

Photography

Whipping up a storm: how Robert Mapplethorpe shocked America

Twenty-five years since the photographer's posthumous exhibition – which included images of gay S&M – became a point of debate, what have we learned?

Kevin Moore

Tue 17 Nov 2015 15.48 EST Last modified on Thu 27 Jun 2019 07.20 EDT

Shares **285**

Comments **102**



It might be ill-advised to reduce an artist's life and work to a single observation, the magic key that unlocks everything, but in the case of [Robert Mapplethorpe](#) there is a pronounced duality – in the themes and subjects depicted in his “icy”, graphically stylized black-and-white photographs; in the [dark-angel personae](#) he cultivated; and in the controversies all of these facets wittingly or unwittingly sparked during his short lifetime.

Let's begin with the pictures. An exhibition at [Sean Kelly Gallery](#) in New York earlier this year, titled *Saints and Sinners*, paired works selected for certain contrasts and

similarities: a dark shrouded figure next to a light shrouded figure; Frank Diaz holding a ram's horns to his head next to Lisa Lyon with a scorpion between her legs; a blond Amanda Lear next to a brunette Mapplethorpe in drag. The black-and-white of the photographs was emphasized by an installation featuring black stripes on white walls, the stark contrast of which undergirded a theater of light S&M play and religious irreverence. Mapplethorpe's tight orchestration of his photographs – arrangement, lighting, composition – lends a perpetual chilling effect to a full spectrum of erotic subjects.

As for the personae, Mapplethorpe by all accounts was a good boy harboring bad boy fantasies. [A series of photographs taken by artist Judy Linn](#), Mapplethorpe's classmate at Pratt in the 1960s, shows a baby-faced Robert at the beach, his head framed in a dark cloud of soft curls contrasted against smooth white skin, incongruously lighting a cigarette and wearing chains, a cross, bangles, and a black leather bikini bathing suit held together by metal rings. As with Warhol, Mapplethorpe's artistic success came to rest as much on his provocative public image as on his art and he cultivated this from an early age.



Mapplethorpe in 1969. Photograph: Lee Black Childers/Redferns

Mapplethorpe's many alter egos, explored over the years in a variety of self-portraits, hardly signal a sloughing off of the constraints of the Catholic religion he was raised in, as one might assume. Rather, his various guises – militia man, gay sex fiend, femme fatale – reveal a committed exploration of Catholic themes familiar throughout art history: the debasement and transcendence of the flesh; transgression, punishment and confession; agony and ecstasy. As curator and art historian [Germano Celant](#) has observed, Mapplethorpe was deeply spiritual but he plunged headlong into the dark side of religion, courting something of a "Catholic inversion" characterised by an attraction to the demonic, the violent and the abject, all the while striving toward a vision of redemption, the conversion of suffering into grace through beauty, balance and stasis.

For Mapplethorpe, the greatest metaphor for this conversion was sex – more precisely, sadomasochistic sex, which he pursued most intensively as a voyeur and a participant during a three-year period in the late 1970s. The notorious [X Portfolio](#) resulting from this foray is often treated as an anomalous subset within the artist’s larger body of work, consisting mostly of classical nudes, flower studies and celebrity portraits (select flowers would come to form a Y Portfolio, select black nudes a Z), usually for the purpose of minimizing the disruption to an otherwise robustly healthy artistic career.

But the “sex pictures”, as Mapplethorpe called them, were essential to the whole, as demonstrated in his persistent attempts to bring them to the center of his artistic presentation. This he most emphatically proclaimed in his creation of the X, Y and Z Portfolios, a modern-day *boîte en valise*, after Duchamp, a “suitcase” of the artist’s most select wares. [LACMA exhibited the portfolios in their entirety in 2012](#), something that never happened in the artist’s lifetime, despite his persistent attempts at integration.



Leather Crotch (1980) by Robert Mapplethorpe. Photograph: Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

It should be noted that the S&M pictures, while involving models Mapplethorpe encountered in New York bars like [the Mineshaft](#), depict not sex acts per se but re-enactments of sex acts, theatrically lit against spare backdrops within the tightly controlled environment of the artist’s Bond Street studio. This stringent artistic process forged a common aesthetic within the total body of work, placing flowers and cocks – as the artist often insisted – on equal visual footing. More importantly, it highlights a taller totem of meaning: Mapplethorpe saw all social life as theatre. For him, the medieval rituals of S&M, with its strict behavioral codes and specialised equipment, was in no way different from the fashion rituals of modern women, attempting to make themselves attractive and powerful, or from the display of flowers or the arrangement of nude bodies. All appeared as actors on stage, performing the archetypal themes of lust, love and longing.

Mapplethorpe liked duality and he also liked controversy. His first career success with this dyad occurred in February of 1977, when twin shows of his work appeared in New York, one at the commercial [Holly Solomon gallery](#), the other at a non-profit arts space

called the Kitchen. Holly Solomon showed Mapplethorpe's portraits while the Kitchen showed selections from the X Portfolio, a separation declaring both mainstream acceptance and underground resistance. Marking the separation in the shows' shared announcement, Mapplethorpe created a double self-portrait, one showing the artist's hand wearing a dress shirt and Cartier watch, the other hand wearing a black leather glove and studded metal bracelet, both writing the word "pictures" – driving home the notion that respectability and perversion are often two sides of the same coin.

Later photographs, such as the audacious Man in Polyester Suit (1980), show a more sophisticated fusion of the same ideas. As noted in the forthcoming exhibition catalogue by Paul Martineau and Britt Salvesen, "Mapplethorpe enjoyed setting up provocative juxtapositions in order to insist on continuities." But sometimes continuities are too far a reach and it is in those devilish moments when Mapplethorpe's work achieves its most explosive and lasting impact.



A demonstration against the decision to censor Mapplethorpe's work. Photograph: John Stamstad/Contemporary Arts Center

Mapplethorpe and the culture wars

Though one would hardly call Mapplethorpe's vision innocent, he could not have foreseen the specific political eruptions his artistic sensibilities activated. Two major retrospectives, both opening in 1988, just before the artist's death from Aids, became major skirmishes in the American culture wars. The Whitney Museum's show, titled Robert Mapplethorpe, comprised 110 photographs and did not travel outside of the artist's home turf of New York City. Robert Mapplethorpe: the Perfect Moment, comprised 125 photographs and was scheduled for an extended tour, ultimately to seven US cities: Philadelphia, Chicago, Washington DC, Hartford, Berkeley, Cincinnati and Boston. Both retrospectives presented selections from the X Portfolio.

The first round of trouble occurred in Washington. The Meese anti-pornography commission had been established in 1985 and conservative politicians, notably Jesse Helms and Alfonse D'Amato, were railing against various forms of arts funding. Specifically incensed over the National Endowment for the Arts's support for works such as Andreas Serrano's Piss Christ, they called for the elimination of the NEA and its sponsorship of art they deemed "morally reprehensible".

Folding under pressure, the Corcoran's director Christina Orr-Cahill canceled the Mapplethorpe exhibition three weeks before it was scheduled to open, sparking a cinematic protest rally outside the institution, where 10 of Mapplethorpe's photographs were projected onto the exterior wall of the building. The most striking among these were a tattered American flag and a self-portrait of the recently deceased artist, gazing quizzically out over the crowd. In a bold political move, the Washington Project for the Arts's director Jock Reynolds hung the show across town, attracting nearly 50,000 visitors.

Two interim venues later, The Perfect Moment hit a different political wall at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) in Cincinnati, where several national anti-pornography organisations were headquartered and local law enforcement was known for its vigorous prosecution of obscenity since the 1970s. Taking notice of the events in Washington, a local organisation called Citizens for Community Values (CCV) launched a letter-writing campaign to try to block the exhibition. In the weeks before the exhibition's opening, on 7 April 1990, protests were staged on both sides. The local media added a third ring to the circus, relaying not only events and public opinion but also educating viewers on the fine points of Ohio obscenity law, the first amendment, the nature of art, homosexuality, the Aids crisis and sex acts most viewers never dreamed existed.



A gallery view of the Perfect Moment, Mapplethorpe's exhibition. Photograph: Rare books and archives library at the University of Cincinnati

The conflict came to a head on the day of the show's opening, as lawmakers issued indictments against the CAC and its director Dennis Barrie on charges of pandering obscenity for pictures of homoerotic acts and the illegal use of a minor in nudity-

oriented material. Five photographs ultimately formed the basis of the trial, which occurred four months later, after the exhibition had completed its full run with record-breaking attendance of more than 80,000 visitors. (Two pictures of nude children were eventually thrown out when the mothers signed statements saying they had authorized the photographs and their use.)

In a twisted “what if”, the CCV had ill-advisedly generated a mass mailing containing examples of the so-called pornographic works – among them, the artist’s self-portrait with a bullwhip in his anus, a man urinating in another man’s mouth and several pictures not even by Mapplethorpe. As WCPO TV reporter Stephen Hill pointed out, if the jury were to declare the works obscene, CCV could have faced similar charges for distributing obscene material through mail. Another mischievous journalist noted that the very same pictures in question were freely available for viewing in town at the public library and in numerous bookstores and those institutions were not being prosecuted.

The jury, selected because members had not seen the exhibition and had never visited an art gallery or museum, was asked to decide whether the photographs were obscene or art based on consideration of the five pictures alone, without any exposure to the other 120 photographs in the exhibition. (A legal footnote: the judge had thrown out arguments that the contested works must be considered as part of the whole, and that the exhibition itself was a total work of art; favouritism toward the prosecution was evident throughout the trial, excepting judge Carl Rubin’s Easter Sunday decision to grant the museum immunity from harassment or seizure of works by local police during the run of the exhibition.)



Police officers in CAC. Photograph: Rare books and archives library at the University of Cincinnati

Advertisement

In a court transcript ripe for comedy, expert witnesses on both sides testified for and against the artistic merits of the work. [Judith Reisman](#), a “media specialist” and former songwriter for the children’s television programme Captain Kangaroo, argued that the photographs were not art because no faces – and thus no emotions – were visible; in an article published the previous year, she had accused Mapplethorpe of being a Nazi and a child molester.

Almost as bizarre, Janet Kardon, the exhibition’s original curator, discussed the artistic properties of the photographs strictly in terms of light, form and composition, evading any mention of their sexual content. Ohio obscenity law states that a work can only be considered obscene if, “taken as a whole, [it] lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value”. An apple pie missing one of its ingredients – flour, butter, apples – is not an apple pie.

After less than two hours of deliberation, the jury acquitted Barrie and the CAC on all counts, determining that the photographs were indeed art and therefore not obscene. While Mapplethorpe’s personal definition of art delighted in the duality of artistic merit and obscenity (he briskly referred to his work as “smut art”), luckily for the defendants, US law marks an absolute separation between the two.

[A symposium on the 25th anniversary of the conflict](#), held last month at the CAC and organized by Cincinnati non-profit FotoFocus (a refrain will occur at the New Museum in New York on 19 November), revealed a city and institution in some ways still recovering from the polarities of 1990. One question that was frequently asked: has Cincinnati changed in 25 years?



Mapplethorpe's 1985 self-portrait. Photograph: Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

Certainly attitudes towards homosexuality and Aids have changed, both of which clearly hit nerves among certain members of the community. An undercurrent in the attacks against *The Perfect Moment* was fear of contagion from the works on view, a visceral and irrational response born out of a climate of national ignorance regarding the functions and capabilities of the disease, which was so little understood at that time: by simply looking at the X Portfolio – by being in the same room with it – one risked infection with the HIV virus. And it was widely understood that most or all of the men depicted in the photographs had died, or were dying, of the disease as a result of their behaviours.

If today the X Portfolio pictures are hard to look at (and they still are), it has more to do with the violence than the sexuality. The flinch one feels in response to an image such as [Lou, NYC](#) (1978) (a picture of a pinkie shoved into a urethra) is a spasm of physical empathy, not so different from seeing a razor blade slit an eyeball, as in Luis Bunuel's film *Un Chien Andalou*. But if the homosexual content has lost some of its sting, the child nudity has not. If anything, anxiety over the exploitation of children has only heightened in the last 25 years; curators today will tell you that *Jessie McBride* (1976) and *Honey* (1976) court more trouble – globally, not just in the US.

One has to ask if the exhibition was poorly calculated on the part of Kardon, Barrie, and others who supported it, a grave misjudgment in terms of what American audiences needed or were prepared to see. Was fisting something people really needed to know about? Or didn't they? Mapplethorpe was not an overtly political artist but his

retrospectives occurred during a period of obdurate political and cultural conservatism. And, of course, *The Perfect Moment* ignited two enormous political controversies within that climate.

Mapplethorpe's work was intentionally provocative and, in some ways, that was just a device to get attention, a component of his career strategy. But provocation was also typical of art of the late 1970s and 1980s, as seen in work by performance artist [Karen Finley](#) and by Mapplethorpe's fellow photographers Serrano, [Peter Hujar](#) and [Nan Goldin](#). Mapplethorpe had his own perspective, his religio-metaphorical vision of S&M as modern theatre, as has been noted. But his work also claimed its place among the art resistance of its time, expressing the urgency of a political climate in which cities were failing, lives were being lost to Aids, and government response was to turn a blind eye or to be openly antagonistic.

In that light, *The Perfect Moment*, and those who chose to stand in its defence, just might be one of the boldest and bravest art events of the 20th-century. Its provocation polarized communities but, in the end, a continuity of sorts was found – the moral universe gaped open and was imperfectly refastened.

- Robert Mapplethorpe: *The Perfect Moment, 25 Years Later* is at the New Museum in New York on Thursday. [Details here](#)