

Bob Carlos Clarke

Described as both crazy and brilliant, **Bob Carlos Clarke** is best known for his fetishistic imagery of women. His still lifes, while driven by the same erotic fantasies, are an example of the breadth of his work. Elizabeth Roberts looks back on his life



© SCARLET CARLOS CLARKE

WHEN BOB CARLOS CLARKE threw himself in the path of an oncoming train on 25 March this year, the photography world recoiled in shock. He was 55 years old, married with a teenage daughter and highly successful in his field – with seemingly everything to live for. But behind the exterior lay a darker side. Fascinated with death and with a fear of growing old, he had been suffering from severe depression in the weeks leading up to that fatal Saturday morning. Ironically, 12 days later he was buried at Brompton Cemetery which he had photographed on many occasions. In his book, *The Dark Summer*, he wrote: ‘Graveyards exude a strange combination of peace and tension. The mood is unpredictable: they may be threatening in sunlight or tranquil under a thunderous sky...’

Carlos Clarke’s life seems to have held a similar dichotomy. Born in Ireland, he was sent to prep school in Dublin and later to public school in England where his wild and creative personality failed to fit in. On leaving school he had a brief flirtation with journalism but gave it up to attend art college, going on to do an MA in photography at the RCA.

From the start, he was fascinated by women and soon moved into the world of glamour and fetishistic photography but, at the same time, he became an obsessive print-maker. While not to everyone’s taste, his work was regarded as exceptional. He covered fashion, portraiture and commercial photography and worked for

some of the biggest names – Smirnoff and Volkswagen among them. He produced a series of books in which he transposed his commercial skills to the world of voyeurism and sensuality.

The pictures you see here reveal another dimension to his work, and yet confirm his subversive approach. The fetishistic aspect of his overtly sexual imagery creeps into these still-lives.

He wrote in his book *Shooting Sex*, ‘My most satisfying photographs are not exclusively of women. Just as some people are supercharged with sex appeal, certain objects, either natural or designed, are inherently sensual.’

These pictures are impregnated with the same preoccupations that are played

eventually get involved with the river. Beneath the dank, echoing bridges with the constant muffled drone of the city above, it’s another world – a cemetery for the debris of our civilisation. The detritus of modern life lies everywhere – tools, bones, clothing, condoms and cutlery, all clad in a uniform of grey black mud, each object bearing the imprint of its provenance and the scars of experience.’

His images of knives and forks are deceptively simple but with an element of disquietude about them. *Lock, 1991*, which portrays two forks entwined, is his tender and erotic representation of himself and his wife Lindsey. ‘His personal pictures came from all sorts of things – the pictures of roses came about

‘His images of knives and forks are deceptively simple but with an element of disquietude about them’

out repeatedly in his pictures – in fact, it is these obsessions that appear to drive the creative process itself. ‘He was always experimenting,’ says Ghislain Pascal, his agent at Panic Pictures. ‘But whatever he shot, he interpreted in his own way.’

Carlos Clarke was a dedicated beachcomber both in London where he scoured the banks of the Thames and at his south coast house. In *Shooting Sex* he wrote, ‘My London home overlooks the Thames, so it was inevitable that I would

because Lindsey stole them from a neighbour’s garden!’ says Ghislain.

But, Carlos Clarke’s creativity came at a price that was finally paid when his fascination with death turned on himself. What he leaves behind is tribute enough to his life. **B&W**

RIGHT Untitled 1991





Lock 1991



England 1991



Roses (undated)

Marlene 1991





LEFT Scissors 1991
ABOVE Untitled 1991

DARK GENIUS

A permanent exhibition of Bob Carlos Clarke's work entitled *Dark Genius* is at Marco Pierre White's restaurant, Luciano, at 72-73 St James's Street, London SW1A; tel 020 7408 1440