



Mapplethorpe, Robert (1946-1989)

by Ken Gonzales-Day

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Gifted American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe brought rigorously formal composition and design, and an objectifying "cool" eye, to extreme subject matter. In so doing, he sparked a firestorm of outrage that led to debate about the public funding of art in the United States.

Born into a Catholic family in Queens, New York on November 4, 1946, Mapplethorpe grew up in suburban Long Island. He studied painting, sculpture, and drawing at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn from 1963 until 1969, when he moved to the Chelsea Hotel with the singer and poet Patti Smith, who was to become one of his favorite models.

In the early 1970s, Mapplethorpe began making black and white photographs. In 1972, he began a long-term intimate relationship with Sam Wagstaff, former curator of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford and the Detroit Institute of Arts, who served as his mentor as well as his lover.

Wagstaff encouraged Mapplethorpe's photography and helped arrange for his first solo show, "Polaroids," at the Light Gallery in 1973. Subsequently, Mapplethorpe began exhibiting widely and quickly earned a reputation as an extraordinarily accomplished photographer.

In 1978, Mapplethorpe published the *X Portfolio* and the *Y Portfolio* in limited editions. *X* centers around photographic images of S&M behavior, while *Y* focuses on flowers and still lifes. In 1981, Mapplethorpe published the *Z Portfolio*, which focuses on black men, also in a limited edition.

Together, these three portfolios represent his best known work and his persistent themes. His photographs typically combine rigorously formal composition and design with extreme--often explicitly sexual--subject matter. Even his still lifes and other non-sexual images convey a strong sexual aura.

Mapplethorpe's gaze is particularly noteworthy for its cool detachment even when recording scenes of intense sexual activity. The artist typically presents masculine bodies as objectified icons of desire.

Mapplethorpe's objectification and fetishization of the black male body has been particularly controversial, especially since the publication of *The Black Book* in 1986. The controversial photograph "Man in a Polyester Suit" (1980), for example, features a black man in a slightly wrinkled three-piece suit. The image is cropped both at the chest and above the knees. Hanging from the suit's fly is a large, semi-erect, uncircumcised penis.

In another image, "Philip Prioleau" (1979), a naked black man is seated on a wooden pedestal, his back facing the viewer, a paper backdrop in the background.

But the accusations of objectification and exploitation have been countered by readings of these images that point out the artist's practice of naming his sitters and that emphasize the erotic balance between



Robert Mapplethorpe (standing) with author Jack Fritscher. Copyrighted photograph courtesy Jack Fritscher.

sitter and photographer. As a gay photographer, Mapplethorpe was frequently implicated in his own, sometimes transgressive, sometimes idyllic, desire.

Mapplethorpe imposes a formalist compositional technique on even his most extreme subject matter. Edges move the eye through the famous images of intense sadomasochistic activity. For example, in "Jim, Sausalito" (1977), one finds a leather-hooded man, his eye and mouth openings unzipped, his body crouching against a metal ladder.

The figure is caught in a square of light in the center of the image and framed by a scratched and peeling concrete wall. The wall suggests an exterior or public area that has been transformed by gay desire into a highly sexualized space. This combination of formal elements and desire is Mapplethorpe's signature contribution as an artist.

In 1986, Mapplethorpe was diagnosed with AIDS. The following year his companion and mentor Sam Wagstaff died of complications resulting from AIDS.

In 1988, the artist established a charitable foundation to support AIDS Research and photography projects.

In 1988, Mapplethorpe's first American retrospective was presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. However, the following year, shortly after the artist's death on March 9, the traveling exhibition, "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment," begun at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, created a fire-storm of controversy.

Senator Jesse Helms actually destroyed an exhibition catalogue on the floor of the United States Senate, igniting a debate that ultimately decimated public funding for the arts and challenged First Amendment rights. In a shocking capitulation to political pressure, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D. C. cancelled the show just prior to its opening.

In 1990, the exhibition traveled to Cincinnati, where Contemporary Art Center director Dennis Barrie was indicted on charges of obscenity and child pornography. Both Barrie and the museum were subsequently acquitted, but one of the consequences of the charges was to demonstrate how threatening images of gay male sexuality are to many people.

Some of the controversies sparked by Mapplethorpe's photographs have settled, but his work continues to remind us that the perfect moment may be as fleeting as the click of the camera's shutter.

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