

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jason Farago, "4 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2021

The New York Times

4 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

Arthur Jafa remixes Robert Mapplethorpe; Sanou Oumar leaps forward; Ray Johnson makes connections; TR Ericsson processes grief.



Robert Mapplethorpe's "Horse #4," from 1982. Credit... Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

April 14, 2021
'Robert Mapplethorpe Curated by Arthur Jafa'

Through April 24. Gladstone Gallery, 515 West 24th Street, Manhattan; 212-206-9300, gladstonegallery.com.

[Arthur Jafa](#)'s most conspicuous skill is for editing; the force of his [videos](#) (such as "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death," on view at the New Museum in the show "[Grief and Grievance](#)") comes from a jagged, poetic soldering of high- and low-resolution found footage. Those smash-cut techniques persist here, at Gladstone, where he has arranged in breezy counterpoint 108 icy photographs of flowers and fornicators by Robert Mapplethorpe. He freely mixes Mapplethorpe's portraiture, still lifes, nudes and sadomasochistic pictures; omits many well-known images (none of the bodybuilder Lisa Lyon); and accentuates his early color Polaroids, such as three shots from 1972 of Mapplethorpe's lover, Sam Wagstaff, hard at work.

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Alistair Butler, 1980. Mapplethorpe photographed numerous African-American models in the 1980s; the images were collected in his hotly debated “Black Book” of 1986. Credit...Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

Jafa’s nonhierarchical presentation brings out Mapplethorpe’s campy side, and the Wildean absurdity of contemplating men’s tumescent or dilated parts with the same tranquil gaze you’d cast on a tiger lily. Some juxtapositions offer a bit of decadent fun, as when Jafa interrupts a run of Mapplethorpe’s blunt black-and-whites with a rare color portrait of, hard to believe, the archbishop of Canterbury. He intermixes Mapplethorpe’s nudes of Black models with admirable neutrality, though placing one model’s erect sex organ next to a black horse facing the same direction is really a schoolboy joke.

But can we even see Mapplethorpe today the way we did when the Kitchen debuted his roughest pictures in 1977, or when an [obscenity trial in 1990](#) made them [a flash point of the culture wars](#)? His stringent composition and cold eye retain a small power, but the relationship of sex to photography has changed a great deal. Let me try to put this decorously: A certain number of visitors to this show will later look at dozens more explicit, square-format photographs — and even send one or two — on smartphone apps that facilitate encounters not unlike those Mapplethorpe pictured. Once the shock was how he objectified nude bodies; now it’s we who objectify ourselves, every day in our pictures and profiles, just for one moment of human contact.

JASON FARAGO