

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jackson Arn, "Why Mapplethorpe's Photographs Remain Subversive, Even without the Shock Value," *Artsy*, January 14, 2019



## Why Mapplethorpe's Photographs Remain Subversive, Even without the Shock Value



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self Portrait*, 1980. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. Courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum.

Leon Trotsky wrote that the novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline entered the canon as effortlessly as other men enter their homes. The photographer Robert Mapplethorpe preferred to lob bricks through the windows—it wasn't always clear if he was trying to go inside or tear the place down. In 1989, the year he succumbed to AIDS, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., canceled an exhibition of Mapplethorpe's work that included photographs of anal-fisting and naked children. Three decades later, he's the subject of "Implicit Tensions," a two-part retrospective at the Guggenheim, and *Mapplethorpe* (2019), a creatively-named biopic starring Matt Smith from *Doctor Who*. Prestige is a funny thing.

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There's a cute moment in *Mapplethorpe* in which the fresh-faced photographer and the musician Patti Smith, his longtime friend, convince the manager of New York's Chelsea Hotel to give them a room by offering some drawings with the assurance that "you may not know us yet, but we're gonna be big stars." That was in 1969. Six years later, Mapplethorpe photographed Smith with a black jacket slung over her shoulder, producing the image that would become the cover of her album *Horses*. Before the decade was done, Mapplethorpe had also completed "X Portfolio" (1978), a collection of gay BDSM-themed portraits that would soon make him the most controversial photographer in America.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Patti Smith*, 1976. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. Courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum.

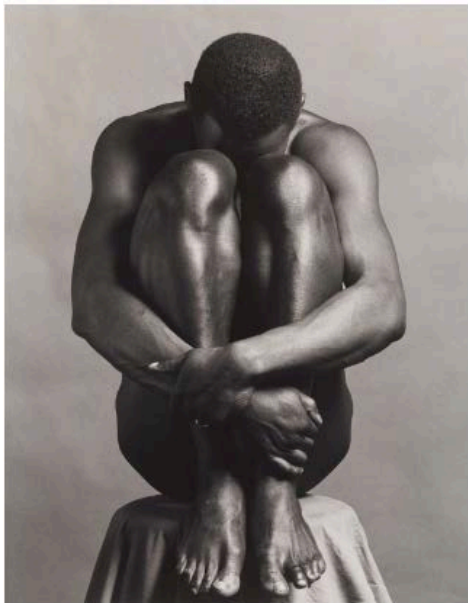


Robert Mapplethorpe *Self Portrait with Whip*, 1978  
ClampArt

Most "controversial" artists are forgotten long before they die, and many others are done in by their own success. Pierre Auguste-Renoir, whose paintings the 19th-century bourgeoisie likened to rotting corpses, is now denounced as a bourgeois hack. The principles of Bauhaus architecture, first intended to free mankind from the banality of modern life, can be found in any 21st-century shopping mall. It's more complicated with Mapplethorpe. He invited controversy with his unblushing and genuinely brave choices of subject matter: anuses, penises, and everything else Reagan's America wanted to hide behind a fig leaf. But his visual style was more traditional; to find another artist who crammed X-rated content into such stiff, formal packaging, you'd need to go back all the way to the Marquis de Sade.

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Set side-by-side with the work of his downtown peers Peter Hujar and Richard Morrison, Mapplethorpe's photographs look almost like oil paintings—less gritty than glossy, less concerned with preserving what Henri Cartier-Bresson called “the decisive moment” than with purging that moment of imperfection. In this sense, the photographer he most resembles is Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden, who came of age around the same time as photography itself. Like Mapplethorpe, von Gloeden was derided for his images of naked men and prepubescent boys, and celebrated for his attention to texture and classical symmetry. In the film, Mapplethorpe coos over a von Gloeden from 1902—like many of the earlier photographer's works, a recreation of a painting.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Ajitto*, 1981. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. Courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Ken and Tyler*, 1985. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. Courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum.

Because he trafficked in images such as this, von Gloeden is often dismissed as a misguided pioneer, someone who ignored what was unique and revelatory about photography, instead using it to make pseudo-paintings. A similar frustration underlies some of the recent reflections on Mapplethorpe's work. “What has excited most photographers since the invention of the medium,” wrote Richard Woodward in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2016, “is its versatile realism.... [Mapplethorpe's] career was a struggle against photography's bias toward the mundane, which others have seen as one of its unique strengths.” As a result, many of his trademark male nudes, Woodward concluded, “have a cold, glossy perfection, and are a terrific bore.”

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Robert Mapplethorpe, *Lisa Lyon*, 1982. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. Courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Calla Lily*, 1986. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. Courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum.

But to focus exclusively on the formal aspects of Mapplethorpe's nudes would be like reading *Playboy* for the articles. To be fair, Mapplethorpe took great pains to get the contrast and balance of his work just right—he and his printer Tom Baril would sometimes spend days developing a single portrait. Even so, the images that resulted were plainly intended to shock gallery-goers with their content, bringing into the public sphere what otherwise happens behind closed doors. Some of the images still have this effect, but many others simply don't pack the punch that they did 30 or 40 years ago. This puts the contemporary critic in a strange position. The tension between white-hot eroticism and cold perfection was central to the power of Mapplethorpe's photographs, but today, coldness prevails. (His photographs of flowers, paired with nudes, were initially praised for their visceral, almost pornographic qualities; these days, the nudes seem like still lives).

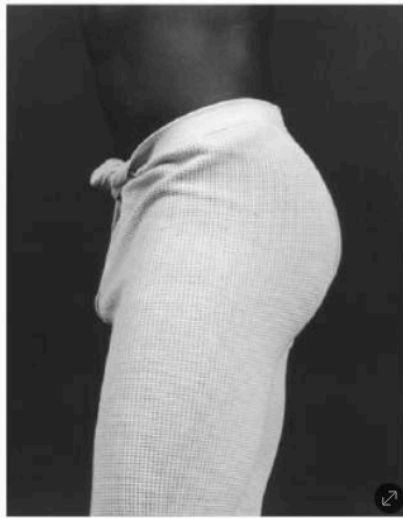


Robert Mapplethorpe, *Joe Rubberman*, 1978  
"Mapplethorpe + Munch" at Munch Museum, Oslo

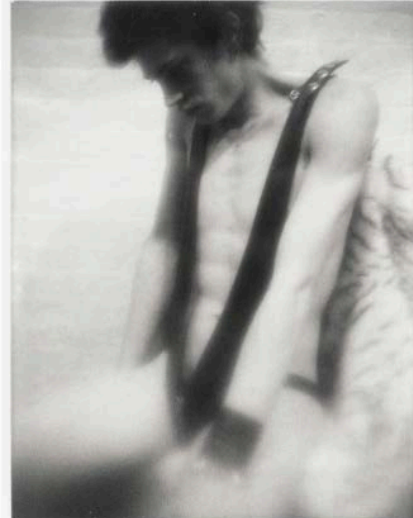
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It's a mark of Mapplethorpe's strengths and his limitations that you can't really understand his work without knowing the context in which he worked. The 1980s was an era of frenzied homophobia disguised by the pompous term "Culture Wars": On the floor of the Senate, Jesse Helms lambasted the National Endowment for the Arts for awarding grants to Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, of *Piss Christ* (1987) fame. In July 1989, four months after Mapplethorpe's death, Helms sponsored a bill forbidding the NEA from funding any further work that featured—among many other things—homoeroticism, S&M, and "individuals engaged in sex acts." It passed.

What had infuriated Helms about Mapplethorpe were photographs like *Lou, N.Y.C.* (1978), which shows, in close-up, a man shoving a pinkie finger into his urethra. It's still a shocking image, not just for what it shows, but how—the violence implied by the tightness of the man's fist and the rigidity of his fingers. With his usual keen eye for texture, Mapplethorpe emphasizes bulging veins and bristly pubic hair, celebrating what's wild and animalistic about sexuality, everything Helms tried to cover up, but couldn't erase.



Robert Mapplethorpe *Michael Spencer*, 1983  
Galeri Nev Istanbul



Robert Mapplethorpe *UNTITLED (SELF PORTRAIT)*, ca. 1972  
Cheim & Read

Or consider *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter* (1979), in which a lovely young sub and dom sit in a bland living room and stare straight at the camera (it's the only straight thing about the photograph). It is tempting, with 40 years' hindsight, to view the whole thing as a smug, Arbusian joke—Brian and Lyle can't see how out of place they are, but we can. But when you realize that Mapplethorpe took their picture at a time when BDSM was still widely criminalized in the United States, their poses become brave and genuinely moving. The fact that both men consented to use their full names in the title is crucial to the photograph's power—they're holding nothing back, and as a result, they radiate sexuality, seeming almost to transform the objects around them (that end table!) into kinky playthings.

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Robert Mapplethorpe · Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter, 1979  
"Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium" at ...



Robert Mapplethorpe · Leather Crotch, 1980  
"Robert Mapplethorpe" at Kiasma Museum of ...

There are surprisingly few allusions to the Culture Wars in the Mapplethorpe biopic, perhaps because he died just as they were beginning in earnest. Late in the film, on the way into the Whitney Museum, Mapplethorpe is wheeled past a pack of protesters with signs saying “Pornographic art is sick!” Back in the 1980s, at least, art’s enemies were mostly standing outside the building, not in it. Even in the midst of his “Conservative Revolution,” Reagan never spoke openly about doing away with the NEA altogether, but 30 years later, his successor tweets about hobbling the organization beyond the late Senator Helms’s wildest dreams. Mapplethorpe reigns in Hollywood and the Guggenheim, but the same grants that helped make him a star are just a few congressional votes away from oblivion—that’s the ambiguous victory of our moment.