

Robert Mapplethorpe's Art, Life Focus of Upcoming Symposium

FotoFocus and the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) are tackling the proverbial "elephant in the room" whenever one talks about Cincinnati's support of photography — or of the arts in general.

STEVEN ROSEN - OCT 7, 2015 11 AM



Cincinnati police officers at the CAC in 1990

FotoFocus, the nonprofit organization dedicated to furthering local interest in photography as an art form, isn't spending this year solely planning for its 2016 Biennial.

Instead, it and the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) are tackling the proverbial "elephant in the room" whenever one talks about Cincinnati's support of photography — or of the arts in general.

On the 25th anniversary of Hamilton County's unsuccessful prosecution of the CAC and its director Dennis Barrie for showing the Robert Mapplethorpe touring retrospective *The Perfect Moment*, they will have a two-day, multi-panel symposium at the CAC commemorating the exhibition. It will occur Oct. 23 and 24.

The symposium, *Mapple-thorpe + 25*, is free and open to the public, but an RSVP is required. You can register at mapplethorpe25.org.

National experts on the late photographer's life and work will be participating, as will locals who will recall the events of 1990 and opine on what has changed here since then.

The Perfect Moment was organized by Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1988. Mapplethorpe died of AIDS in 1989 at age 42. Conservative elements, especially the anti-"pornography" Hamilton County Sheriff (and former prosecutor) Simon Leis, led the effort to punish the CAC for presenting the show. Specifically, they opposed five photographs depicting homosexual sadomasochistic acts, and two separate and unrelated portraits of nude children.

"The first panel specifically addresses the controversy and will answer the question of how Cincinnati has changed," says Kevin Moore, FotoFocus' artistic director and curator. That first panel is Oct. 24 — *The Exhibition, the Contemporary Arts Center, and Arts Censorship*. Its members could also discuss if it could happen again here.

Raphaela Platow, the CAC's director, will moderate a discussion that features Barrie; H. Louis Sirkin, the lawyer who defended him and the CAC in 1990; Jock Reynolds, director of the Yale University Art Gallery; and Michael Stout, president of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

A second chance to discuss the events of 1990 comes Oct. 24 at 21c Museum Hotel, when *ARTNews* editor-in-chief Sarah Douglas hosts an Oral History Reception.

But that local angle isn't the sole focus of the symposium. As Moore and Mary Ellen Goeke, FotoFocus' executive director, emphasize, it will also be about how Mapplethorpe's work fares 25 years after *The Perfect Moment*.

"We try to clear the smoke and talk about who Mapplethorpe was and what he was doing," Moore says.

The symposium begins Oct. 23 with a keynote lecture by Italian art historian and curator Germano Celant.

On Oct. 24, after *The Exhibition* panel, there will be a "comment" by Robert Reid-Pharr, professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and a noted African-American scholar whose books include *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual*.

The Artist's Circle and Studio follows, featuring those who knew Mapplethorpe. Robert Sherman, one of his models, will participate, as will Judy Linn, who photographed Mapplethorpe. Also on the panel is Carol Squiers of the International Center of Photography. The moderator will be Philip Gafter, author of a recent biography on Sam Wagstaff, the art curator and Mapplethorpe's partner.

Next comes *Curators Curate Mapplethorpe*, which Moore will moderate. It features Jennifer Blessing, the Guggenheim Museum's senior curator of photography; Britt Salvesen, photography curator at Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and Paul Martineau, associate photography curator at the Getty Museum.

The closing keynote lecture will be from the celebrated California photographer and professor Catherine Opie. Moore says Opie has written about how Mapplethorpe's visibility as a gay artist gave her courage as a young gay woman desiring to make art. "I think it will be a very interesting, touching lecture," Moore says.

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