

# Boston Review

---

October 1990 Volume XV Number 5

---

## The Mapplethorpe Moment

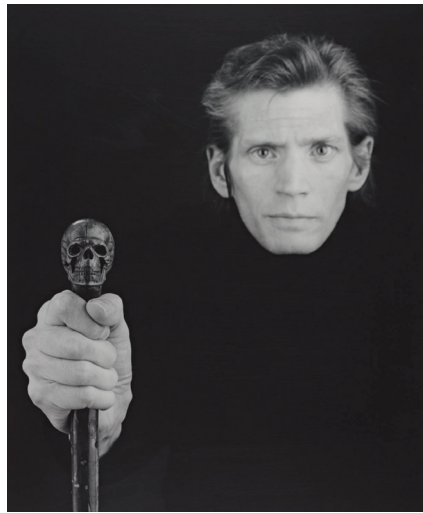


Photo courtesy of the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford CT  
© The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe

Jesse Helms understands completely how politically lucrative a good controversy can be. But his virulent response to Robert Mapplethorpe's photography is not just a calculated gesture; something in Mapplethorpe's work *moved* him to anger, threatened those North Carolina, tobacco-tinted, Bible Belt blinders of his.

That Helms would work so hard to crystallize his anger in legislation just demonstrates, in a fun-house mirror sort of way, that Mapplethorpe's work has the voltage to do what good art is supposed to do: move us off our centers and give us an eccentric, and fresh, angle of vision.

I saw the show in Hartford last year, in a city that was either confident or indifferent enough to let the exhibit come and go unmolested. The exhibition staff had framed Mapplethorpe's work strikingly, in an arrangement Mapplethorpe would have approved. On the right of the exit to his exhibit was a self-portrait of Mapplethorpe gripping a cane with a skull perched on the knob end. Mapplethorpe's head floated against a black background, slightly out of focus, while the skull was sharply outlined in the foreground. To the left of the exit were photos from his X, Y, and z portfolios, three rows of thirteen pictures depicting flowers, black men, and, yes, all those pictures, the ones that have raised everyone's dander.

On the right, death and decay; on the left, vitality; erotic, pornographic, aesthetic; and the observer in the middle, where Mapplethorpe placed himself. Balancing this trinity of energy,

entropy, and possible epiphany, more than anything else, defined and drove Mapplethorpe. Mapplethorpe's photographs are like pictures of particle acceleration explosions: the "perfect moment" happens when the heat of living and the ice of death meet like anti-matter, and in their annihilation form sprays of beauty and attention and daring and understanding.

**B**orn in 1946 in Floral Park, New York, a place he described as very middle-class and Catholic, Mapplethorpe attended the Pratt Institute in the late sixties, where he worked on collages and jewelry. There, living with Patti Smith in the Chelsea Hotel, he slid easily into the burgeoning pre-punk underground at Max's Kansas City where, according to his recollection, there were "lots of scarves and cheap clothes [and] people who were becoming something that they never became. There were drag queens and people who were in Warhol movies, but were never really quite talented enough to do anything else."

Someone wanted to back him as a jeweler, but he didn't think the work was important enough. He began making "photographic objects" with pornographic pictures he cribbed from magazines, and he initially became a photographer because he wanted to "have the right raw material [for my collages] and it would be more mine, instead of using other people's pictures." After meeting John McKendry, who was at that time curator of photography for the Metropolitan Museum, and Sam Wagstaff, a collector of many things and eventually Mapplethorpe's lover, he began working exclusively with photographs in the mid-seventies. "Right from the beginning," he said, "before I knew much about photography, I had the same eyes. When I first started taking pictures, the vision was there."

The "vision." At heart it's a romantic vision, at least "romantic" as that word applies to Lord Byron and his cohorts, an urge toward the unconventional, the edge, art for its own sake. And like many romantics, Mapplethorpe used the old bottles - in his case, figure studies, still lifes, portraits - to display the new vintages of his obsessions, bending the conventional forms without breaking them so that his images would radiate what one reviewer called a "dangerous beauty" and what Susan Sontag dubbed "the quiddity or isness of something." Joan Didion called the process "the perilous imposition of order on chaos," but Mapplethorpe characteristically put it more simply: "My work is about order. I'm a perfectionist."

Perfection. That was the grail Mapplethorpe was after, the heart of his vision. He described perfection as having "[everything] where it should be" in the photograph, but this wasn't just a matter of technicalities. True, his images had symmetry and rigor, "classical" in the cool sense of the "skin" of his photographs is remarkably clean and crisp. But critic Kay Larson labels his brand of perfection "hot" classicism because it aims to give a shape and a name to a sensuality - indeed, an eroticism - that Mapplethorpe believed bubbled just beneath the poised "skin" of his subjects, just as it simmers beneath the controlled "skin" of his pictures.

**A** good example of how Mapplethorpe does this is a 1985 black-and-white photograph titled "Grapes," one of Mapplethorpe's still lifes. The frame of the picture encloses a cluster of dark grapes sprinkled with water, in the rough shape of a human heart. Ambient light fans over the grapes and a much more directed lighting comes from underneath. These are not grapes we will ever see in the supermarket. They are ideal grapes, full of juice and flavor, ready to burst against the palate. Mapplethorpe's attention is so refined that we can even see the grain of the grape's skin.

But Mapplethorpe doesn't want the eye to stop at the exquisite detail. Because nothing in the meticulous uncluttered surface distracts the viewer, the viewer is forced to move closer and closer to the object until the space between viewer and object becomes charged with a kind of seductive electro-magnetism, an artistic strong-force. Suddenly, these grapes take on a gravity, a robustness. even an aura of danger and excitement. He wants the viewer to go deep into these grapes and consider how ripe they are, how much life and force they have in them, and to recognize that the life-force that ballooned these grapes also works inside each of us.

It's funny, that tingling sensation as you move on to the next offering-after all, they're only grapes, But that's the point. Once you really look at them, which Mapplethorpe's immaculate surface forces you to do, they aren't just grapes any more. There's more there, and that more reaches down to some fairly elemental levels. These grapes are erotic, full of eros, that energy most feared by the gods because it couldn't be completely controlled, the energy most directly tied to our physical natures and that fuels our hunger for expression and freedom

Mapplethorpe wants to arouse the viewer, whether sensually or just in some more general sense, and get us to feel that as we look at his images, we are, in some very basic way, in touch with a self either pre-social or just outside society's pale, the thing the Puritans felt they had to restrain in Hester Prynne.

**W**hen Mapplethorpe's camera moves to people, the intimate charged connection between viewer and subject becomes even more dangerous, more ambiguous, more challenging, more exciting, more rebellious. As Arthur Danto said about Mapplethorpe's Whitney Museum show in 1988, Mapplethorpe was trying in his images to stretch certain limits because he hoped, in some way, that "consciousness would be transformed" and people would be liberated from their preconceptions into new conceptions. The desire to liberate comes through most strongly in his figure studies of male and female nudes because these studies are not about "the body," as it might be viewed abstractly in a drawing class in a coolly classical way, but about bodies, in all their physical and sexual attractiveness and power.

In his 1983 *Lady, Lisa Lyon* (photographs from which are included in the exhibit), he worked with bodybuilder Lisa Lyon in exploring where the line lies between masculine and feminine identity. He chose Lyon because bodybuilding, as a sculpting of flesh and a choreography of posing, fit his classical tastes. But he was also aware that Lyon was involved in a traditionally male activity, and his book is, in part, a narrative about this crossing, and erasing, of gender boundaries (a topic he explores in some of his self-portraits). Mapplethorpe pushed the boundaries here because, for him, crossing gender identities was a way of achieving real, visceral, usable freedom. Lisa Lyon said that what Mapplethorpe was doing was "exploring the limitations of male and female," not to maintain sexual limits and definitions but to break them.

He erases other kinds of lines in his studies of nude black men. Critics have called these pictures exploitative and racist, but writer Edmund White says that what Mapplethorpe did was bring black men "out of invisibility." Mapplethorpe knew that the project was, in his words, "loaded": black men, especially naked black men, could never be neutral subjects in American society. And especially the black men Mapplethorpe chose for models. Brenden Lemon, in a review of the Whitney in *Aperture*, said that to some degree Mapplethorpe can be pigeonholed as the photographer "who has his black dicks" and that "the phallus does



Photo courtesy of the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford CT  
© The Estate of Robert Mapplethorpe

*Mapplethorpe balances his models between  
grace and pressure, power and resistance.*

provide some measure of the man.” His models are well-endowed and are often posed in ways calculated to provoke all the myths about the threat and thrill of black male potency. It was almost as if what Mapplethorpe really wanted to do was take portraits of the black phallus, as in “Man in Polyester Suit,” where the half-erect elephantine penis looping out of the fly has a parabolic grace that is both sexual and aesthetic at the same time.

**B**ut there’s more to these pictures than just a geometric fascination for phallic dimensions. While he may have been a little disingenuous by insisting that he was concerned only with the pictures, not the politics, he nonetheless produced a collection of photographs similar in form and execution to classical sculptures that in their cumulative effect not only give dignity to the models but also allow the men to exist as sexual beings without the threat of fear or violence.

In these pictures Mapplethorpe balances his models between grace and pressure, power and resistance. For instance, in “Ken Moody, 1984” (Moody was a favorite model of Mapplethorpe’s), Moody is shown from the waist: up with his eyes dosed holding a brilliantly speckled tiger lily over his head with both hands. For a moment both the muscular man and the fragile beauty of the flower held aloft like a halo are equivalent, each being’s beauty a reflection of the other’s. In another moment the flower will wilt and the man will die, and in this they’re equivalent, too, but for the instant the camera has captured them they collaborate in perfection.

In other pictures the balance is less calm, full of tension and restraint. In “Thomas on a Pedestal, 1986,” the subject is shown standing in profile bent over at the waist. His forearms

rest on the pedestal, hands crossed at the wrists, fists clenched, and his face is hidden by his upper arms. His left foot is arched at the heel, while his right foot is flat, and the knees are slightly bent, as if he were ready to also arch the right foot and balance himself.

He is not at rest, even though he's stationary; it is the moment before he acts, when the body has decided but not yet moved. The body becomes beautiful because it's caught in that instant between decision and action; a breath before, and the body is too relaxed, a breath after, and the body's moving too fast to see.

Mapplethorpe, then, was always looking for that moment between moments when we could see (because he's captured it on film) the full humanness of the poised human body. A quartet of pictures done in 1981 called "Ajitto" (after the name of the model) probably shows this best of all.

Mapplethorpe has Ajitto sitting on a simple pedestal draped in rough cloth, his knees pulled into his chest, his face hidden by the posture. The four shots are from the front and back and each side. From the side, in shadow but clearly visible, is the curve of Ajitto's penis and testicles. The play of light on the black skin (what Mapplethorpe called "bronze") gives Ajitto a volume that fills the picture frame completely, and his simple yet dignified pose emphasizes his humanness, his individuality, and his sexual being. We even see small scars on his right arm and left shin. This may be a man with whom we have an ambiguous and perhaps even hostile relationship, but Mapplethorpe brings us so close to the subject that if we continue to deny his political and sexual humanity, we end up denying our own.

**F**reedom, humanity, liberation, new ideas, brilliant technique - nice. But what about all "those" pictures in the "X" portfolio, the ones that Senator Helms fumed about, that caused the Corcoran Gallery, to its everlasting shame, to cancel the Mapplethorpe exhibit, that helped journalists cash in on a ready-made juicy congressional contretemps? It would be nice to say that they're simply not that interesting and only of minor importance, or are simply pornographic and not artistic, or simply don't measure up to the technical standards of the other pictures. But they're there. Mapplethorpe wanted them there. And they're there for a purpose.

Arthur Danto wrote that Mapplethorpe's photos of the New York gay community in the 1970s, his "X" portfolio, were "political acts," meant to "enlist art in some more critical transformation." There is no doubt about this. Mapplethorpe said in an interview with ArtNews that "I was in a position to take those pictures [and] I felt an obligation to do them."

But an obligation to what? The world that Mapplethorpe photographs in his "X" portfolio is a world based on sexual energies that simply aren't accepted, or even recognized as legitimate, by the "straight" world. But they exist, even in the "straight" world, they are a part of what constitutes being "human," and Mapplethorpe believed that the effort to disown them could only lead to shame or (as with Senator Helms) intolerant condemnation.

**M**applethorpe said on a number of occasions that his Catholic upbringing gave him a strong sense not only of symmetry and iconography but also of redemption and reconciliation. Mapplethorpe wanted to remove all that had been called "shameful" (in this case, certain sexual practices) from the power of shame to isolate each of us from the other and from our own selves. In a number of interviews Mapplethorpe said that as far as he was concerned there was no difference between a cock and a flower and a portrait because they all had their

own elegance and power. A little coy in saying this, perhaps, but it was something he clearly believed because he wanted us to see the “shameful” things without shame, just as we looked at flowers or a face. He wanted us to be able to envision without the blinders of a morality that taught us that certain of our impulses should be hidden, distorted, misnamed, condemned.

Such innocence of vision, what Roland Barthes called a “blissful eroticism,” was doomed. Every society has its code of modesty, and it’s the romantic’s fond notion that such a code can be nullified simply by people changing their attitudes about sexual pluralism. And it ignores the fact that lust, however “pure” its energy may be, ultimately depends upon anonymity for its satisfaction, on bodies with no names or faces, which can only dehumanize people. But Mapplethorpe’s effort to push these boundaries, to bring the code into relief if not decline, was an effort to get us to reconcile ourselves with ourselves, through challenge and assault but also through beauty and grace.

The “perfect moment” for Mapplethorpe was a moment that, in the words of critic Janet Rardon, captured “the peak of bloom, the apogee of power, the most seductive instant, the ultimate present.” For Mapplethorpe, to achieve that perfection, what he called “a space that’s magic,” meant pushing against boundaries - sexual, racial, moral, political. That’s what bothered Jesse Helms: all the blurred lines, all the calls for exploratory license, all the broken cherished stereotypes, all the blatant “here it is in your face” quality of some of the photographs, all the sex, all the bodies, all the nakedness - all the freedom. What Mapplethorpe was trying to do was bound to shock and disturb, not only as a conscious effort but also by the simple fact that he was trying to get people to move beyond what they’d been told they were by the society in which they lived.

In his own way Mapplethorpe was trying to encourage that process of self-definition and self-discovery, which is also a way of resisting authority, that drives the culture and politics of a democracy. In a 1985 speech, Ronald Reagan, of all people, said that artists “have to be brave; they live in the realm of idea and expression, and their ideas will often be provocative and unusual.” Artists “stretch the limits of understanding...[and] express ideas that are sometimes unpopular.” “Where there’s liberty,” Reagan concluded, “art succeeds.” Mapplethorpe would almost add, if he were inclined to speak politically, where art succeeds, there’s liberty. Jesse and Cincinnati, and the rest of us, need to listen very closely to that.