



Mapplethorpe Then and Now: 25 Years and a Conversation with FotoFocus' Kevin Moore

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Many different memories, ideas, conclusions, and issues are beginning to surface as FotoFocus Curator Kevin Moore and the Contemporary Arts Center each look toward Fall of 2015, the 25th anniversary of the original Robert Mapplethorpe photography show, "The Perfect Moment", and its tumultuous aftermath. Sheriff Simon Leis and the Vice Squad closed down the exhibition, then CAC Director Dennis Barrie went to trial – but was acquitted – for pandering obscenity and the CAC itself was the object of similar but eventually dropped charges.

Moore has organized a two-day symposium at the CAC, on October 23 and 24, featuring widely known and respected contemporary art curators, experts, and the like (the list of participants will follow this column), while the CAC itself is mounting a kind of "After 25 Years" exhibition, although, alas, the two Mapplethorpe related events will not occur at the same time, although in the same place.

For the exhibition the Contemporary Arts Center has asked seven area curators to select specific artists from this region whose work will be included in the CAC show, which opens approximately two weeks after the symposium has ended. Among the area curators selected is William Messer, one of contemporary art's finest photography curators/collectors/critics, who currently curates photography exhibitions at Iris Book Cafe in OTR, and who has become a recognized and respected authority on photography itself as well as, since the Mapplethorpe exhibition, on censorship in the arts. Other curators include Weston Gallery Director/Curator Dennis Harrington, Carnegie Curator (former CAC Curator) Matt Distel and current CAC curator Steven Matijcio. Although many originally thought the CAC show would present only photographs, a recent conversation I had with Matijcio indicated works on paper and videos are included. Only paintings are not represented in the upcoming show.

Some of my own perspectives on Mapplethorpe then and now are partly predicated on my being on the Board of the Contemporary Arts Center for a number of years preceding and through the Mapplethorpe exhibition. I was Chair of the Exhibitions Committee when Director Barrie decided to book the Mapplethorpe show, a decision supported by the Exhibitions Committee and a perhaps somewhat reluctant Board of Trustees.

About two years before that members of the CAC Board had consulted a marketing company owned by CAC Board member Barbara Weinberg and her husband, Irwin. They created a marketing survey for the CAC membership and collated the results. It was clear that the membership was eager for more photography shows, as well as more shows about contemporary architecture. Then CAC Curator, Sarah Rogers-Lafferty and I began to consider a photography show tentatively called "The Male Nude"; we were aware of a burgeoning interest in/return to figuration, as well. Women's Studies departments around the country in academia had moved more into what's now called 'gender studies', so Sarah and I were focused on the male, rather than the female, nude. Mapplethorpe's work was in our large file of possible photographers whose work might be included in such a show. At around that time, area curator/photographer Brad Austin Smith presented a show at the old CAGE gallery on West Fourth Street, called "The Male Nude", as I recall. It was a stunning show, but Smith told me then that the Vice Squad had appeared one day at the gallery. They did not close the show, but their appearance created a distinct chilling effect and was the first tangible warning of what might come. This occurred about 18 months or so before the Mapplethorpe show opened at CAC.

Nearer to the CAC/Mapplethorpe opening, the Playhouse in the Park opened a production of the play *Equus*; it has a nude scene early on, where the boy about whom the play is written is seen on a (wooden) horse, the *Equus* of the title. He was nude, and the Vice Squad also appeared at that opening, though with no specific warnings or attempts to shut the play down. These two precedents had occurred as America was moving politically to the right. In Washington, Mapplethorpe opened and immediately closed at the Corcoran gallery; nine months or so later it opened at the CAC in Cincinnati. Concurrently, a new group called "Citizens for Community Values" appeared seemingly out of nowhere, headquartered in Sharonville, and this group was determined to keep all 'pornography' out of Hamilton County.

The Corcoran's closing brought another enormous socio-cultural force to the scene: members of Congress. Senator Jesse Helms of N.C. and others were angry at the use of government funds, through the National Endowment for the Arts, to fund what they believed to be obscene art shows. (At that time, the total dollar figure in the entire NEA was the same as was allocated to military bands, according to *Harper's Magazine*.) The Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati did not use a penny of federal money in the Mapplethorpe show, a wise decision on Director Barrie's part, given the growing political sensitivity of the issue of government funding for the arts in general.

I need not get into the closing down of the show, and the trial that followed, as so much of that's been a matter of public record for these past 25 years. But I do also want to mention that Cincinnati, at that time, had what most called an 'anti-gay' housing ordinance, voted in by its citizens, and that certain people from one area corporation had expressed their intention to try to stop the Mapplethorpe show from actually opening here, and, throughout the build up to the show and up to and through the trial, pressures were exerted behind the scenes on selected CAC Board members; an attempt was made to defund the CAC, or to get area corporate support withdrawn from the Center itself. This part of what became known as just "Mapplethorpe" may be the least publicly documented, but as important an element as any other, perhaps, in its way, the most important, as the power behind the scenes attempting to not allow this show to open was intense. Any area corporation with any history of supporting the CAC was being pressured to stop its funding, and members of the CAC Board were pressured into resigning from it.

The Cincinnati in which we now live is almost completely a different city, with different cultural attitudes, different leadership, and a new burgeoning urbanist movement. I am assuming that the symposium organized by Kevin Moore, FotoFocus' highly intelligent and sensitive general curator, will address some of these issues, though in my phone conversation with Moore it sounded as though the focus may be more on aesthetic changes made here and elsewhere since the Mapplethorpe show and all its aftermath. All participants in the symposium, Moore says, are experts in contemporary art, and all are familiar with Mapplethorpe's oeuvre; many have written about him/his work, and it sounds as if the focus is on what's been learned from the Mapplethorpe controversies, rather than a rehashing of what happened then. And since a large number of panelists and also guest curators in the CAC show couldn't have been more than, say, between six and fifteen years old when the CAC show was here, it would be nigh on impossible for many of them to address the 'then' part of Mapplethorpe, rather than the 'now'. Emphases will be on aesthetic choices and/or changes more than on the socio-politics which surrounded the original show. And all the panelists being Mapplethorpe experts and, if you will, 'fans', it doesn't sound as if there's an 'anti-Mapplethorpe' contingent anywhere in either symposium or exhibition. At the end of the second day of the symposium, too, according to Moore, the panelists will move from CAC to 21st Century Hotel, where members of the public can ask questions and have their say.

A number of major socio-political issues may be said to have coalesced around the Mapplethorpe opening and the temporary closing of the show by the Sheriff and Vice Squad, representative of an America moving farther to the right politically. My own opinion: few of the issues raised by this show were ever aesthetic in any way, but the content of the so-called 'homoerotic' images was the explosive aspect, as were two photographs of under-aged children. Mapplethorpe's so-called "X" portfolio were very small images, as I recall about 6" x 6", and these were put under plexiglass way in the back of the galleries during the opening and for what was presumed to be the duration of the show.

Everyone was, at that point, ID'd to make certain that they were over 18, in order to get to those images at all. But the rest of the show mainly, though not exclusively, consisted of Edward Weston-like photographs of flowers, and many of celebrities: Warhol's world had pervaded Mapplethorpe's. Most of the latter two groups of photos could easily have been classified as classical (and sometimes derivative), but the other images unfortunately dominated discourse about the exhibition. Mapplethorpe's images were relatively conservative and often very beautiful: his craft was impeccable. The self-portraits were a particularly strong group of photographs but their relationship to Catholicism and to the religious tradition of portraying the devil (see "Self-Portrait with Bullwhip", an absolutely clear contemporary incarnation of the Devil), was never really discussed, which was a terrible waste of this fine work



Kevin Moore Photo by Wilson Reyes

FotoFocus Curator Moore believes that the major lasting effect of the Mapplethorpe show and following trial had the enormous benefit of allowing people to discuss homosexuality openly, and I think he's right on that point, but I don't think that the show was responsible for the new openness about homosexuality that has entered American culture in the past ten years or so. I see the show as the end of an era, and Moore probably sees it as a beginning, at least on that one issue. Because Mapplethorpe's interest in sex was limited to sado-masochistic homosexual practices, many people with whom I spoke at that time thus believed that homosexual men were, therefore, mainly if not exclusively interested in the particular practices Mapplethorpe documented/aestheticized in his work.

Sharonville-based Citizens for Community Values probably worked in reverse in trying to censor or dictate what would or would not be seen, in general, in the arts in Hamilton County. The Cincinnati Post did an exhaustive survey of the citizens of Hamilton County, and over 60% of those surveyed were content to be left alone, to determine for themselves what they'd see or not see: this was an important breakthrough and perhaps under-discussed since then but the people of Hamilton County appeared often as liberal and/or libertarian on such issues. Greater Cincinnati was presumed, for decades, to have been arch-conservative politically and socially, but events surrounding the Mapplethorpe exhibition began to show that these assumptions were not accurate.

The CAC exhibition thus crystallized attitudes that may have been over by then, and the future of socio-political and first amendment's freedom of expression, issues have probably changed forever, at least publicly, in this region. In spite of the horrors and difficulties of the trial, and the fear of a virtual defunding of the CAC, out of those ashes a newer value system began to emerge, and Moore is absolutely correct in seeing the post-Mapplethorpe era thus.

But I think that the role of certain corporate leaders in this region may be underplayed, even overlooked, in the upcoming symposium and exhibition (it's really a shame that the show won't be up when the symposium is on). Anywhere one went in America, during and after the closing of the show and the trial, if you mentioned "Cincinnati", what you heard was "Mapplethorpe", censorship, the lack of freedom of speech and expression. This city had a huge black eye and a reputation for being backwater, and the corporate leaders here did not like any of that one bit. Before Mapplethorpe, Cincinnati was often known nationally for Marge Schott's big mouth, and for her often racist/sexist remarks. Schott was preempted by Mapplethorpe, but neither was in any way helpful or beneficial for Cincinnati's national reputation; conventions were canceled; the future was uncertain. Cincinnati also still had its basically anti-gay housing ordinance, voted in. Artists were vigorously self-censoring; the only nudes you'd see here were classically rendered and basically asexual. And the two incidents of censorship I'm aware of, occurring in this region since the Mapplethorpe exhibition, each took place at area universities (UC and NKU). It's ironic to note such action from alleged bastions of freedom of speech and expression, in both instances concerning art exhibitions.

I think that Procter and Gamble's executives are mostly responsible for changing attitudes that began to manifest themselves a few years after the Mapplethorpe debacle, with globalization the general reason for so many changes. Ron Florida's 2008 book, *The Creative Class*, made a huge impact all over the country; Florida maintained that, in order to be competitive in a globalizing world, every city must find the best available talent everywhere, and that unless prejudicial attitudes regarding race, class, gender and sexual identity were thrown out the window some of the best creatives simply wouldn't come to a city perceived as Cincinnati had been after Mapplethorpe. Some years elapsed between these two events, but when Procter went into fifty international countries, and knew that many an international creative would be coming to Cincinnati, the company put its weight behind getting rid of the anti-gay housing ordinance, which the citizens did indeed vote out.

Eventually, companies like Procter would offer 'partner benefits'. Corporate attitudes changed dramatically during the mid to late nineties and onwards. LGBT people were perceived as important markets for any number of products; Jaguar, amongst others, began to advertise in Out Magazine. And the City of Cincinnati was becoming more Democratic, while the county remained politically more Republican due to all kinds of demographic and racial shifts. Columbus, too, began to overtake Cincinnati in population growth, and a more tolerant environment prevailed in arts and culture in general. Upscale stores, like Gucci, chose Columbus over Cincinnati, and all these changes were beginning to be reflected here, along with a just burgeoning Young Professional class and scene in Over The Rhine, in particular, though also in Northside and in East Walnut Hills. Gays were coming out in high school, and their friends and peers were accepting of same, as the generations changed. Our schools insisted on tolerance and anti-bullying campaigns began to be important. Current news stories about transgender people is one result of all these changes. Gay marriage began to appear, all over America, with record speed. All these changes occurred rapidly, perhaps symbolically coalescing with the first election of President Obama.

In the visual arts, too, photography had begun its grand ascendancy as an important art form/medium, and video and performance art began to be integrated fully into contemporary art. Images of the male form/figure began to emerge, along with a new contemporary form of classical realism. Drawing classes, like Manifest Gallery's drawing sessions, were likelier to have male models than females, as a new field known as 'gender studies', began to appear in syllabi and curriculums all over academia. They had originally been an offshoot of Women's Studies, but became an individual field. What became known as 'queer theory' appeared in academic publications as well as internationally acclaimed art publications. In contemporary art, postmodernism offered new critiques of Western art and culture, with feminism offering its interventions as well, but throughout the visual arts were a plethora of new ideas, new critiques into culture. 'Gay culture', if there is such a thing, became an integral part of all these new ideas. The audience for male nudes, to use one subset of the figurative genre, was as likely to be women collectors as gay males. All these societal strictures were changing and moving with a great speed, helped along by the internet, among other things.

Artists here, such as Tony Lunesman, were openly addressing gay identity in their work and in entire exhibitions. Corporate support followed, as the marketing departments understood the possibility of vast new markets, including people of color. Diversity, which grew out of academia and the arts, began to be adopted seriously by the corporate world, which understood the potential for new markets through the interchanges of ideas amongst varied populations.

I don't know how many of these changes can be directly related to the Mapplethorpe exhibition. Kevin Moore believes that most contemporary art of that era was overtly political, seeking to help define and create social change, and that Mapplethorpe was an artist of this ilk (I thought of Mapplethorpe more as a careerist and an exhibitionist of sort, but perhaps neither mattered, in the end). So Moore sees a show like Mapplethorpe's as sowing the seeds for many of the socio-political-aesthetic changes which have occurred since that exhibition here 25 years ago. He is certainly correct in most ways but he also misses the kind of political work so many artists favored in the '80s and '90s, much preempted by the money-driven contemporary art fairs we now have all over the world. And although I never thought of Mapplethorpe as a political artist, hindsight matters as much as the perceptions of the early nineties. Younger artists, curators and collectors have matured in what's really a different America, certainly a more inclusive one.

That the lessons learned from the original exhibition and trial will differ between generations is a healthy thing, also inevitable. Students are educated today very differently from the way boomers were; diversity and inclusiveness are at the core of today's educational belief systems. The corporate world and museums as well all have significant educational and outreach programs as a result. (The CAC's first education curator, Sandy Rosen, is still one of the finest I've ever met). And if, as the highly intelligent and curatorially astute Kevin Moore's belief that Mapplethorpe's show at CAC fast-forwarded this country's more open attitude towards gay people, then the show can best be seen as an opening, rather than a closing.

Moore and I agreed about the lack of any real critical assessment of Mapplethorpe's actual work, the photographs themselves, which truly got lost in the morass of the trial. Parenthetically, I've always been utterly baffled by those who believe(d) that then Director Dennis Barrie somehow orchestrated much of what became known simply as "Mapplethorpe" as a way of driving his career path; as a Board member then, whose role was to talk to the national press on radio talk shows, TV shows and the like, I worked closely with Barrie at that time, and am comfortable maintaining that such motives had nothing to do with Dennis Barrie then or later.

2015 is a good time to reflect on what the original Mapplethorpe show meant then and means now, as Cincinnati has grown and developed and wants to be known as a liveable, increasingly hip city with urban and cultural amenities rare for a city this size. I am looking forward to this symposium, expecting some revisionist history, but then all history is ultimately revisionist. The pulse of contemporary art and culture is likely to be felt and discussed by the group of art professionals whom Kevin Moore has invited, as fine and impressive a group as we'll likely see here in quite some time. The fact that they are coming to Cincinnati tells us on its own how much Cincinnati has matured and grown since the trial.

The symposium is likely to generate new ideas and approaches; we hope that the CAC show does, as well.

—Daniel Brown

For Immediate Release

Mapplethorpe + 25:

A Symposium to Commemorate the 25th Anniversary of

Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment

Co-Presented by FotoFocus and the Contemporary Arts Center

at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, OH

October 23 and 24, 2015

Cincinnati, OH – May 18, 2015 – FotoFocus and the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) in Cincinnati, Ohio, are pleased to announce a symposium on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial exhibition, *The Perfect Moment*. Under the leadership of Mary Ellen Goeke, Executive Director of FotoFocus, Contemporary Arts Center Director, Raphaela Platow, and curated by FotoFocus Artistic Director Kevin Moore, the program will include an international roster of curators, critics, artists, and art world professionals who will meet for a two-day event on October 23 and 24, 2015, at the CAC, to discuss the significance and implications of the exhibition and Mapplethorpe's career and legacy as these have evolved over the past 25 years.

Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment opened on April 7, 1990, at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati in a climate of national cultural unrest. The exhibition immediately sparked controversy when politicians took offense to the show and the use of public funds provided by the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) to support it, leading to the indictment of the CAC and Director Dennis Barrie on obscenity charges. Similar controversy had resulted in the cancellation of the exhibition tour at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the previous year. The historic trial that followed—where for the first time a museum and its director faced criminal charges because of an art Robert Mapplethorpe, Ken Moody and Robert Sherman, 1984 exhibition—brought national attention to the subject of public funding for the arts, as well as arts censorship.

Twenty-five years later, numerous reassessments of the artist's career have prompted fresh insights. The symposium, *Mapplethorpe + 25*, will revolve around this revitalized interest in Mapplethorpe as curators, artists, critics and others explore the broad question: what does Mapplethorpe's work tell us about the culture we have inherited and inhabit today?

"With the 25th anniversary of Robert Mapplethorpe's exhibition, we wanted to revisit the past as it is the basis of history; it reminds us of where we come from and who we have become," says FotoFocus Artistic Director and Curator, Kevin Moore. "Mapplethorpe's work rather ambitiously proposes a far-reaching idea of universalism, of timeless values common to all of humanity across myriad cultural geographies. Yet his work is also idiosyncratic, personal, of a particular historical moment—the politically conservative 1980s and the height of the AIDS crisis. To comprehend his work as both timeless and timely, as an amalgam of a perfect world and an imperfect moment, is to grasp the essential need to make art, to write history, and to contemplate both."

"It's remarkable that it has been 25 years since Mapplethorpe's exhibition and the national uproar, and we are thrilled that the symposium is taking place right where it all started," said Contemporary Arts Center Director Raphaela Platow. "Showcasing Mapplethorpe's work elevated the CAC to a national platform as a place that fought for new projects and ideas. What many don't realize is at the time, that was a very risky statement for an institution to make."

SYMPOSIUM PROGRAM AT THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER (CAC),

CINCINNATI, OHIO:

OCTOBER 23 and 24, 2015

Program subject to change

Friday, October 23

Opening Film Montage

Welcome and Introduction by FotoFocus and CAC

Keynote speaker: Germano Celant, Independent Curator, Milan-New York

Saturday, October 24

Welcome and Overview

Panel: The Exhibition, The Contemporary Arts Center, and Arts Censorship Moderated by (TBD), with panelists: Dennis Barrie, Principal of Barrie Projects and former Contemporary Arts Center Director; Jock Reynolds, Director, Yale University Art Gallery; Raphaela Platow, Director, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati; and H. Louis Sirkin, Senior Counsel, Santen & Hughes, and former trial counsel to Dennis Barrie and the Contemporary Arts Center

Panel: The Artist's Circle and Studio Moderated by Phillip Gfelter, author and photo historian, with panelists: Robert Sherman, promoter, Chateau Marmont, Los Angeles; Judy Linn, artist, New York; and Carol Squiers, Curator, International Center of Photography, New York

Panel: Curators Curate Mapplethorpe

Moderated by Kevin Moore, Artistic Director and Curator, FotoFocus, with panelists: Britt Salvesen, Curator, Wallis Annenberg Photography Department, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); and Paul Martineau, Associate Curator, Department of Photographs, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Closing Artist Keynote speaker: Catherine Opie, artist

Oral History Reception at the 21c Museum Hotel:

Visitors are invited to share their stories of the 1990 Mapplethorpe exhibition, reflect on its impact, and comment on issues raised in the symposium. This commentary will be recorded and simultaneously broadcast during the symposium's final public reception at the 21c Museum Hotel.

About Robert Mapplethorpe

Robert Mapplethorpe was born in 1946 in Floral Park, Queens. He studied drawing, painting, and sculpture at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Influenced by artists such as Joseph Cornell and Marcel Duchamp, he also experimented with various materials in mixed-media collages, including images cut from books and magazines. He eventually began producing his own photographs with a Polaroid camera and in 1973 received his first solo gallery exhibition titled "Polaroids" at the Light Gallery in New York City. Two years later he acquired a Hasselblad medium-format camera and began shooting his friends and acquaintances, some of which were involved in the New York S & M scene—by the late 1970s, he grew increasingly interested in documenting that scene. In 1986, he was diagnosed with AIDS. Despite his declining health, he continued to make strides in his career, including his first major American museum retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1988. Mapplethorpe passed away in 1989, but his legacy lives on through his work, which is represented by galleries and in the collections of major museums around the world.

About FotoFocus

FotoFocus is a non-profit arts organization whose mission is to present the finest in photography and lens-based art, and to produce programs that are artistically, intellectually, and academically rigorous yet accessible, educational and enriching to a large and diverse public. FotoFocus celebrates and champions photography as the medium of our time through programming that ignites a dialogue between contemporary photo-based art and the history of photography. FotoFocus has awarded more than 85 grants to regional artists and institutions since 2012 for the production and presentation of photography and lens-based art.

Launched in October 2012, the FotoFocus Biennial is a month-long regional photography festival based in Cincinnati. The second edition of the Biennial in 2014, included six original exhibitions curated by Artistic Director Kevin Moore, the premier of the FotoFocus ArtHub, as well as exhibitions by over fifty participating venues throughout the region. The FotoFocus Biennial 2014 featured programming included five days of lectures, panel discussions, screenings, and performances with curators, critics, and art world professionals.

Further information about FotoFocus can be found at www.fotofocuscincinnati.org and the FotoFocus

Biennial 2014 at <http://www.fotofocusbiennial.org>.

Follow FotoFocus on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram via the hashtag #FotoFocus

FotoFocus Biennial 2016: Photography, the Undocument, Oct. 1-31, 2016

The Undocument questions the documentary character of photography, exploring the boundaries between facts and fabrications. The FotoFocus Biennial 2016 will run through the month of October in Cincinnati at participating museums, galleries, organizations, and in the ArtHub. The FotoFocus Biennial will include four days of concentrated programming and events to be held October 6 – 9, 2016.

