

Culture Index

A COMPENDIUM OF WHAT'S IN PLAY NOW • EDITED BY JULIAN SANCTON



Self-Portrait,
1980

PHOTOGRAPHY

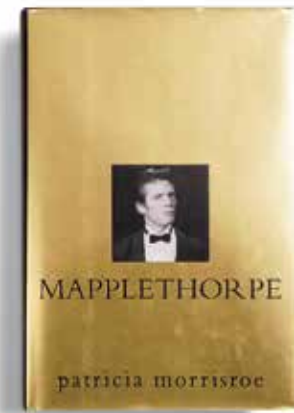
THE ECSTASY AND THE AGONY OF ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

Before his LACMA-Getty retrospective, the late artist's biographer looks back on his avant-garde life.

BY PATRICIA MORRISROE

Robert Mapplethorpe remained focused on his legacy even from his hospital bed, writing his signature over and over again until it was reduced to a blur. In another example, he turned the “e” at the end of his name into an arrow, as if aiming at a target he could still envision but could no longer reach. When he died, on March 9, 1989, from complications of AIDS, he was only 42, but through his relentless drive and determination, he’d ensured the forward momentum of his remarkable career.

In March the Getty Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art will present a collaborative retrospective of the photographer’s work, drawing on the art and archives acquired in 2011 from the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Museumgoers will have the unique opportunity to



Clockwise from top left: Mapplethorpe at his 1988 Whitney show, photographed by Jonathan Becker for *Vanity Fair*; a rally in Cincinnati in support of an exhibition by the late artist, 1990; the cover of Morrisroe's 1995 biography; Mapplethorpe and Patti Smith, early 1970s.



see the full range of Mapplethorpe's output, from his 1970s collages, videos, and fetish jewelry to the photographs that sparked the "culture wars" of the 1990s. In April HBO will present the documentary *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures*, and Patti Smith, the photographer's friend and muse, is currently adapting her best-selling memoir *Just Kids* for Showtime.

Mapplethorpe would have loved the attention. During the six months I interviewed him for *Mapplethorpe: A Biography* (Random House), he repeatedly expressed his desire to "live long enough to see the fame." We'd met five years earlier when I profiled him for London's *Sunday Times Magazine*. I remember thinking he'd make a great biographical subject, especially after he confided that his life was even more interesting than his photographs, but at 36 he was far too young for such a definitive project. AIDS changed the arc of his life and inevitably his story. By the time Mapplethorpe

THE PHOTOGRAPHER HAD LITTLE TO SAY ABOUT HIS FLOWER PORTRAITS, EVEN LESS ABOUT HIS PORTRAITS. HE WAS NOT A RACONTEUR, EXCEPT WHEN IT CAME TO SEX.

had a major show at the Whitney Museum, in 1988, he was already in a wheelchair.

In August of that year, I approached him about writing his biography. He agreed almost immediately. Mapplethorpe later confessed that he didn't want a gay man to write his story for

fear of being pigeonholed as a "gay photographer." He felt comfortable around women, especially someone who shared his Catholic upbringing. "Then you understand," he said. Though he was no longer religious, Catholic iconography infused his work, and his placement of objects, whether in his photographs or his loft, had an altar's rigid symmetry.

Mapplethorpe's loft was on New York's West 23rd Street, near the Chelsea Hotel, where, a decade earlier, he'd lived with Smith. The place wasn't decorated for comfort but served as a showroom for his various collections. Like his patron and former lover Sam Wagstaff, he was obsessed with accumulating things: 19th-century busts of Roman gods and devils; Scandinavian pottery and Italian glass; Arts and Crafts furniture. There was never an object out of place, and everything—and everyone—did have a place. It was the way he'd always organized his life, and it became especially important as he began to lose control over it.

Each week seemed to add another year to his chronological age. Gazing at his once handsome face was to see what he would have looked like at 60, 70, and finally, as an old man. Mapplethorpe knew he'd lost his physical appeal. He was vain and very proud. He could also be charming, petty, and extremely critical. Nothing escaped his discerning eye. When I once showed up in a new Romeo Gigli shawl-neck jacket, it didn't take him a few minutes to say,

"That looks confused." He then went on to explain that if I wanted to wear a jacket with a high collar I had to wear my hair up. When I pulled it up, he made a face and told me to leave it down. Finally, he said, "I think you should get rid of the jacket."

Mapplethorpe was a master at the art game, negotiating the boundaries of up-town and downtown with the ease of a seasoned diplomat. He'd appear at Park Avenue dinner parties in black leather chaps before heading down to the Mine-shaft, a gay sex club, where he was such a regular people would ask, "Who was there besides Robert Mapplethorpe?" While his S&M pictures made his name, they were not made for decoration. The flower photos were the big sellers; they were "respectable," even when exuding an air of imminent danger. As for the commissioned portraits, they allowed him to network and also provided a steady income stream. But whether the subjects paid for the pictures or not, Mapplethorpe sculpted them in his own image: urban, edgy, cool, and slightly dangerous, too.

The photographer had little to say about his flower portraits, even less about his portraits. He was not a raconteur, except when it came to sex. He considered himself an expert in the extremes of human behavior, and in his brief life he probably gained more knowledge than most sex researchers. (Fittingly, 30 of Mapplethorpe's most compelling sex photos were



Poppy, 1988

donated to the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction.)

It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, that Mapplethorpe's love life was exceedingly complicated. He was searching for a man he could put on a pedestal, one who'd happily stay there. The great love of his life was Milton Moore, the subject of one of his most famous photographs, *Man in Polyester Suit*, which recently sold for \$478,000 at auction. Moore, who had serious psychiatric issues, was AWOL from the navy and had difficulty living up to Mapplethorpe's impossible expectations. Once he nearly burned down the photographer's studio; another time, feeling claustrophobic, he

jumped into the Hudson and swam to New Jersey. Eventually, they split up—Mapplethorpe admitted that he feared for his life—but even five years later, he could barely utter Moore's name without tears coming to his eyes.

Mapplethorpe died before the Corcoran Gallery of Art canceled "The Perfect Moment," an exhibition of his work that would set the stage for a 1990 obscenity trial in Cincinnati. (Both Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center and its director were acquitted.) Mapplethorpe the provocateur would have relished the spectacle just as Mapplethorpe the careerist would have loved to be here for the Getty-LACMA shows. His work has stood the test of time, even as he seems emblematic of his own time. It's hard to imagine him today, in the era of gay

marriage—he probably would have criticized the concept as "too suburban"—but in his self-portraits as a woman he was ahead of his day in focusing on transgender issues. A Mapplethorpe portrait of Caitlyn Jenner would have been something to see.

Before Mapplethorpe left for New England Deaconess Hospital, in Boston, we spoke for the last time.

"Just don't make me out as boring," he said.

There was no danger there. ♦

"Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium" runs March 15 through July 31 at the Getty; March 20 through July 31 at LACMA.

THE SHORT LIST

What to see, hear, and do around the world this season



THEATER

David Harrower's searing play **BLACKBIRD**, about a confrontation between a middle-aged man and the young woman he abused when she was a child, comes to Broadway's Belasco Theatre, with Jeff Daniels and Michelle Williams as the two broken souls.

3/10-6/11



ART

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents a **LOUISE BOURGEOIS** exhibition, "Structures of Existence: The Cells," devoted entirely to the late artist's series of enclosed phantasmagorias, taking full advantage of Frank Gehry's game-changing building.

3/18-9/4



FILM

Warner Bros. challenges Marvel's superhero hegemony with **BATMAN V. SUPERMAN: DAWN OF JUSTICE**, combining DC Comics' two headliners. Trailers indicate the film isn't as dumb as it sounds, thanks in part to Henry Cavill's charm as the Man of Steel.

3/25



MUSIC

This year's edition of the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival provides two major inducements for those not partial to flower crowns and jean shorts to head to Indio, California: the long-awaited reunions of **GUNS N' ROSES** and **LCD SOUNDSYSTEM**.

4/15-24



BOOKS

In Curtis Sittenfeld's **ELIGIBLE** (Random House)—a deft, modern retelling of *Pride and Prejudice* written under the aegis of the Austen Project—the five Bennet girls return home to Cincinnati, with Messrs. Bingley and Darcy as doctors competing for their affections.

4/19



TV

If anything counts as "appointment TV" in the age of DVR, it's the back-to-back-to-back season premieres of three of the best shows on television: HBO's **GAME OF THRONES**, **SILICON VALLEY**, and **VEEP**, whose biting political satire is especially needed now.

4/24

AL BEHRMAN/AP PHOTO (RALLY); © JUDY LINN (MAPPLETHORPE AND SMITH)

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