

Robertson, Rebecca. "Union of the States," *ARTnews*, May 1, 2011.

ARTnews

Union of the States

Fifty Americans choose the images in a new Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition.



White Gauze, 1984, is among the Robert Mapplethorpe photographs in the show "50 Americans." The photos were selected by one constituent from every U.S. state.

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After searching through nearly 2,000 photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, Jennifer Factor, a business analyst in Philadelphia, picked one that captivated her. It was a haunting picture of a couple wrapped in blanched gauze, their heads and shoulders merged together in a cocoon-like form. "There was something about the texture and the layers," she says. "It drew more of a feeling than anything else."

Factor's selection, titled *White Gauze* (1984), appears this month in "50 Americans," an exhibition of Mapplethorpe photographs chosen by a diverse group of Americans (one from each state in the nation), on view at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York through June 25. These citizen curators were found through friends of friends of the gallery, Internet ads, and more creative means. "I stopped someone in a gas station who had West Virginia license plates," says gallery associate Lauren Kelly. "In North Dakota, we cold-called a bookstore in Fargo."

The volunteers made their selections using an online database and were asked to explain their choices in texts to accompany the show. A garden designer in Kentucky described *Flowers* (1986) as "forced branches of flowering quince," adding that the photo had "an honest quality to it." A rancher in Wyoming,

who didn't know Mapplethorpe's work before the project, picked an image of bodybuilder Lisa Lyon walking a tiger on a chain for the "raw power and beauty of the subjects."

Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS in 1989, attracted controversy for exploring sadomasochistic and homoerotic subject matters, but gallery owner Sean Kelly found the 50 participants to be open to the photographer's full range of work, including his more racy images.

"I think people are much more sophisticated and accepting about differences—social, sexual, psychological, emotional," Kelly says of Americans today. "It's a more plural and more accepting world."

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