

“Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium, J. Paul Getty Museum & LACMA, LA,” *Aesthetica*, January 25, 2016.

Aesthetica

Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium, J. Paul Getty Museum & LACMA, LA



This major retrospective, presented between the Getty Center and The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) throughout spring 2016, will explore the work of one of the most significant photographers of the late 20th century. The most comprehensive survey of the artist's work yet, this exhibition will display Mapplethorpe's hugely influential portraits, self-portraits, figure studies and even floral still lifes which explicitly explore gender, race, and sexuality – and which proved highly controversial in the late 1980s.

Mapplethorpe's best known portraits were characterised by extreme attention to detail, selecting flawless male models and lighting and positioning their bodies to highlight physical prowess, often using African-American models such as Ajitto and Thomas whose skin he described as 'bronze,' and whom he photographed as such. Further frequent subjects include Lisa Lyon, a bodybuilding champion who described herself as a performance artist, and with whom Mapplethorpe enjoyed a six-year collaboration resulting in 184 portraits with Lyon posing as characters ranging from naive ingénue to dominatrix.

The photographer's skill in the studio is further displayed by a selection of floral still lifes, which imbue orchids, lilies, poppies, and irises with an erotic charge. The line between fine art and pornography, meanwhile, is furthered by the Getty's installation of Mapplethorpe's X Portfolio, which depicts the gay S&M community in 13 photographs of sex acts that Mapplethorpe staged for the camera with particular consideration to harmonious composition.

Also included are intimate self-portraits, including a single photograph taken in 1988, two years after the artist was diagnosed with AIDS, a time in which he began to work more ferociously than ever – also establishing the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to help fund AIDS research. Starkly lit, with Mapplethorpe clutching a skull-topped cane, this raw and honest piece is one of Mapplethorpe's most

powerful works, and is included as part of the exhibition's discussion of the artist's work in a historical context, outside of the sensationalism that has surrounded his work.

Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium

15 March – 31 July, J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center, 1200 Getty Center Dr, Los Angeles, CA 90049, United States

20 March – 31 July, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), 5905 Wilshire Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90036, United States

For more, visit www.getty.edu and www.lacma.org.