

ICONIC PHOTOGRAPHER

# Bob Carlos Clarke

1950-2006

**Bob Carlos Clarke's** provocative work and outspoken opinions concealed a dark side to his personality. **David Clark** looks at the life of this restless, creative and ultimately tragic character

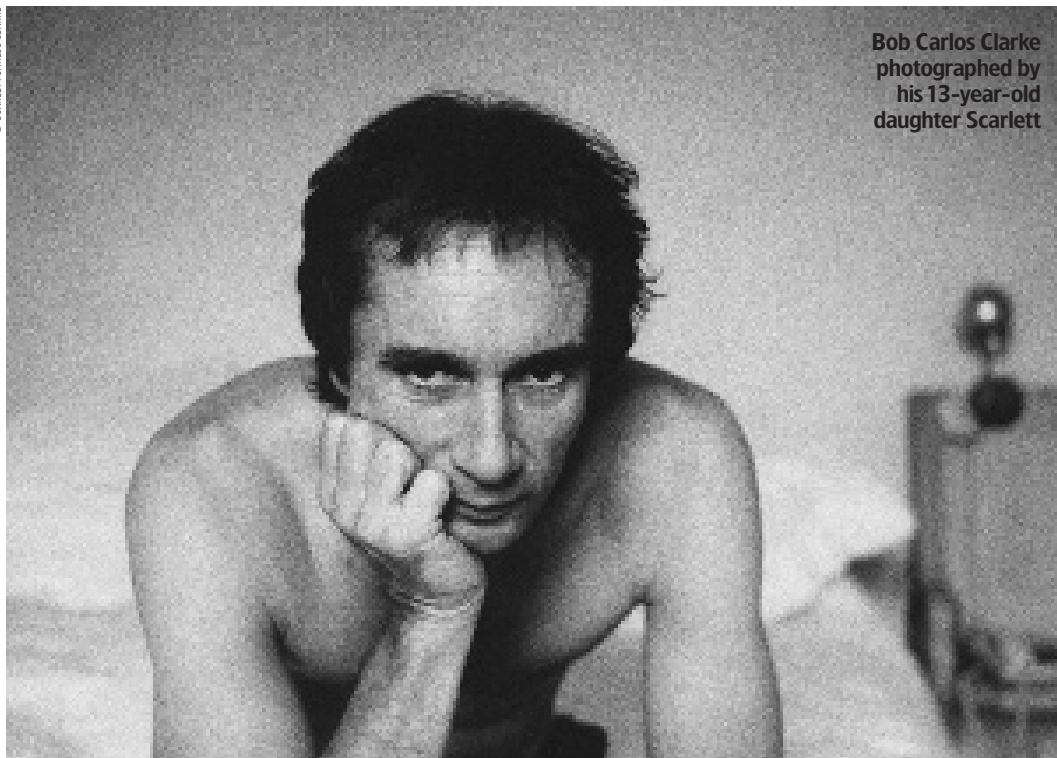
**B**OB Carlos Clarke's bold, well-crafted images made him one of the most famous photographers of his generation. He is most often associated with glamorous, confrontational images of beautiful women, often rubber-clad and depicted as dominant and physically flawless. Yet his work encompassed a much wider range of subjects, including celebrity portraits and still-life studies. Admired by his peers and popular with the public, his work is now achieving the kind of success in the fine-art world that eluded him in his lifetime.

Carlos Clarke, the son of a retired major, was born and brought up in Ireland. He later wrote that '1950s Southern Ireland was a fertile environment for the cultivation of sexual oddity, rife with papal propaganda, Protestant prudery, bigotry, hypocrisy and ignorance.' He spent ten unhappy years at public schools from the age of eight. This included several years at Wellington College in England, from where he wrote frequent tearful letters to his parents.

After leaving school he went to Worthing College of Art in West Sussex. Sex was a driving force in his work from the outset and he claimed that he took up photography as a way of getting to know a beautiful girl in the year above him called Sue, who did part-time modelling. She soon became his lover and later his first wife.

Carlos Clarke's passion for the medium was immediate; he had found something he enjoyed doing and which also enabled him to meet and photograph attractive women without their clothes on. To generate income he began photographing nudes for publications, including *Men Only* and *Penthouse*, while continuing his education. He undertook a degree in photography at the London College of Printing and went on to complete

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Bob Carlos Clarke  
photographed by  
his 13-year-old  
daughter Scarlett

☞ I shot the cutlery to stop myself going crazy, and I consider these and the stones to be among my best photographs ☞

an MA in the subject at the Royal College of Art in 1975.

During his time at college a friend introduced him to rubber-wear and photographing models in fetish gear became a recurring element in his work in the years that followed. He

later admitted that he got himself 'thoroughly rubber-stamped with a reputation that became an embarrassment.'

His first book, in which he provided images to illustrate Anaïs Nin's erotic novel *Delta of Venus*, was published in 1980. This was the start of a decade in which Carlos Clarke became a highly successful photographer. He was commissioned to shoot portraits, advertising campaigns for high-profile clients and glamour calendars. In the studio, Carlos Clarke often used his larger-than-life persona to provoke a reaction from his models, while his attention to technical perfection, particularly lighting, bordered on the obsessive.

He went on to shoot portraits of celebrities including Keith Richards,

Dita Von Teese and Rachel Weisz. However, he generally preferred working with unknown models. He would often approach girls in the street and ask them to pose for him, or go out late at night to London nightclubs to search for his next muse.

Despite his addiction to high-energy photo shoots with glamorous women, there was also a completely different side to his work. He enjoyed still-lives and his subjects were mainly found objects such as stones, flowers and cutlery. 'I shot the cutlery to stop myself going crazy,' he later said, 'and I consider these and the stones to be among my best photographs.'

After the sinking of the *Marchioness* pleasure boat on the Thames in 1989, he spent months scouring

'Black Is My True Love's Heart'. After a friend introduced Carlos Clarke to rubber-wear while at college, photographing models in fetish gear became a recurring element in his work



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'Lock'. The two forks entwined are said to be Carlos Clarke's tender and erotic representation of himself and his wife Lindsey

the river bank in search of relics to photograph. These images were later published in a charity calendar.

Carlos Clarke enjoyed many successful years in the business. However, his high-energy, unpredictable personality and the kind of work he liked to create eventually contributed to his downfall.

Although he had highly creative phases there was also a profoundly dark side to his character. His second wife, Lindsey, has said that towards the end of his life he often talked about suicide or sank into deep depressions. At the same time, the price of having a distinctive and successful style was that he was still strongly associated with it after it was no longer fashionable. Commissions became less plentiful.

Although he continued working and published the autobiographical book *Shooting Sex* in 2003, he was behaving increasingly erratically. In early 2006 he was admitted for treatment to The Priory in south London, where he was declared psychotic and initially put on suicide watch. It seemed that he was responding to treatment, but on 25 March he walked to a level crossing at Barnes, leaped the barrier and

Never underestimate the importance of your unrepeatable, irreplaceable, iconic photographs

jumped in front of a train. It was an end that many of those people closest to him saw as tragic but in some ways sadly inevitable.

Since his death, Carlos Clarke's work has become highly sought-after by collectors and his images have appeared in the National Portrait Gallery – an honour denied in his lifetime. He himself was aware of the allure that a tragic death brings to an artist's work. 'For the purposes of defication, an early and appropriate death is essential,' he wrote in *Shooting Sex*. 'If you want to qualify as a legend, get famous young, die tragically and dramatically, and never underestimate the importance of your unrepeatable, irreplaceable, iconic photographs.' **AP**

# Amateur Photographer ICONS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

## Decisive moments

- 1950** Born in Cork, Republic of Ireland
- 1964** Sent to Wellington College, an English public school in Berkshire
- 1969** Attends Worthing College of Art, where he develops his passion for photography
- 1975** Completes an MA in photography at the Royal College of Art
- 1980** Publishes his first book, *The Illustrated Delta of Venus*
- 1987** Produces a series of original portraits of the chef Marco Pierre White, published three years later in the book *White Heat*
- 1990s** Writes a regular column in *Amateur Photographer*, titled *Devil's Advocate*
- 1999** Produces the 'Cutlery' photographs, a series of fine-art, still-life studies
- 2003** Publishes perhaps his most famous book, *Shooting Sex: The Definitive Guide to Undressing Beautiful Strangers*
- 2006** Commits suicide at the age of 55 by jumping in front of a train at a level crossing in Barnes, south London

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Carlos Clarke photographing model Vanessa Upton, who developed a more outrageous style the more she worked with him



## Books

Bob Carlos Clarke produced five books in his lifetime: *The Illustrated Delta of Venus*, *Obsession*, *The Dark Summer*, *White Heat* and *Shooting Sex*. All are available at [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk), either new or used. There's also an informative and candid biography, *Exposure: The Unusual Life and Violent Death of Bob Carlos Clarke* by Simon Garfield.

## Websites

Carlos Clarke's official website is [www.bobcarlosclarke.com](http://www.bobcarlosclarke.com). It offers a slideshow of his most famous images, a selection of tributes that appeared in the press after his death, a brief biography and details of print sales.