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MAPPLETHORPE REVISITED



Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation
"Embrace" (1982) is part of "Robert Mapplethorpe: 50 Americans,"
to open in May at the Sean Kelly Gallery in Chelsea.

As Elisabeth, a 52-year-old rabbi from Newton, Mass., perused more than 2,000 photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, she had a specific mandate: select just one that particularly caught her eye.

"I didn't expect to choose this image," she wrote in a statement explaining her choice: a naked portrait of [Patti Smith](#) from 1976, her knees pressed to her chest. "I did not expect to choose a recognizable face."

[Sean Kelly](#), who owns the Chelsea gallery that bears his name, was also surprised. He was curious to see if reaction to Mapplethorpe's work had changed since 1989, when the Corcoran Gallery in Washington canceled an exhibition of his work because of concerns that Mapplethorpe's homoerotic and sadomasochistic imagery would lead to a backlash against the [National Endowment for the Arts](#), which had provided partial financing.

So Mr. Kelly challenged himself to organize a show that was, as he put it, "a demographic snapshot through Robert's lens, literally." He asked 50 random people, one from every state, to each select one photograph.

"There were caveats," Mr. Kelly explained. "It couldn't be anyone we knew, and no relatives."

His gallery began conducting demographic research, studying census data on state populations, economies and religious makeup. Gallery staff members talked to friends, and advertised on [Craigslist](#) and [Facebook](#), to come up with 50 people (none under 21), ranging from a 23-year-old math teacher in Oklahoma to a 106-year-old retired farmer in Vermont. Each participant was given a password and a couple of weeks to study the images on a private area of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation's Web site.

Their choices make up "Robert Mapplethorpe: 50 Americans," a show at Mr. Kelly's gallery from May 6 through June 25. Alongside the photos will be participants' explanations of their decisions. (All those taking part are identified by first name only.)

"Nobody made safe choices," Mr. Kelly said. "The images were not at all what you would predict. We were concerned that we could get 50 famous images or lots of shots of flowers." Instead, he said, some picks were "incredibly personal," like that of a Wyoming rancher who had been mauled by a bear. He chose a photo of Lisa Lyon, Mapplethorpe's friend and model, with a tiger, because the animal reminded him of his fiercely protective dogs.

Other selections were more interpretive, like that of a Michigan woman who chose "Embrace," a shot of a black man and a white man hugging, because, she wrote, "I see comfort, hope and hopelessness all in one."