

“Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium,” *Artforum*, January 2016.

ARTFORUM

“ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE: THE PERFECT MEDIUM”



Robert Mapplethorpe, Tim Scott, 1980, gelatin silver print, 14 × 14". © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

“SEX IS MAGIC,” Robert Mapplethorpe said. “If you channel it right, there’s more energy in sex than there is in art.” In the end, of course, he didn’t have to choose. He channeled sex into art: He released energy squared. There will be ample evidence of this explosive exchange in “The Perfect Medium,” a retrospective so big that, for its initial outing at least, it’s divided between two venues, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Getty. Mapplethorpe already provided an occasion for the two museums to join forces in 2011, when they pooled resources to purchase important art and archives from the artist’s foundation, which sweetened the acquisition with what’s commonly described as a “generous gift.” Drawing from that wealth of material—which includes collages, contact sheets, jewelry, physique magazines, and Mapplethorpe’s membership card to the Mine Shaft sex club—both venues will be showing work never or rarely exhibited before, giving us the most comprehensive and complex view so far of this wildly ambitious, remarkably protean provocateur. The Getty will show Mapplethorpe’s coolly erotic flower studies as well as pictures from his “X Portfolio,” 1977–78, the suite of s/m images that were at the center of the controversies surrounding “The Perfect Moment,” the 1988 retrospective that became a key flash point of the culture wars. Documents relating to that uproar, including the September 1989 *Artforum* with a cover image of protesters outside the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, will be on display. LACMA promises a wild-style mix that rounds up artists who shared Mapplethorpe’s moment (Nan Goldin, Eric Fischl, Larry Clark, Lorna Simpson) and immerses their work within the full range of his practice, from his early Polaroids, framed T-shirts, and altar installations to the meticulously staged, classically restrained portraits and still lifes that introduced him to the pop-culture mainstream. At both venues, hard-core erotic imagery and a fiercely queer aesthetic will be front and center. In his best work, Mapplethorpe was deliberately, thrillingly outrageous—and these shows should be, too.