

AEQAI

Past Perfect: “Mapplethorpe + 25: A Symposium to Commemorate the 25th Anniversary of The Perfect Moment” at the Contemporary Arts Center, October 23-24, 2015

November 24th, 2015 | Published in *, November 2015

It was a pretty perfect moment. For one evening and the whole day following, FotoFocus and the Contemporary Arts Center teamed up to sponsor and host three panel discussions and three keynote speakers to talk about the making of Mapplethorpe the artist, the making of the CAC’s 1990 show “The Perfect Moment” and subsequent trial, and the current task of making meaningful exhibits out of the Mapplethorpe canon while bearing in mind, as FotoFocus’s Artistic Director and Curator Kevin Moore noted, that this is “material that’s been very well exposed” by now. The guest list was first-rate. On hand were some of the people behind the decision to mount the Mapplethorpe show in Cincinnati in 1990, including Dennis Barrie, the CAC Director in the 1990s, and the thoughtfully eloquent Louis Sirkin, the First Amendment attorney who defended Barrie and the CAC in court. There were familiar faces, including Robert Sherman, Mapplethorpe model and occasional partner, and familiar names, including the distinguished photo critic Carol Squiers, now Curator at the International Center of Photography. There were people who knew Mapplethorpe when he was young, people who helped shape his career and reputation, and people who now work to extend and redefine his legacy. Together, they made claims about Mapplethorpe’s relationship to virtually every art form (except, oddly, photography), provided considerable and delicious anecdotal heft to our understanding of Mapplethorpe’s life in the New York City in the 1970s and 80s, from which he drew the material that fueled the notoriety of his art, and reminded the audience how much the culture of Cincinnati had changed in the last quarter century.



The Artist's Circle and Studio Panel (Photo Credit: Jacob Drabik)

"The Perfect Moment" always was a strange title for a show of Mapplethorpe's photographs. It suggests that Mapplethorpe was an artist whose brilliance lay in capturing the urgent evanescence of a world in motion, like Cartier-Bresson. Anything but. The greater part of his output might as well have been pictures of objects cast in plaster or carved out of marble (or jet). In the portion of Friday night's talk dealing with Mapplethorpe's antecedents, Germano Celant showed slides of work by Canova and Rodin, and a picture Mapplethorpe had taken in 1974 of Michelangelo's "Slave." The perfect moment? In hindsight, though, the 1990 show was a perfect moment for Cincinnati. It was the high-water mark for Senator Jesse Helms's hostility towards directions in art of which he did not approve. The indictment of Barrie and the CAC was also pretty much the high-water mark for the moral policing by Hamilton County Prosecutors Art Ney and his predecessor Simon Leis. (Leis was mentioned only in passing at the CAC event, though it seemed to me that the Cincinnati of the 1980s in which I lived was a city whose public life was constructed substantially according to his image.) Following the jury's acquittal of Barrie and the CAC in 1990, Cincinnati City Council in 1992 passed a comprehensive ordinance prohibiting discrimination throughout the city for a variety of causes, including sexual orientation. Too soon. In 1993, Ballot Issue 3 was introduced to amend the City Charter to strike sexual orientation from the menu of possible discriminations and to prohibit any law from ever changing that status. It was approved by the electorate with a two-thirds majority. A decade later, in 2004, Article XII was overturned by a popular vote of 53%. In the Q&A following one of the panel discussions, Robert Sherman was asked how he thought Mapplethorpe would have responded to the furor in Cincinnati over his work (he had died the year before it opened). Sherman answered that "he would have been thrilled" by the publicity, but probably would have hated all the criticism. As Kevin Moore noted, Mapplethorpe was not particularly political himself, but understood that he was the occasion for the exercise of political convictions by others.



(l. to r.) Raphaella Platow; Dennis Barrie; Louis Sirkin; Jock Reynolds
(Photo Credit: Jacob Drabik)

Among a number of shrewd things Louis Sirkin said in the Saturday morning panel about the show and the trial, he noted that he should have been able to defend the CAC with what is called an affirmative defense (where one set of legal facts takes priority over another set, such as free and protected speech taking precedence over obscene content). The Mapplethorpe photographs were, he pointed out, “obviously art” being shown at what was obviously an art museum. It is interesting to think twice about the category of what makes something “obviously art.” In the case of Mapplethorpe’s work, it seems to be in large part due to the ease with which the work can be subjected to formal analysis. But formalism seems like an iffy basis for defense. I remember in 1990 seeing CAC Curator Jack Sawyer standing in front of Mapplethorpe’s notorious “Man in Polyester Suit” (1980), and praising its strong diagonals. But even material that we could probably agree was pornographic—whether elegantly or sleazily so—can be analyzed in formal terms. It is a famous fallacy that rigorous application of formal criticism will by itself distinguish between art and trash. Besides, as keynote speaker Robert Reid-Pharr noted, homosexual and sadomasochistic images on display at a museum are art, per se; the same images at a porno bookstore are not. So we haven’t defined the form, just acknowledged the context. Besides, the formal qualities of Mapplethorpe’s sexually-charged images can be stifling. In the course of referring to Mapplethorpe’s “classicism,” Kevin Moore observed, we are looking at highly “idealized portrayals of sex acts.” They are so highly idealized that in many cases, the bodies do not seem to be composed out of flesh. Carol Squiers noted that Mapplethorpe “wanted to make art that gave you the feeling in your gut that you got from pornography.” The prosecution of Dennis Barrie and the CAC to the contrary notwithstanding, I wonder if it ever did.



Kevin Moore (Photo Credit: Jacob Drabik)

Jock Reynolds, who in 1989 was the director of the Washington Project for the Arts and offered his venue to show the Mapplethorpe exhibit that the Corcoran Gallery of Art, under pressure, had refused, observed that Jesse Helms fomented resistance to Mapplethorpe by circulating a carefully-selected limited number of images. Helms's odd curatorial act worked, Reynolds noted, to "decontextualize" some of Mapplethorpe's most easily objected-to works. I take this to be an interesting and serious point—the florals and the portraits would surely have provided artistic bona fides for the penises—but it's hard not to wonder what difference it really would have made. The censorious mind doesn't seem, in fact, to care about intent when discerning pornography. As recently as November 2015, Stephen Colbert reported that in covering the news story of the auction sale for \$170 million of the reclining Modigliani nude, CBS wouldn't permit him to actually show the painting. Furthermore, when he wanted to contextualize the painting by showing Michelangelo's David, CBS informed him that he could only broadcast it in a distant view and for no more than two seconds, although a less salacious rendition of male anatomy is hard to imagine.

In his study of Rabelais, the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin introduced a helpful distinction between two different ways of representing the human body, one of which he called "classic" and the other "grotesque." These are not terms of judgment; Bakhtin himself thought that the more significant form was the grotesque. The classical body is the body of Greek and Roman sculpture (especially as understood in the 18th century): it is the body that is literally statuesque—polished, colorless, impervious, and immutable. It is the body as understood by the eyes. By contrast, the grotesque body is rough, disorderly, wet, and changeable. As it is distinguished by its openings—especially the less polite ones—it is the body as experienced by the sense of smell. Mapplethorpe, who, as Dennis Barrie observed, rightfully belongs to the "Greek tradition" in his sense of the body, belongs to the classical side of representation, sometimes almost stiflingly so.

Except when he wasn't. A relatively small proportion of the work exhibited in "The Perfect Moment" would qualify as grotesque (in Bakhtin's sense of the term). Mostly, they were the images gathered in a collection of thirteen pictures Mapplethorpe published in 1978 as *Portfolio X*. The Cincinnati Grand Jury that indicted Barrie and the CAC selected seven prints as the offending items, not all from the *Portfolio*. Two are pictures of naked children; the other five of the "Cincinnati Seven" belong to the body of sadomasochistic work Mapplethorpe produced, chiefly in the late 1970s, and they are grotesque: inappropriate things are entering the body through generally inappropriate openings. They are going up the down staircase, as a friend of mine once said. In the relatively well-known "Self-Portrait with Whip" (1978), a diabolical-looking Mapplethorpe—wearing boots, leather chaps, and a leather vest—turns back to look at us over his shoulder with a long bullwhip trailing out of his anus; in "Lou, N.Y.C." (1978), a man has inserted the tip of his pinkie into the opening of his penis. Despite the strong support from collectors over the years for Mapplethorpe's pictures, Michael Ward Stout, the President of The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, wryly noted in one of the panels that the Estate has a lot more of the sadomasochistic images left on its hands than it has of the calla lilies. In a later panel, Paul Martineau, Associate Curator of the Department of Photographs for the Getty Museum, suggested that the Getty could team up with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (together, they hold some 2000 of his works) for Mapplethorpe shows where "one museum could show the Apollonian and one the Dionysian" side of the artist's oeuvre. For the sake of attendance figures, one might want to be the Apollonian venue, even in California.

But none of the indicted images were the exhibition's most grotesque, by a long shot. There were, for example, two images on display of a penis bound into some sort of armature, before and after being mutilated. Why were they not part of indicted group? I believe that they were so far from being classic images that they were in fact, unrecognizable by police, prosecutors, and grand jury. You can't indict obscenity if you physically can't see it. A print exists of the mutilated penis, signed by both Mapplethorpe and Patti Smith, with extensive handwritten annotations. One scribbled note reads "They take offense at this nude." Another: "It was the transformation." Another: "What could I experience that could compare to this?"

For a brief while, Mapplethorpe's art was dedicated to the incomparable experiences he was racking up. It is here that he was being least classical in his vision of the body, and most transgressive. He presents images to us with the dumbfounded directness we hear in the titles of some of Goya etchings: "I saw this." These pictures were taken in New York City in the 1970s when, as Philip Gelter noted in introducing one of the panels, "Robert Mapplethorpe was becoming Robert Mapplethorpe." It is the world, Gelter commented, of Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side." Though Carol Squiers argued that in her experiences with him, Mapplethorpe made it clear that he did not want to be known as a gay artist, it is perhaps too easy to underestimate the impact in the 1970s and 1980s of an artist was, in Michael Stout's words, "documenting, in formal and documentary way, the homosexual world." Judy Linn spoke endearingly of watching Mapplethorpe prepare himself, psychologically and physically (down to his choices of costume), to enter that world from the pleasant security of the rooms he shared with Patti Smith. In a discussion the day following his own talk, Germano Celant explained that in the world of contemporary art, by the time Mapplethorpe was first beginning to make images, pure objectivity and cool, distant remove were no longer possible. There are aspects of self-portraiture in everything he does: "An artist takes responsibility and says 'I'm there, I'm part of the subject.'" He is free to head off to another evening of experience. Then, by the late 1970s, Michael Stout said, Mapplethorpe had given all this up and become the artist we think of today, for better and for worse.



Judy Linn with her photograph of Robert Mapplethorpe while he was at art school (Photo Credit: Jacob Drabik)

In what I heard at the CAC's Symposium—and I heard almost all of it—there were strong voices making important arguments about the arc of Mapplethorpe's career, with a particular emphasis, of course, on how part of that arc came to pass through Cincinnati a quarter century ago. There were plenty of subjects it would have been interesting to have heard more about. Though his botanical images have long been treated as a safe refuge for people who want Mapplethorpe without the bullwhips and penises, they are, as poet Richard Howard once observed, pictures that capture the sex organs of plants. Moreover, there is a long and interesting tradition of plant photography, and it would have been interesting to have him placed somewhere in that continuum. Though Robert Sherman told stories about working with model Ken Moody and scholar Robert Reid-Pharr's keynote address was entitled "How to Look at a White Man," there is a great deal more to be said about issues of race in Mapplethorpe's work.



Robert Reid-Pharr (Photo Credit: Jacob Drabik)

A subject on which a good deal was said though it was never really pulled together was Mapplethorpe's relationships to women, including, of course, Patti Smith. Carol Squiers noted that Mapplethorpe "had a very interesting relationship with women. He was a sexual provocateur." After his evening talk, Germano Celant was asked a question about Mapplethorpe's artistic relationship to another artist capable of seeing sexuality through the eyes of a great formalist sensibility, Georgia O'Keeffe. All Celant could say was "I forgot" about her, though he went on to tell a story about Mapplethorpe's vexed relationship with the figure of Cindy Sherman, who was starting to earn big money for her work, which led Mapplethorpe to say, in great frustration, "But she's not a photographer." One of the women towards whom he was most drawn was model and muse Lisa Lyon, a body builder whose highly-toned figure seemed to have as much in common with Mapplethorpe's male portraits as his female ones. Celant told a story about the making of "Marty and Veronica" (1982), a well-known image of a black man going down on a white woman. Her breasts, which in the final photograph are standing up straight although she is lying down, frustrated him because they "didn't cooperate." It is hard to imagine a clearer description of what it means to quest for Bakhtin's classic body that behaves more like a statue than like a superstructure of mere flesh.

Towards the end of the Q&A after his panel, Robert Sherman was asked by a member of the audience, "Did the man have an extremely large ego?" Sherman giggled. "I thought you were going to ask something else"; he paused a moment like the fine storyteller he is and then added, "It wasn't bad." The CAC/FotoFocus Symposium did a great job at bringing Mapplethorpe to life, and especially the young Mapplethorpe who was, as Geffer suggested, a 1970s New York version of the 1890s London dandy, "both aestheticized and transgressive." Judy Linn showed pictures she had taken of him when he was barely in his 20s, an art school student who was not even a photographer yet, but was starting to get attracted to—and energized by—the worlds of pleasure and danger he saw around him. Carol Squiers described the relationship they had over a number of years, talking, drinking, and going to see a lot of shows: "He looked at a lot of art, at a lot of photography, but he was interested in the craft rather than the content." Robert Sherman rounded out the portrait of what it was like to work professionally with Mapplethorpe: "He was very soft spoken, very specific, very focused. At a shoot, you'd do a line of coke, shoot, do a line of coke," and then go back to work. In the 1970s, that too was part of craft.



Robert Sherman (Photo Credit: Jacob Drabik)

When Mapplethorpe found a model he liked better, he would walk away from you completely. Sherman felt hurt—and used—when Mapplethorpe moved on, but after all, he said, "Who doesn't like to be photographed?" I wonder if people a quarter century later, made more anxious by the role of surveillance in everyone's lives, would still agree. Representations of gay identities have surely changed since Mapplethorpe was in his prime, as have our attitudes towards photography altogether. If people wish to be photographed, the iPhone, Facebook, and Instagram help us wallpaper our lives with images. The audience at the CAC was very large—for the evening and first morning events, the auditorium was completely filled with an overflow crowd left to gather what they could by a remote video feed—and it was quite varied in age. But I saw very little intergenerational chit-chat. The generations feel a little stumped by each other. Kevin Moore noted that he wasn't sure "how to find out what today's audience thinks about the New York S&M scene in the 1970s," and Paul Martineau explained that he "had to figure out how to explain the X Portfolio to my parents."

Just as Cincinnati is a different city now than it was 25 years ago, it's hard not to think that Mapplethorpe would be a different artist if he were starting out today. And what would today's audience make of the relative safety of Mapplethorpe's formal and classicized aesthetic? Where would they go for the equivalent sense of danger that Mapplethorpe could bring out in his most dangerous work? The Mapplethorpe who came to life at the CAC Symposium had contagious appetites and an inquisitive eye and could be sweet and generous and fun and outrageous and kind of innocent. Until he wasn't.

—Jonathan Kamholtz