Steichen, Cecil Beaton, and Horst P. Horst all made highly stylized magazine portraits of their accomplished contemporaries, often fashionably dressed and glamorously posed in context of elegant accoutrements. Of course, Richard Avedon and Irving Penn seized the mantle for the remainder of the twentieth century.

Mapplethorpe, too, photographed a broad swath of accomplished artists, writers, and celebrities of his era: William Burroughs, for example, as well as Richard Gere, Grace Jones, and Andy Warhol. Hujar photographed his downtown Manhattan circle of notable bohemian friends and acquaintances, from Candy Darling to Charles Ludlam and Susan Sontag.

Fame or accomplishment, however, is not required for a portrait to be of significance. In the early twentieth century, E. J. Bellocq made photographic portraits of prostitutes in the French Quarter of New Orleans; a debate continues today about whether his enterprise was a defiance of censorship, or a catalogue for prospective clients. In the 1930s and '40s, Mike Disfarmer set up a studio in Heber Springs, Arkansas, and photographed a steady stream of townspeople in an American Gothic style of vernacular

portraiture that was singularly his own. Malick Sidibé did the same thing in Bamako, Mali. And, of course, Diane Arbus photographed strangers and acquaintances alike, who were by no means of public renown.

In this tradition, Dureau's pantheon consists of the disparate, unknown, and disenfranchised characters of the French Quarter. Dureau's photographs are formally articulate and emotionally tender. Their beauty derives from their simplicity and humility, but, also, the current of eroticism evident in Dureau's gaze and even summoned in the viewer. It is Dureau's great accomplishment to render the individuals of his local community so worthy of history's attention: human, powerful, sexual, and humble, as if to say that figures of folklore, legend, and myth had been inspired from daily circumstance and human flesh, out of the palpable experience of ordinary life.

[1] Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, trans. David Luke (New York: Bantam Classics, 1988), 340.
[2] John Lahr, *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 69. Quote from a letter Williams wrote to Audrey Wood, January 15, 1946: "Right now I am doing more with the sisters, it is now set in New Orleans and is called 'A Streetcar Named Desire'—there is one by that title that runs close by my apartment, and proceeding in the other direction down the next street is one called 'Cemeteries.'"
[3] Author's telephone conversation with Kenneth Holditch, June 8, 2015.
[4] Kenneth Holditch, essay for the exhibition *George Dureau: Selected Works 1960–1977*, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, 1977.
[5] Lafcadio Hearn, "The Glamour of New Orleans," in *Inventing New Orleans: The Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, ed. S. Frederick Starr (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 187.
[6] According to the organization Little People of America, most people with dwarfism prefer to be called either a little person or dwarf. "Little People of America: FAQ," http://www.lpaonline.org/faq-.
[7] Jack Fritscher, video interview with George Dureau, New Orleans, April 8, 1991.
[8] Author's conversation with Bradley Sumrall, New Orleans, May 27, 2015.
[9] Fritscher.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Edward Lucie-Smith, wall text for George Dureau exhibition, Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, 1988.
[15] Jack Fritscher, interview with George Dureau, "When Cameras Collide: Dureau, Disability and Dueling with Mapplethorpe," *True Tales*, August 2005. `http://truetales.org/writings/fritscher0508dureaumapplethorpe.htm`.
[16] Author's conversation with William Fagaly, New Orleans, May 28, 2015.
[17] Bradley Sumrall, "The Baroque Bohemian of the French Quarter: George Dureau to be Honored at the Ogden Museum," *Louisiana Cultural Vistas Quarterly*, Fall 2011, 35.
[18] See Rodger Streitmatter, *From "Perverts" to "Fab Five": The Media's Changing Depiction of Gay Men and Lesbians* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.
[19] "73 Arrested In Vice Raid On Esplanade," *New Orleans States-Item*, July 29, 1964.
[20] Rachel Kranz and Tim Cusick, *Gay Rights, Revised Edition* (New York: Facts on File, 2005), 72.
[21] Richard Meyer, *Art and Queer Culture* (New York: Phaidon, 2013), 131.
[22] Gene Thornton, "Critics' Choice," *New York Times*, March 1, 1981.

[23] Sumrall, "The Baroque Bohemian," 34.
[24] Jack Fritscher, *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera* (San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 1994), 243.
[25] Edward K. Kaplan, *Baudelaire's Prose Poems: The Aesthetic, the Ethical and the Religious in The Parisian Prowler* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012)
[26] Edmund White, essay, in Robert Mapplethorpe, *Robert Mapplethorpe: Altars* (New York: Random House, 1995), 130.
[27] Eve Abrams, "Remembering New Orleans' Overlooked Ties to Slavery," National Public Radio, July 18, 2015..

See also Erin Greenwald, "Purchased Lives: New Orleans and the Domestic Slave Trade, 1808–1865," 2015. http://www.academia.edu/16710542/Purchased_Lives_New_Orleans_and_the_Domestic_Slave_Trade.
[28] Fritscher, *Mapplethorpe*, 237.