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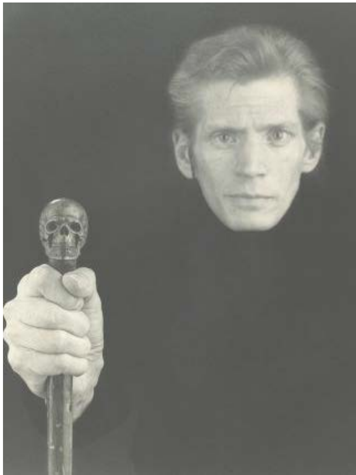
Art in America

# PUTTING MAPPLETHORPE IN HIS PLACE



Robert Mapplethorpe: Self-Portrait, 1988, platinum print, 23⅛ by 19 inches.

With a retrospective for the celebrated photographer about to open at two Los Angeles institutions, the author reassesses the 1990 “X Portfolio” obscenity trial, challenging its distinction between fine art and pornography.

Americans take their art seriously. Stereotypes about Yankee simplicity and boorishness notwithstanding, we are a people ever ready to challenge each other’s tastes and orthodoxies. And though we always seem surprised when it happens, we can quite efficiently use the work of artists as screens against which to project deeply entrenched phobias regarding the nature of our society and culture.

In hindsight it really was no surprise that the traveling retrospective “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment” would so fiercely grip the imaginations of artists, critics, politicians and laypersons alike. Curated by Janet Kardon of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in Philadelphia, the exhibition opened in December of 1988, just before the artist’s death in March of 1989. It incorporated some of Mapplethorpe’s best work, including stunning portraits and still lifes. What shocked and irritated some members of his audiences, however, were photographs of a naked young boy and a semi-naked girl as well as richly provocative erotic images of African-American men and highly stylized photographs of the BDSM underground in which Mapplethorpe participated. Indeed, much of what drew such concentrated attention to Mapplethorpe was the delicacy and precision with which he treated his sometimes challenging subject matter. He had achieved art superstar status by ostentatiously rejecting certain rules while carefully following others.1

The conversations around change and continuity, indecency and propriety that Mapplethorpe helped ignite were precisely tuned to the zeitgeist of the 1980s. The controversy surrounding “The Perfect Moment” was part of a larger debate in America over the nature of the arts and artistic freedom, particularly the role that government should play as an arbiter of taste and a protector of standards of decency. Ronald Reagan came into office in 1980 looking to dismantle many of the structures of the Great Society put into place by Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s. He was particularly eager to dismantle—or at least defund—the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and he did not lack for co-conspirators.

In the same year that the controversy around “The Perfect Moment” got under way, the NEA came under fire for its support of Andres Serrano, whose 1987 photograph Piss Christ showed a crucifix submerged within liquid that the artist described as his own urine. In the wake of the outcry, and with Mapplethorpe’s name heavy in the mouth of the NEA’s greatest foe, the late Senator Jesse Helms, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., announced that it was canceling its showing of “The Perfect Moment,” which had a very successful run at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art following its premiere at the ICA in Philadelphia. After its abrupt rejection by the Corcoran, the show was moved to the Washington Project for the Arts, which presented the photographs to large, enthusiastic audiences.

In 1990 “The Perfect Moment” traveled to Cincinnati’s Contemporary Arts Center (CAC). Obscenity charges were quickly leveled against both the CAC and its director, Dennis Barrie, exposing them to potential penalties of up to $10,000 in fines or, in Barrie’s case, jail time. The CAC and its director were eventually acquitted by a jury of eight men and women from Cincinnati and the surrounding Hamilton County, a verdict that is correctly understood as a victory in the battles to protect the rights of artists and to insure continued public funding for the arts.

We are also correct to judge the controversy surrounding Mapplethorpe and “The Perfect Moment” in relation to American struggles for civil rights, free speech and sexual liberation. We should remember, however, that even as rights, privileges and liberties have been obtained by oppressed communities, these groups have been simultaneously confronted with novel and at times even more onerous forms of policing and control. As has been demonstrated throughout our collective histories, there is always a give-and-take between progress and repression. Speaking of the abolition of slavery in the anglophone Caribbean, historian Thomas Holt has argued that while elite white abolitionists conceded the vulgarity and barbarism of the institution—while they agreed that Africans and persons of African descent were, in fact, members of the human family—they remained altogether wary of the idea of full, unfettered freedom. They were afraid that newly freed persons would opt out of the systems of cheap labor that supported the plantation system, and that their liberation would be so disruptive and so unpredictable as to threaten basic social and economic structures. Freed people could be trusted to live as full members of the society “only after being re-socialized to accept the internal discipline that ensured the survival of the existing social order.” Holt continues:

They would be free to bargain in the marketplace, but not free to ignore the market. They would be free to pursue their own self-interest but not free to reject the cultural conditioning that defined what that self-interest should be. They would have opportunities for social mobility, but only after they learned their proper place.2

Holt’s observations, while applicable to many groups striving for freedom, are useful as we attempt to make sense of the aftermath of the so-called culture wars that raged in the 1980s and ’90s, for which Mapplethorpe was a spectacularly alluring poster boy. These debates about art and moral propriety took place in the context of AIDS activism and the struggle for gay rights. While in retrospect we can celebrate the momentous successes of these movements, we must also acknowledge that their victories have come with certain costs.

Much of the celebrity that Mapplethorpe achieved stems from the ways in which his various audiences have been reminded that no matter the iconoclastic nature of the work, no matter its “vulgarity,” Mapplethorpe ultimately ought to be recognized as cultivated, refined and elite—an individual comfortable in the most rarefied precincts of art and culture. The J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are mounting a joint retrospective of Mapplethorpe’s photography this month. The Guggenheim Museum in New York will echo their efforts in 2017 with a separate retrospective. This institutional activity speaks to the fact that Mapplethorpe and his work have been fully integrated into the most sophisticated parts of the American art scene. In this context, the image of a whip shoved into the artist’s anus and trailing to the floor, the photograph of a pinky stuck into the head of an oversize penis, and, perhaps most important of all, the image of the artist, his face lined and pale, daring his viewers to remark on the trace of disease on his skin and the hint of thinning at his temples—none of these can be taken as evidence that Mapplethorpe is anything but a gentleman, a dandy, an aesthete.

This was not always the case. Mapplethorpe's early pornographic work was either rejected or excluded from commercial exhibitions by both Holly Solomon in New York and Simon Lewinsky in San Francisco, even as these gallerists coveted the artist's portraits and photographs of fruit, flowers and statuary.3 Mapplethorpe was faced with a difficult challenge: despite his masterful images and immense creativity, his erotic life—the very font from which he presumably drew inspiration and sustenance—could mark him as a character with only the most tentative hold on race and class respectability.

For the gallery owner, the art critic or the museum director excited by Mapplethorpe's work but confused and daunted by its haphazard purchase on propriety, the only option, it seems, was to launch a counteroffensive. They had to begin the painstaking work of parsing Mapplethorpe's creations so as to make plain the idea that, their content notwithstanding, the photographs demonstrated "internal discipline." This trait would make them acceptable within the main currents of both the art world and society at large. The images were not as naughty as one might have first thought. They were not pornography per se, but instead indications of Mapplethorpe's advanced intellect and technical mastery.

In order to "sell" Mapplethorpe one would have to, in effect, translate and simplify his aesthetic. Though it might have been the case that Mapplethorpe sullied himself among New York's sexually adventurous gay community, this did not diminish the fact that his work was remarkably well executed, "within its proper place," to borrow Thomas Holt's language again, regardless of its objectionable subject matter.

It is important to remember that some of Mapplethorpe's fiercest and most articulate critics have been gay African-American intellectuals, especially Kobena Mercer and Essex Hemphill, who argue that Mapplethorpe's much-celebrated technique, his ability to photograph (black) bodies as if they were marble or bronze sculptures, actually continues a centuries-long tradition of separating black physicality from black subjectivity.4 Thus when confronted with Janet Kardon's celebratory claim in the "Perfect Moment" catalogue that Mapplethorpe's black models are "startlingly volumetric, occupying their space so convincingly that the photographer might be holding a chisel instead of a camera,"5 the response of these African-American critics has been to remind us that there is nothing particularly novel about Mapplethorpe's aesthetic. Paying attention only to surface and volume, or what Kardon calls "the dark terrain" of black bodies, has often been the way that African-Americans have been treated in both American art and culture.

What may relieve the tension produced by these charges is the fact that Mapplethorpe's photographs are at once stirringly sensual and remarkably mannered. Or, to again quote Kardon, "the flowers exude beauty and danger, the nude black models epitomize purity and eroticism, the portraits convey truth and deception." No matter the complexity of Mapplethorpe's technique, the fact of his naughty, never-quite-disciplined sexuality cannot be ignored. Those nude black models, those many men dressed in leather and chains were for him something more than shells on which to project his aesthetic. They were also cleaned-up representatives of a social/sexual underground that was very much at odds with the mainstream conceits of 1980s America. What makes Mapplethorpe truly obscene may not be that he pictured whips, chains, masks and leather, nor that he delighted in the sexual fetishization of black men's bodies. Instead, his crime was pairing these images with his many works that might easily be recognized as high art.

In a gossipy and slightly scolding remembrance of Mapplethorpe published in 2008, David B. Boyce, a curator, collector and general fixture of the 1970s New York art scene, offers a clear discussion of the problems faced then by lesbian and gay artists, dealers, critics and curators as they attempted to achieve some level of social and professional stature for themselves and their work in the art world. Speaking of his first encounter with Mapplethorpe and Mapplethorpe's partner, collector Sam Wagstaff, Boyce writes:

In purely visual terms, they appeared to be an odd couple. With this exceptionally handsome face, etched deeply with a desirable masculine divinity, and held gracefully atop a tall, impeccably dressed build, Sam Wagstaff exuded sophistication, taste, education, old money, and confidence, while his slim younger partner, dressed rebelliously in denim and silver-studded black leather, seemed vaguely edgy and preoccupied. Robert Mapplethorpe did not appear to fit comfortably among the guests gathered at

a cocktail party on Gramercy Park East that early fall evening of 1975, and gave the slightest impression that he'd rather be elsewhere.6

The visual and ideological codes that Boyce offers are fairly straightforward. Wagstaff seems to epitomize all that Mapplethorpe threatened. He appears in Boyce's appreciation as a sort of necessary check on Mapplethorpe's wildness. Wagstaff was the embodiment of the perfected, mellowed (all but heterosexual) white masculinity that might effectively underwrite—and discipline—the young artist's rebellious streak.

Boyce describes how, after befriending Mapplethorpe, he was pleasantly surprised by the artist's knowledge of art—knowledge that came mostly from what "he'd picked up along the way under the tutelage of Wagstaff." He also reiterates that one ought to resist thinking of Mapplethorpe's sexual imagery as pornographic or somehow distinct from the rest of his oeuvre. "My instinct was to regard these sexual images with the same criteria as the non-sexual despite the minute hint of naughty glee that glinted in Robert's eye."

It is this naughty glinting that catches one's attention. Boyce uses the figure of Wagstaff as a sort of inadequate cover for the fact that Mapplethorpe depicted a world that could not be neatly cleaned up and reframed for easy consumption within the American art market. His sincere appreciation for Mapplethorpe's talent notwithstanding, Boyce repeats his aversion to the artist's social and sexual practices, telling us that he was "completely unintrigued by S&M and the leather culture." He goes on to fret over the artist's "compulsion to explore the sexually bizarre," concluding that Mapplethorpe's HIV diagnosis in the mid-1980s "quelled this obsession." He was also alarmed by Mapplethorpe's "appetite and capacity for drugs." "Those were the halcyon days of gay youth, before the catastrophe of AIDS," Boyce writes. "Robert Mapplethorpe had given that standard of urban gay sex life his photographic imprimatur, and then with a bold and deliberate temerity, he foisted it on the world. A part of that world never forgave him."

What most irritates Boyce is not so much that Mapplethorpe pictured sadomasochistic imagery, but instead that the artist so successfully blurred the line between so-called legitimate art and pornography. He mischievously danced across the naughty/nice divide in a manner that makes it difficult to know where artistic transgression ends and social capitulation begins.

Nonetheless, Mapplethorpe's life and work provide an unparalleled opportunity to examine the social and cultural implications unleashed when we do the rude work of distinguishing real art from dirty pictures, well-formed citizens from the edgy, the preoccupied, the wild, the rebellious, the naughty and the bizarre. Jesse Helms complained that "there's a big difference between The Merchant of Venice and a photograph of two males of different races in an erotic pose on a marble-top table."7 The critique I offer here is that our ability to transmogrify Mapplethorpe from a scruffy downtown photographer with a taste for drugs and nasty sex to an epoch-making art star has been achieved through reference to the only half-acknowledged belief that at the core of the matter Helms was right.

The liberal forms of evaluation with which we approach Mapplethorpe not only reiterate old-fashioned distinctions between good and bad art but they also do the unseemly work of introducing new and potentially more restrictive forms of artistic policing and social control. We have accepted much too quickly the idea that there are inherently pornographic forms of culture, images and modes of social interaction so obviously vulgar and antisocial that they must be scrubbed, tamed and repurposed before questions of liberality and liberation can be addressed. One must wonder, in fact, if the ways in which Mapplethorpe has been evaluated, the ways in which a commentator like Boyce carefully distinguishes the artist's interest in "the sexually bizarre" from his skill and talent as a photographer, is itself part of a larger trend to extend social recognition to sexual minorities while simultaneously demonizing the presumed excessiveness and immaturity of these communities' institutions and behaviors "before the catastrophe of AIDS."

This matter came to a head in the 1990 trial in which the Cincinnati CAC and its director were charged with two counts each of pandering obscenity and the illegal use of a minor in nudity-oriented material. The attorneys for the defense proved to be especially hard-nosed and practical in their approaches to the case. The basis for the charges was the Supreme Court's 1973 decision in Miller v. California in

which the court developed a three-pronged standard in order to identify pornographic material: (1) the work, taken as a whole, appeals to a prurient interest under contemporary community standards, (2) the work is patently offensive, or (3) the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value. Writing in the journal Litigation two years after the successful resolution of the Mapplethorpe case, attorney Marc Mezibov, partner in the Cincinnati-based firm Sirkin, Pinales, Mezibov and Schwartz, noted that from the very beginning the team defending the CAC and director Barrie understood that it was the third leg of the standard, the presumed artistic merit of Mapplethorpe's work, that would allow them to retrieve it from the trash pile of the prurient and the pornographic.

They were met immediately, however, with one quite impressive stumbling block; that is to say, the good citizens of Cincinnati and Hamilton County. Mezibov writes:

In the last 20 years a community-wide understanding has developed of acceptable forms and means of expression, largely the result of rigorous law enforcement. X-rated movies are not acceptable, nor are adult bookstores. Neither type of establishment exists any longer in Hamilton County.8

Not only were potential jurors unlikely to be Midwestern versions of East and West Coast liberals with passionate commitments to the protection of free speech, but they also could not be expected to have had more than the most limited exposure to the so-called sexual underground from which Mapplethorpe drew inspiration for some of his most provocative images. To make matters worse, the team was not successful in its efforts to limit the jury pool to the residents of Cincinnati versus the presumably less cosmopolitan, more conservative residents of Hamilton County. Nor were they allowed to expand the jury's mandate to encompass the artistic merit of the entire exhibition. Instead the jurors were asked to judge the images in Mapplethorpe's "X Portfolio" (1978), those particularly naughty BDSM photos. As Mezibov later complained, the prosecutor sought "to display the controversial materials in a vacuum, totally unaccompanied by explanation and completely disconnected from the greater context and dignified setting in which the photographs were displayed at the CAC."

The defense's responses to these challenges were altogether logical and obviously successful, but also troubling in the ways in which they reinforced calcified ideas about art and respectability. In effect their tack was to train the jurors, to offer them expert instruction in how to distinguish art from pornography. Moreover, their methods turned on the strong suggestion that pornography happened "over there," in the X-rated movie houses and adult bookstores that no longer existed in Cincinnati at the time of the trial, not in the "dignified setting" of the CAC. "Despite the graphic nature of the photographs, which some jurors described as gross and disgusting," Mezibov writes, "the jury concluded that the prosecution had not made its case because, like a poorly baked apple pie, 'it was missing an ingredient.' [The exhibition] had artistic value, and that's what kept it from being obscene."

Hopefully you will forgive what may seem an untoward criticism of the politics surrounding the defense of the CAC, Barrie, and in a sense, Mapplethorpe himself. My concerns are based on the suspicion that the arguments utilized in the case might very easily slip from the divvying up of obscene versus elegant objects to the apportioning of respectability to individuals and communities. Homoerotic and sadomasochistic images in the gallery are recognized as art; homoerotic and sadomasochistic images in the adult bookstore are pornography. And even more to the point, while the patrons of the gallery are to be marked as exemplary, advanced, cosmopolitan and progressive, the patrons of the bookstore are suspect and suspicious, individuals who might be rightly detained and arrested all in the name of "community-wide understanding" reinforced by what Mezibov describes as "rigorous law enforcement."

The ultimate success of the defense hinged on their ability to offer careful instruction in the very forms of understanding that have just been described. At the heart of the matter was the issue of whether they could produce a narrative of respectability powerful enough to rescue Mapplethorpe and his work from the nether side of the good art/bad pornography divide. The defense in the case was extremely attuned to just this problem. They were particularly careful in their selection of expert witnesses, hoping to strike the right balance between prestige and normativity. They chose only individuals who had "Midwestern connections or at least Midwestern manners and appearances." This group included:

. . . a West Coast museum director with a professorial manner; a curator from the Eastman Kodak Institute of Photography (renowned for the "Brownie" camera) which is located in the innocuous-

sounding city of Rochester, New York (as opposed to New York City, which has threatening connotations for many Cincinnatians); and a museum director from Berkeley, California, who was born and educated in Michigan [and] looked as if she had stepped off a Midwestern college campus.

The defense team also went through an exacting process of jury modeling and selection in order to create the right audience for the arguments and instruction they offered. This resulted in the selection of a largely middle- and working-class group of four men and four women, "all from rather conventional backgrounds," all employed, two with some college education, and one with a college degree. None had attended "The Perfect Moment," nor had any ever visited the CAC. Moreover, in an impressively clarifying aside, Mezibov remarked in his postmortem of the trial that, "our model juror was a single black man living within the boundaries of the city of Cincinnati. Out of a jury array of approximately 60 persons, only one fit the model profile." Even as much of the controversy surrounding both Mapplethorpe's body and his body of work relates to his images of black, urban, single and presumably queer men, the legal deliberation about whether those images are pornography or art, obscene or respectable, took place—and indeed takes place—in their absence. The point was, in effect, to reframe Mapplethorpe for the mainstream, to make him and his work "dignified" and, therefore, at least somewhat palatable to Americans "from rather conventional backgrounds."

Barrie and the CAC won their cases. Senator Jesse Helms, liberally using Mapplethorpe's photographs as tools to rile the good white folks of North Carolina, twice won reelection to Congress, overcoming surprisingly vigorous challenges from Harvey Gantt, former mayor of Charlotte, who if he had been successful would have been only the fourth African-American to gain a U.S. Senate seat. An amazingly successful industry has grown up not only around Mapplethorpe's photography, both the wicked and the polite, but also around the personal effects and furnishings left after his death. Mapplethorpe's many fans eagerly anticipate major retrospectives of his photography, while an HBO series about his life is in the works.

Still, it may be Mapplethorpe himself who was the great loser in all these machinations. The maestro died at the height of his artistic powers. Moreover, much of the world that spawned him, a world that included not only grand museums and galleries, but also the bars, baths, piers and rambles that Mapplethorpe frequented and drew inspiration from, have been censored and shuttered (through rigorous law enforcement), not simply in the interest of public health, but also in order to discipline newly liberated queers.

We are free to bargain in the marketplace, but not free to ignore the market. We are free to pursue our own self-interest, but not free to reject the cultural conditioning that defines what that self-interest should be. We have opportunities for social mobility, but only after learning our proper places. Robert Mapplethorpe died a celebrated artist and a member of the American elite. The price of the ticket was a mere handful of personal liberties, loss of connection to a history of sexual liberalism and radicalism, and some stunning, world-making photographs.

"Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium," at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Mar. 15-July 31, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mar. 20-July 31.

This essay expands upon a lecture presented at "Mapplethorpe + 25," a symposium organized by FotoFocus and the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Oct. 24, 2015.

*Ken Moody and Robert Sherman*, 1984, platinum print, 19½ by 19¾ inches.

*Patrice, N.Y.C.*, 1977/78, selenium-toned gelatin silver print, 7¾ inches square.

*Joe, N.Y.C.*, 1978, gelatin silver print, 7¾ by 7⅝ inches.

*Thomas*, 1987/94, gelatin silver print, 19¼ inches square.

*Phillip Prioleau*, 1982/90, gelatin silver print, 15¼ inches square.