

Robert mapplethorpe: photographers work essay



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Robert Mapplethorpe has managed, over the past several years, to render a certain credibility to flower photography—a worthy achievement, considering the ease with which that genre has always slipped into kitsch (Clark 1997 255). He has done this with almost obsessive manipulation of pictorial space. Obsessive to the point that composition, in this phase of his oeuvre, is actually the principal subject (Camille and Rifkin 2001 485).

He composes impeccably a handsome display of his recent work at the Julia Gallery is a testament to this (Clark 1997 255). Not since Manet have there been images of flowers so refined or so perfectly ordered (Cooper 1994 178). However, order and refinement are, properly, vehicles—vehicles that might translate ideas rooted somewhere beyond the surface of the artwork itself. It is an abiding part of the mythology in art photography, just as it is in formalist abstract painting, that order itself, or form itself, can rightly be the central working idea (McNair 2002 441). Today, in the face of our broad search for a rich, multi-layered art, this aesthetic attitude seems particularly lean (Camille and Rifkin 2001 485). The usual perspectives think back on tasteful, empty canvasses from the 1960s and early 1970s, and on photographs depicting neat, unmodulated planks on a wall; and we reconfirm their extraordinary vapidness (Clark 1997 255).

Feel certain that it would take more than marketing genius to return this tradition to its former authority (Cooper 1994 178). The discussion centers on the characteristics and uniqueness of Mapplethorpe's photography.

Discussion To some observers, contemporary photography's preoccupation with pictorial form is based largely in Minor White's persuasive teaching. It is true, however, that in White's own works—the most enduring ones—therein

an otherworld quality pervades— they wield an aura of Symbolist disquiet (Camille and Rifkin 2001 485). His art penetrates form, locating memory jogs to which many of us can respond (Hirsch 2007 568).

This is not at all what the absolute formalists sought in White's wake. It is, in fact, precisely what they most wanted to elude; memory Jogs tend to undermine surface order, an unspeakable audacity (Cooper 1994 178). In most of Mapplethorpe's flower still-lives, there is the sense that he, similarly, is laboring in the service of utter formal perfection, that he aims, further, to proffer refinement for the sake of refinement (Julius 2003 388). This coincides with a belief in photographic prints as precious, singular objects (Clark 1997 255).

The danger here, of course, is that art- works, when best conceived, originate in intelligent human beings who would have some consequential ideas, not only about their medium, but also about human existence—human existence in either a benign or a hostile environment (Hirsch 2007 568). To elect the production of mere precious objects is to say that one is willfully leaving the art making to others and opting to create fine decor in its stead. Not in every case is this so with Mapplethorpe (Camille and Rifkin 2001 486). In some photographs there is a dark enigma as perfectly pursued and contemplated, as is the formal elegance (Cooper 1994 178). It is possible to sense reverie in it, past and future human presence, and a discernible, but well guided drama (Clark 1997 257). It is possible to align this, and a few others in this show, with still-lives by Velasquez or even Morandi, not, of course, for attitude parallels, but for intensity of feeling (Camille and Rifkin 2001 486).

Such intensity is not what distinguishes Mapplethorpe's now famous male nudes. In all but a few cases, they seem wittingly pornographic, at times even fetishistic (Cooper 1994 179). As such, the only intensity they disclose is voyeuristic (Clark 1997 257). In a sense, they are elevated by Mapplethorpe's uncommon stylistic gifts, but the content's force is inexorable (Hirsch 2007 568).

The evidence is that, most often, the focus is less on the nude as classically beautiful, or as evocative of feelings, than it is simply on genitalia. Meyer (1993) understands the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe as a radical response to the traditional objectification of the camera's subject; his human subjects, often participants in gay sadomasochism, stare defiantly at the camera, in control of their own image (Hirsch 2007 569). In Mapplethorpe's 1988 self-portrait, taken while he was living with AIDS, he too stares defiantly at the camera as his hand grasps a cane with a skeleton's head for a tip (Camille and Rifkin 2001 486). Meyer (1993) reads this photograph in a way that synthesizes the gay and lesbian communities' responses to their representations in media, science, and government discourse—defined as education about AIDS (Clark 1997 257). Mapplethorpe employs photography to reassert his power over, and in the face of, AIDS (McNair 2002 441).

Gwen Meyer's reading, Mapplethorpe's use of photography can be said to be engaging in Foucault's concept of reverse discourse in which one who is the object of surveillance via discourse reverses, or deconstructs, the discourse in order to enter as an active and ironic subject of that discourse (Cooper 1994 180). In addition, this is largely how gays have responded to their own representations in messages about AIDS (Hirsch 2007 569). The earliest

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responses by gays came from grassroots organizations in large urban areas that formed to combat what they saw as the desexualization, remedicalization, and annihilation of gay identity in the early 1980s (Julius 2003 388). Indeed, the most political responses from gay and lesbian communities have come in the form of safe sex education, and in activism (Clark 1997 258). Typically, employing neutral backdrops, clear lighting and sharp focus (heightened by the fine surfaces and rich tonalities of gelatin silver and platinum prints), these photographs combine extreme or shocking subject matter (e.

g. close-ups of genital and bodily mutilation) with a rigorous sense of design and structure (Camille and Rifkin 2001 487). Indeed, despite his frequently confronting imagery, Mapplethorpe maintained a classic modernist stance of cool detachment (McNair 2002 441). Stripped of psychological presence or personality and unlike, for example, the empathetic individualizing portraits and nudes, by the contemporary gay photographer Peter Hujar (who was also based in New York), Mapplethorpe presents bodies as iconic types or emblems (Cooper 1994 180).

This overriding, and ultimately aesthetically conservative, classicism and abstract formalism became more pronounced in the less overtly sexual work of 1980s, such as the figure studies of the female body-builder Lisa Lyon and the photographs of Hack men (Clark 1997 258). For some critics, however, the latter photographs, such as *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1984), simply perpetuated fetishistic racist stereotyping of black men as phallus. During these years Mapplethorpe continued to produce portraits of friends and celebrities (particularly from the art world) and still-lives (imparting an

uncanny sexual aura to his floral arrangements), and began working in color using dye transfer prints (Cooper 1994 181). Robert Mapplethorpe had ironically given the scandals that have been caused by his work, such as *The Perfect Moment*, or the nude pictures of himself suffering from AIDS (Julius 2003 388). At the Cincinnati obscenity trial concerning the 1988 exhibition of Mapplethorpe's work entitled *The Perfect Moment*, numerous critics attested to the formal quality of his art, his use of conventions such as the Golden Mean, and his resolutely orthodox means of representation.

At the time, many believed that this was simply a strategy to fool the jury into accepting his work as art (Stilesq 1996 336). This attitude not only condescends to the jurors, who, as unqualified members of the general public, are presumed to be incapable of judging the value of a work of art, but also misses an important insight into Mapplethorpe's work (Clark 1997 258). A prosecutor in Cincinnati prosecuted the director of an art gallery for an exhibit photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe (Camille and Rifkin 2001 487). The homoerotic pictures, which the director called, "tough, brutal, sometimes disgusting," included three showing penetration of a man's anus with various objects (Julius 2003 388). Yet the prosecutor could not prove that the photographs lacked received praise from art critics and the pictures were displayed in an art gallery; hence, the jury acquitted the director. Mapplethorpe asserted the right of the male, black, gay body to stand for the Universal.

These deployed a self-conscious and disruptive strategy in their art practice, which has become a staple of interpretations of postmodernism (Morth 1996 215). Their very different modes of address are in themselves symptomatic

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of the crisis in representation that has become a cliché of modern and postmodern times (Clark 1997 259). The failure to acknowledge an artist's possible intentions in understanding and appreciating artwork is perhaps best illustrated, and most widely debated, in the case of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's exhibit *Tue Perfect Moment* (Camille and Rifkin 2001 487). Mapplethorpe's work is noted for images of flowers, self-portraits, and portraits of celebration. The exhibit included controversial images of interracial couplings, male frontal nudity, children in explicit poses, and sadomasochistic, homoerotic images (Morth 1996 215).

In marking one of the limits of the sex-gender system, male homosexuality stabilizes and therefore helps naturalize an arbitrary and seemingly increasingly unstable set of technologies and disciplines that operate upon the late-twentieth-century American body (Stilesq 1996 336). The legibility recently accorded gay male culture by American academics should not obscure the fact that in majority culture male homosexuality remains a focus for tremendous anxiety and for (often) brutal fantasies that center not only on sexual practices per se but also on the failure of that system to keep its abject Other in its place. That failure is related to another, perhaps more fundamental, anxiety registered in the terror produced by male homosexuality, one that indicates the role of visibility in cultural epistemology: one must know what homosexuality looks like in order to avoid its multiple contagions, including now the more literal contagion ignorantly equated with it, AIDS (Stilesq 1996 336). The insistence of that cultural anxiety helps to explain why more controversy is attached to the name "Mapplethorpe" in the discourses around the recent Helms

amendment to restrict NEA funding, and the reason for Mapplethorpe's photos of nude men and leather sex have functioned so prominently in that debate. At stake is not the fate of Mapplethorpe's reputation as a photographer, which seems at this point to be fairly secure, nor even the supposed "freedom" of the NEA and to sponsor controversial projects (Morth 1996 215). The denial of NEA funding in the wake of the Corcoran Gallery's canceled exhibit of the Mapplethorpe pieces is only the latest installment in a concerted effort to build a right-wing national consensus out of fears that play prominently on homophobia and more or less explicitly equate male homosexuality with a national security risk.

One of the reasons to insist on the legitimacy of Mapplethorpe's work is to intervene in that construction and the political agenda that frames it (Stilesq 1996 336). One self-portrait exhibited there, for instance, shows Mapplethorpe without pants on, bent over away from the camera and turned back toward it with a demonic grin or leer, a bullwhip issuing from his ass like a tail (Camille and Rifkin 2001 488). It is among his rudest images. But if the current publicity surrounding his name makes it difficult to read against this tendency, we must remember that Robert Mapplethorpe was not only a photographer of the (homo)sexually graphic (Morth 1996 215).

His work can be broken down into three broad areas of focus: nudes, objects such as flowers and sculpture, and portraits. In addition, in his best and most interesting work, the protocols of all three intersect, collide, and inform one another (Camille and Rifkin 2001 488). What marks his more unconventional images most singularly, in fact, is how poised and balanced they are as compositions, their supremely high finish as aesthetic objects conflicting with

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their occasionally violent and often camp content. It would seem, therefore, a measure of the obsessions of our culture that Mapplethorpe can be made out to be a gay photographer tout court (Morth 1996 215). Conclusion Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-89) was one of the most contentious of post-war American photographers, partly due to his homosexuality. Indeed, one of the central aspects of his photography is the extent to which he began not just to explore 'portraiture' in a gay context, but also to do so in relation to an assumed gay audience.

Like Apollo, his portraits of male nudes (black and white subjects), as much as the female studies and those associated with sadomasochism, seem to suggest a determined and problematic aspect of self-identity in which sexual proclivity, rather than social distinction, is uppermost. In addition, nowhere is this more obvious than in the protracted series of self-portraits that he made in the 1970s and 1980s. The series is characterized by the Self-portrait of 1971, an overtly dramatic rendition of Mapplethorpe's body encased within wire and silky material—opposite extremes of his private and public self. He faces the camera naked—his body cut up—as if both self and the physical substance of the individual are subject to cultural and psychological torment. This is a poignant image relatively large number of self-portraits in other guises and garbs.

Often Mapplethorpe, in contrast to this, dresses for the camera — in a tuxedo, in leather, in make-up. Most contentiously, in a self- portrait he has inserted a bullwhip into his anus as he looks at the camera: an obviously radical and extrovert reversal of virtually all the conventions of the portrait photograph. These photographic portraits place themselves within a larger

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context of gender and identity but as photographs, they insist upon themselves as part of a continuing metamorphosis in which a single personality does not so much change as reject the codes through which identity, private as much as public, is assumed, determined, and declared.