

Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium

Life/Style

The human face and form compelled Mapplethorpe throughout his career. By reducing extraneous elements to a minimum and adhering to his own conception of physical beauty, he made this traditional subject his own. This gallery features a range of figure studies, from those that concentrate on the sculptural body to more individualized portraits. The dynamic between photographer and model can be tense, and Mapplethorpe, rather than defusing this charged energy, distilled it into what he considered an essential perfection in form.

Male subjects in particular commanded Mapplethorpe's attention. Focusing on friends and lovers, he portrayed an increasingly self-aware and visible community of gay men in New York, San Francisco, London, and Paris. Style and identity could be expressed in many ways, which Mapplethorpe observed closely and captured with his camera. Some photographs center on significant items of clothing and ornamentation, such as underwear, a belt buckle, or an earring; others depict men performing masculine roles, dressed in costume as policemen, cowboys, and soldiers. Mapplethorpe deftly combined contemporary gender codes and art-historical references, particularly in his self-portraits. One of his own best subjects, he exuded confidence and a hint of provocation, no matter the guise or pose.

Art/Identity

Like many others who came of age in the 1960s, Mapplethorpe discovered himself through art. At age 16, he enrolled at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where he gradually discarded the conservative Catholic norms of his upbringing in Queens and shifted his focus from advertising design to graphic arts with an emphasis on sculpture, painting, and drawing. The works in this gallery, made between 1965 and 1975, trace the formation of Mapplethorpe's artistic vision and sexual identity.

The New York art scene of this period—especially the work of Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol—offered examples of approaches to art that were

simultaneously high and low, disciplined and messy, glamorous and grungy. Drawing on this energy, Mapplethorpe began to develop a visual lexicon for his own obsessions. His fascination with Catholic iconography, pop collage methods, and the legacy of surrealism can all be seen in these early drawings and constructions. With his precise hand and keen sensibility for graphic design, he transformed humble, often scavenged materials.

Mapplethorpe's earliest engagement with photography involved the appropriation and modification of imagery from periodicals. Working with this found source material made him receptive to the possibility of making his own photographs, which he began to do in 1971 when his friend Sandy Daley lent him a Polaroid camera.

Sex/Success

Sex was fundamental to Mapplethorpe's art. In the late 1960s, he appropriated imagery from gay pornography magazines for collage and assemblage works. By the time he began taking his own photographs in the early 1970s, he had discovered New York's gay sadomasochistic subculture. Mapplethorpe wanted people to know he was an active participant in this community, not simply an outside observer. "I was a part of it," he later recalled. "Some of those experiences that I later recorded I had experienced firsthand, without a camera." Nowhere is his desire to put himself in the picture more evident than in an iconic self-portrait of 1978, showing the artist with a leather bullwhip inserted into his anus and defiantly looking back at the camera.

Ultimately, Mapplethorpe's so-called "sex pictures"—made during a relatively short span of time, between around 1973 and 1980—are less a documentation of sexual activity than a representation of it as a purified ideal, reduced to basic forms and geometries. This combination of unflinching sexual imagery and stunning technical mastery attracted widespread attention and launched Mapplethorpe onto a national and international stage, earning him a reputation as something of an enfant terrible—an identity he embraced, both in his public persona and in the marketing of his work.

Camera/Career

Mapplethorpe's first experiments with Polaroid photography in the early 1970s coincided with his entrée into art-world social circles. He had already formed a close

friendship with Patti Smith, who helped shape his sense of himself as an artist. In 1971 he met curator John McKendry, who introduced him to the historic photography collections at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, giving him his first inkling that “photography maybe could be art.” The Polaroid camera activated Mapplethorpe’s observational acuity, sense of timing, and ability to be in the moment. Very early on, he gravitated toward the subjects that would occupy him throughout his career: portraits, still lifes, and sexually charged scenarios. The artist’s proximity is palpable in these images. Even when depicting individuals who were themselves performers, Mapplethorpe asserted his authority from behind the camera.

A year after he began to make photographs, in summer 1972, Mapplethorpe felt confident enough to show a portfolio of Polaroids, collages, constructions, and jewelry to Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr., a respected curator and collector. The encounter resulted in a relationship that would be life-changing for both men. Wagstaff endorsed Mapplethorpe’s artistic ambitions, while Mapplethorpe encouraged the older man to lead an openly gay lifestyle. With Wagstaff’s support, Mapplethorpe came into his own as a photographer, showing his work at uptown and downtown galleries, exchanging his Polaroid for a Hasselblad, and establishing a studio at 24 Bond Street. Mapplethorpe’s entry into the photographic world was complete; his next moves would redefine that world.

Refinement/Decadence

By the mid-1980s, Mapplethorpe’s work was being exhibited regularly at museums and galleries around the world. He ran a successful portrait studio at 35 West Twenty-Third Street, employed a staff of assistants and printers, accepted editorial and fashion commissions, and showed himself to be as comfortable in a dinner jacket as in leather.

While building his career, he also pursued ambitious personal projects. One, involving Lisa Lyon, introduces cinematic elements of time and transformation. Another presents painterly floral still lifes in vibrant color. Mapplethorpe was consciously trying to push the boundaries of photography. He remarked in 1988: “I’d like the work to be seen more in the context of all mediums of art and not just photography. I don’t like that isolation.”

These are the words of a man considering his place in history. Mapplethorpe was diagnosed with AIDS in 1986. While he continued to work, he also devoted attention to defining his body of work, publishing books, collaborating with curators on two major retrospective exhibitions (in New York and Philadelphia), and establishing a foundation to preserve his legacy. After his death in 1989, the controversy that erupted around the exhibition *The Perfect Moment* recast him as a polarizing figure in the culture wars. Now, drawing on the rich resources of the Robert Mapplethorpe Archive, we can evaluate his significance in a more balanced way, accounting for his influence in both aesthetic and political terms.