

ECHO AT THE MARGINS MAPPLETHORPE + 25

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FOTOFOCUS AND THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER, CINCINNATI
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The slideshow paused on the now iconic image of a young Robert Mapplethorpe, his body turned away from the camera, stance partially bent over a sheet-covered platform. He is dressed in black vinyl, a leather-braided bullwhip protruding from his rectum. With the whip firmly grasped in one hand, the artist cranes his neck to look back at the viewer, gaze unflinching in the triangular composition of black leather, white flesh, and shadow. The message is undeniable and, to the student of art history, familiar—it's a provocation, a self-portrait, a testament of belief, conviction, and sexuality, but also of freedom, resistance, and potential. Or at least this is how the photograph was read when first exhibited in the winter of 1988. By 1989, however, it would be equally interpreted as an act of transgression, of violence, depravity, even perversity.

Last month, FotoFocus, in collaboration with the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati (CAC) hosted a weekend-long symposium to examine these very qualities in Mapplethorpe's work, more than two decades after the institution's exhibiting of the artist's traveling retrospective, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, and the attendant legal scandal that enflamed the Culture Wars. As the symposium would demonstrate, a lot can change in twenty-five years. Blood, for one thing, was different in 1990 than it is in 2015; race relations, while



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Helmut*, NYC (from X Portfolio), 1978. Courtesy the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

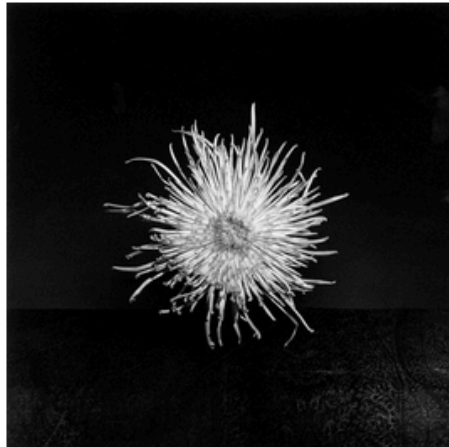
undeniably strained in the '80s and '90s, have taken on a renewed intensity in the American geography; and gay marriage, an unthinkable concept under the first Bush administration, is now legal in all fifty states. In the wake of such cultural and sociopolitical advances, the symposium attempted to address the question of impact: Do these photographs still carry the charge of transgression and boundary-breaking that they did in 1990? If so, or equally, if not, what does this mean for the power of Mapplethorpe's work? How does our current cultural climate affect the reading of the artist's oeuvre, of his legacy, his place in art history?

Self Portrait (with a whip) is one of thirty-nine black-and-white photographs that make up Mapplethorpe's now infamous *XYZ Portfolios*, three overlapping projects that the artist engaged in between 1978 and 1981. At the time of the work's creation, Mapplethorpe considered the three distinct portfolios as a comprehensive representation of his oeuvre—a meditation on life, death, and beauty as visualized in the content of each: the *X Portfolio*, featuring homosexual sadomasochistic acts; the *Y Portfolio*, still lifes of cut flowers; and the *Z Portfolio*, classically elegant nudes of African American males. Exhibited together, the series inform a delicate balance of dichotomies, the interplay between light and darkness, pain and pleasure, formal Apollonian rigor and Dionysian extravagance. Alone, the images possess an altogether different tenor.

Carol Squiers, curator of the International Center of Photography and a friend of Mapplethorpe's in the '70s, said it best: "The vocabulary for describing these works simply didn't exist at the time." I would argue that that vocabulary is still lacking to a degree, but what we have difficulty talking about now isn't so much the works' sexual content, but the subjective and deeply personal world to which these images grant us access. This is a question that defines the work of a number of contemporary photographers, from Gillian Wearing, Catherine Opie, and

Cindy Sherman, to the collaborative team of Ari Versluis and profiler Ellie Uyttenbroek. Each of these artists' interests resides in the dissonance between public and private personae, the contradiction between individual expression and collective uniformity, but none is as effective or jarring as Mapplethorpe's depictions of the margin. The question, then, remained for me: Why? What is it about these images that constitutes their profound staying power? Their ability to haunt, shock, and provoke?

One answer, not explicitly mined as part of the conversation, resides with the issue of movement. In the din of the CAC's amphitheater, surrounded by projected black-and-white depictions of homoerotic lust, classical beauty, and human desire, it occurred to me that there exists an ironic circularity in the distribution and consumption of these photographs. Their journey begins in 1978, shot in the private space of Mapplethorpe's studio amongst friends, peers, and a likeminded queer community. From there, their inevitable trajectory was to move into the public realm, with Mapplethorpe having, by 1984, mounted over forty international solo exhibitions, including a retrospective show curated by Richard Marshall and Tom Armstrong in 1988 at the Whitney Museum. Janet Kardon's *The Perfect Moment* followed, bringing Mapplethorpe's work to the American masses on a seven-venue tour throughout 1988 – 90, beginning with the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia and ending with the ICA in Boston. Of the 175 photographs that made up the traveling exhibition, only a handful depicted the exquisite display of raw, intimate, and unmediated homoeroticism that marked the *X Portfolio*, but that was enough. The images were met with considerable consternation and aggression, and understandably so, for the moment in which these pictures were exhibited witnessed a particular moment in American cultural politics, one marked by extreme conservatism and fear as precipitated by the AIDS crisis, gay rights activism, and a steady movement towards a post-Reagan Era right. It is here, in the triangulated realm of public belief—religious, political, and personal—that the Culture Wars were defined and Mapplethorpe would become a household name, effectively altering the stakes of First Amendment rights and arts censorship forever.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Chrysanthemum* (from *Y Portfolio*), 1977. Courtesy the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

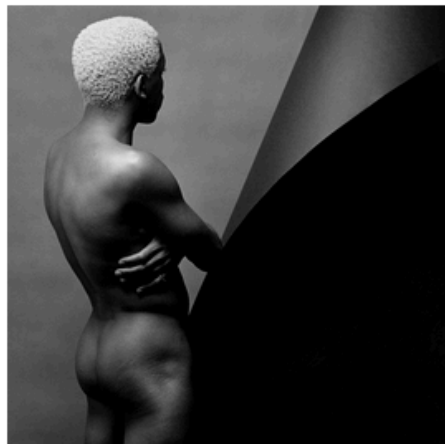
But twenty-five years is a game-changer, and two plus decades on, I would argue, the place from which these images gain their contemporary heft is, ironically, located again within the private sphere. First, and in part due to the Mapplethorpe Foundation's strict control over these images, as expounded upon by Michael Ward Stout, the Foundation's President, they've been denied circulatory participation in the mass media's ever-increasing movement towards normalizing the margin. Google "Mapplethorpe" and predominantly classical self-portraits, flowers, and the occasional nude are the only images to be found in the feed. The S & M pictures, which the artist focused on for a very brief period of three to four years, require considerably more digging to unearth. As a result, the *X Portfolio* photographs still possess an element of risk, of something at stake—both on the part of the artist, who often positions himself as a direct participant in the work, and the viewer, who, because of Robert's expertly wielded control over the compositional frame, is never truly allowed to enter into the traditional voyeuristic role as established by art history. Instead, we are asked to (and in the act of looking, *do*) participate in the exchange of flesh for flesh, pain for pleasure, and vice-versa. Now as was then, this places the art viewer in a rather unorthodox position, effectively reversing the normative balance between private act and public demonstration.¹ In the past, this was provocation enough to ignite social protest on a national scale, but today, where the lines between public and private are increasingly blurred, the reversal would no longer seem to support a catalyst for controversial exchange.

Rather, what has shifted in the historical span since this work was first exhibited is not our mode of reception, per say, but our mode(s) of consumption. Stretched and bound flesh, blood, props, and classicizing symmetry—the stillness of a moment as dramatic as those pictured in the *X Portfolio* work like a paradox, provoking reactions and involvement on the part of the beholder that are exceptional if not downright anomalous to contemporary image consumption. Amidst a climate of pictorial saturation and 24/7 streaming, it is in this circling back towards interiority, toward authentic personal expression in defiance of the "cult of the selfie," that the photographs' contemporary lure is enacted.

In a world where inside and outside cease to exist, where "all movement is towards exteriority,"²

Mapplethorpe's imagery reminds us of the revolutionary powers of that polarizing distinction. These images picture a moment when resistance is possible, when there is an outside against which to protest, when the margin is a viable possibility for inhabiting. The sense of urgency to be located in Mapplethorpe's work in the present then, has less to do with what the images depict—sex, transgression, racial complexity—than what they don't display as

visibly. That aspect of deeply personal subjectivity that, in the wake of the global village, we have all but lost; of a culture and a community largely disappeared. In his uncompromising conflation of dualities, Mapplethorpe meets the doubts and longings of a new age, penetrating the dissociative protection of the technological screen to reveal a past both stripped of its pretensions and rife with a newly radicalized and altogether human potentiality.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Leigh Lee* (from *X Portfolio*), 1980. Courtesy the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.