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IN THE AIR

Cincinnati Hosts Mapplethorpe Symposium 25 Years After Trial



In October of 1990, a jury acquitted Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) and its director Dennis Barrie of obscenity charges — the cause, "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment," a photography exhibition deemed criminally inappropriate for its stark depictions of less-than-vanilla homosexual sex acts. At the time, art censorship was all the rage, especially regarding ties to public funding; the Corcoran cancelled their intended run of the same Mapplethorpe show a year prior for fear of backlash, not to mention [the NEA Four](#) and their famously pulled funding. (See also, as cited by a concurrent New York Times [article](#), the nail-biting case against 2 Live Crew.) As such, Cincinnati's Mapplethorpe win represented an important precedent for art institutions and an overall banner day for free speech. But amid all the scandalizing over sex versus championing its right to be shown, it's easy to lose sight of the artist and his creative intent — to form an opinion without even really looking at the work. Enter "Mapplethorpe + 25," a symposium co-presented by [FotoFocus](#) and the CAC, which aims, at least in part, to reexamine the artistic legacy of so famously controversial a photoset, just in time for the verdict's 25th anniversary.

On October 23 and 24, the CAC will host panels of artists, curators, critics, and scholars to discuss Mapplethorpe's legacy — including opening keynote speaker Germano Celant, editor of several Mapplethorpe books, and closing keynote speaker Catherine Opie, also known for her boundary-pushing, queer-inflected photographs.

Other noted guests include former CAC director Barrie, who will speak on a panel about the trial itself, while former Mapplethorpe model Robert Sherman (one of the men featured in the original show's promotional image, in fact) will join artist Judy Linn and International Center for Photography curator Carol Squiers in a discussion more geared toward the artist's life and practice. Meanwhile, FotoFocus artistic director Kevin Moore will moderate a talk between [LACMA](#) photography curator Britt Salvesen and [Getty](#) associate photography curator Paul Martineau, as both museums have Mapplethorpe retrospectives planned for 2016.

"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," Moore said. "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."

— Anneliese Cooper ([@DawnDavenport](#))

(Photo: American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1946 – 1989) at an exhibition opening at the Robert Miller Gallery, New York City, USA, May 1987.)