

ARTnews

‘He Taught Me How to Be a Leather Dyke’: And Other Perfect Moments From Fotofocus’s Cincinnati Symposium on the 1990 Mapplethorpe Controversy

BY [SARAH DOUGLAS](#)



Catherine Opie gave a keynote lecture about Robert Mapplethorpe's influence on her work. *JACOB DRABIK*

Late last month, FotoFocus and the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati hosted a symposium, titled “Mapplethorpe +25,” which took a look back at the dramatic events that surrounded the exhibition “Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment” a quarter century earlier. As many *ARTnews* readers will recall, this was at the height of what came to be known as the “culture wars,” at the center of which stood an embattled National Endowment for the Arts. “The Perfect Moment” began its tour in 1988 at the ICA Philadelphia, then traveled to Chicago without incident, but in 1989, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., under pressure from right-wing politicians like Jesse Helms, canceled its presentation of the show, which contained photographs of nude children as well as explicit photographs of the gay S&M community from Mapplethorpe’s “X Portfolio.”

The Washington Project for the Arts, then headed up by Jock Reynolds (now director of the Yale University Art Gallery), jumped in at the last minute and took the show, while pro-Mapplethorpe protesters showed up at the Corcoran and projected images on its exterior. In April 1990, “The Perfect Moment” arrived for its scheduled run at the CAC Cincinnati. Cincinnati at the time had a reputation as a conservative community with strong anti-obscenity laws, and the exhibition was greeted with indictments for both the institution and its then director, Dennis Barrie. Barrie went to trial, and after a two-hour jury deliberation, all charges were dismissed, against both himself and the institution.

This is by now a well-known story, but the various panel discussions that took place at the CAC over the course of the weekend—which addressed the controversy, as well as Mapplethorpe’s legacy—brought up some under-reported facts that might otherwise be lost to history, as well as some moving reminiscences.

Reynolds recalled the WPA’s 21-day presentation of “The Perfect Moment” at a time when the N.E.A. was being faced with potentially being defunded during its ’89/’90 renewal cycle. One of the things that he said was deeply impressive to him—and something that was never reported in the press—was that on the night of the opening “the great congressman and civil-rights leader John Lewis brought a delegation of congressmen including Barney Frank and others to see the show and support it.” Another thing that, he pointed out, was never reported in the press was that “I asked John Frohnmyer, the incoming chairman of the NEA, if he would come and look at the show before [Frohnmyer’s] senate confirmation hearing, and he refused to do so. That did not bode well for the kind of courage it would take for the NEA to defend itself, and in particular its peer panel system.”

Reynolds went on to further lament the fate of the NEA. “It’s a weak organization,” he said. “Most of the grants now are \$50,000 or \$75,000 at the most... It’s sad, and this country ought to re-embrace the great partnership between public and private funding... You [used to be able to] take an NEA grant and leverage it into tremendous support. I think it’s got to be fixed at some point.”

Barrie, the former CAC director, remembered the Mapplethorpe events as a tough time for Cincinnati. “It tore this town up,” he said on stage. “Friends became enemies. There were backroom deals. It was hard on people.” But he also reminded the audience that the exhibition was beautiful—“a stunning show that needed to be seen.”



Germano Celant gave a keynote lecture about Mapplethorpe. *JACOB DRABIK*

After the panel discussions were over, I conducted a series of town-hall-style interviews that will constitute part of an oral history about the incidents around the Mapplethorpe show, and what I found was that while there are still some sour memories associated with what happened—one woman spoke of a feeling of shame for the way the city had conducted itself and treated one of its arts institutions—there was also a sense that it had been a learning experience (several of the people I spoke with were arts educators

who brought their students to the protests at the CAC in support of the exhibition). Ultimately, with the verdict that came through in favor of Barrie, it was something that restored their faith in their city's ability to put on challenging exhibitions.

In another panel, on Mapplethorpe and his circle, International Center of Photography curator Carol Squiers talked about meeting Mapplethorpe in the late '70s, when she interviewed him for the first time. "I was trying to figure out what he was doing in his work," she said, "and trying to figure out how I could fit this work into what I knew about photography so far." She admitted that at the time she had "no vocabulary to talk about the sex pictures." She became friendly with him, and recalled him as a generous, curious person who had a puckish side. "One night [Mapplethorpe and his boyfriend at the time] were going out and I don't know if they had to pick something up from me or drop something off, but the two of them showed up at my house dressed head to toe in leather and it just so happened that I was watching Pope John Paul II's first visit to New York when Robert arrived. And, knowing what a good Catholic boy he was, I suggested that perhaps he would like to take a look at the pope. The TV was in the bedroom at the foot of the bed and there was really no place else to sit so the three of us climbed on my bed and laid down and the two of them were wearing these big motorcycle boots so here were these two very long guys totally dressed in black leather with these boots and my TV in between these boots with the pope waving in Yankee stadium."

Highlights of the symposium were the bookend keynote lectures by curator Germano Celant, who knew Mapplethorpe, and the artist Catherine Opie, who was deeply influenced by Mapplethorpe's work, and particularly by the "X Portfolio." Celant took an art-historical approach to Mapplethorpe, making a case for him as a neoclassical artist who worked on the dark end of the spiritual spectrum, and comparing his work to Canova, David, Rodin, and even an ancient Roman cinerary monument.



Opie. *JACOB DRABIK*

Riffing on the title of the famous exhibition, Opie titled her keynote, a speech about how Mapplethorpe's work informed her own photography, "The Perfect Influence."

"Talking about Robert has always been personal," Opie began. "Not because I knew him but because he taught me how to be a leather dyke, and not just any leather dyke, but one who is in love with images and ideas of a classical sense of constructing an image. His images were formal and brutal, all at the same time."

In 1982, Opie, then a student of photography at the San Francisco Art Institute, stopped by Fraenkel Gallery and the dealer Jeffrey Fraenkel showed her Mapplethorpe's "X Portfolio." At the time, she recalled, referring to the famous MoMA curator, she was "schooled in the John Szarkowski school of photography," studying figures like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans. Mapplethorpe "wasn't even in my baby-dyke consciousness. I didn't even know I was a baby dyke, let alone a leather dyke, at that point." She described looking at Mapplethorpe's photographs as "a moment where one discovers more about oneself in 15 minutes than I had known my whole life." Before plunging into a discussion of the images in the portfolio, Opie thanked Mapplethorpe "for guiding me through the greatest gates of presumed hell, where you are engaged with the nicest perverts you will ever meet."

You can watch the symposium panel, "The Exhibition, The Contemporary Arts Center, and Arts Censorship," in its entirety below.