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March 8th, 2019
Robert Mapplethorpe
<https://www.them.us/story/robert-mapplethorpe>

Publication
Author

Them
Naveen Kumar

CULTURE

30 Years After His Death, Robert Mapplethorpe's Provocations Still Endure

Next to what you'll find online, Mapplethorpe's photos now seem tame. But recent exhibitions and documentaries prove his work is still transcendent.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self Portrait*, 1980. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

Robert Mapplethorpe twists toward the camera, eyes defiant, back arched, his shock of chestnut hair standing on end. Below the laces of his black leather chaps, a bull whip snakes from the artist's anus onto the floor and through the foreground toward us. The [1978 self-portrait](#) (link NSFW) is among Mapplethorpe's most shocking and confrontational, and stands among a sprawling body of work that includes hardcore scenes of gay S&M alongside less explicit (if no less erotic) photographs of flowers, celebrities, and sculptural nudes.

A sampling of all such images are currently on display in *Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe Now*, the first of a two-part, yearlong exhibition of work by the artist and his contemporaries at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. This year marks three decades since Mapplethorpe's death from AIDS complications on March 30, 1989, an anniversary concurrent with a surge of renewed interest in his life and art.

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Mapplethorpe, director Ondi Timoner's biopic starring *The Crown*'s Matt Smith as the ferociously ambitious photographer on his rise from art student to living legend, opened in select theaters on March 1. In 2016, HBO's documentary *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* coincided with dual retrospectives of his work at the Getty Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *The New York Times* review of that sweeping dual show ran under the headline, "Why Mapplethorpe Still Matters."

Those curious for the answer would be better served strolling through the Guggenheim or streaming HBO's documentary than by Timoner's oversimplified and mostly unilluminating fictional account of the artist's career (the wigs alone are enough to cry foul). But really, to understand why Mapplethorpe continues to endure and provoke 30 years after his death, all anyone has to do is look at the pictures themselves.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Ken and Tyler*, 1985. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

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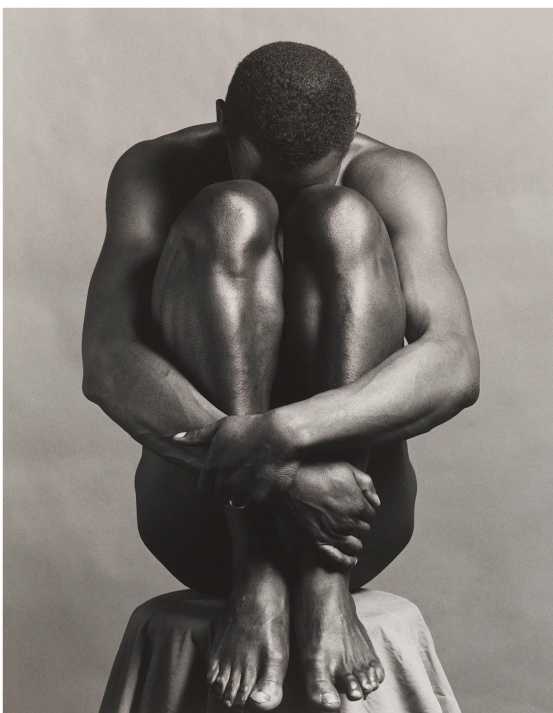
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That's what conservative Senator Jesse Helms urged in his impassioned opposition to a touring retrospective of Mapplethorpe's work that premiered just months before the artist's death. *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* sparked a culture war over public arts funding and censorship that ultimately lionized Mapplethorpe as a totem of free expression and caused the value of his work to skyrocket. "Look at the pictures," Helms demanded in front of Congress, as though the photos' supposed obscenity not only spoke for itself but precluded any consideration of them as art. The handful of photos in question, which included those of a man urinating into another's mouth and a fist plunged forearm deep into an anus, are as precisely staged and beautifully lit as all of Mapplethorpe's compositions. "I wanted people to see that even those extremes could be made into art," Mapplethorpe said of such works. "Take those pornographic images and make them somehow transcend the image."

In marrying the thrill of pornography with the polish of fine art, Mapplethorpe was part of the momentum toward queer visibility pervading American culture in the decade following the Stonewall riots, which broke out 50 years ago this summer. "The rise of the gay rights movement in the early 1970s occurred simultaneously with the growing interest in photography as an equal among the arts," writes photography critic Philip Gfelter in his biography of Sam Wagstaff, Mapplethorpe's wealthy patron and lover. "Gay men led the public charge for photography in the marketplace with their newly liberated sensibilities and willing gazes." Mapplethorpe would not have considered himself a political artist, but his work captured an air of sexual uprising during his ascent to fame in the 70s, before becoming a cultural flashpoint just after his death in 1989.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Ajitto*, 1981. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

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Mapplethorpe's sweeping body of homoerotic photos are also, to some extent, simple acts of self-documentation, whether he was turning the camera on himself or one of his many lovers, whom he'd often meet out at bars, bring home to bed, and photograph. Gefter, who also appears as a commentator in *Look at the Pictures*, writes on photography as an inherently eroticized medium. "The act of looking at a photograph, itself an object with the taint of illegitimacy in aesthetic terms, took on the thrill of the illicit, becoming further eroticized by the knowledge that one was peering into a private reality," he writes in *Wagstaff: Before and After Mapplethorpe*.

"The internet has surely changed our access to (homo)erotic imagery," Gefter wrote me over email. "Until 1965, the Comstock Laws made it illegal to send a photograph of a nude male through the U.S. postal service," he explained, noting how radical it was in the 1970s to exhibit male nudes by Mapplethorpe and other photographers like Peter Hujar or George Dureau. The content of these artists' images may seem almost quaint today to everyone with folders of nudes saved on their phones, not to mention a world of media more twisted and explicit than any one person could imagine at our fingertips. Of course, most of that isn't art, but something else entirely.



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Calla Lily*, 1986. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

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You don't need to search #thot on Instagram to understand how elemental erotic self-documentation has become to queer culture in the decades since Mapplethorpe rose to acclaim. "Photography is not practiced by most people as an art," Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*, published in 1977, just as artists like Mapplethorpe were arguing for its legitimacy as just such a medium. "It is mainly a social rite," for everyday people, Sontag writes, "a defense against anxiety, and a tool for power." Our troves of naked selfies may not rise to the level of art, or convey the animal self-assurance or vulnerability of a Mapplethorpe self-portrait, but photography has become, for many of us, a tool for cultivating and manipulating self-image in a social context that so often considers queer people perverse, or simply less than beautiful.

Even as desensitized and well-practiced voyeurs, standing before Mapplethorpe's work remains a transcendent experience. "All photographs are like *memento mori*," Sontag writes. "To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability." But the beauty of Mapplethorpe's work far exceeds its function as a record of his own and other vigorous, beautiful bodies in the years before HIV/AIDS would decimate the communities in which he lived and photographed. It's in the light hitting slight goosebumps on the curl of a back, the impossibly dark shadow cast by a perfect bloom, the look in a sitter's eye that reveals bottomless inner depths. It's in the pictures themselves.