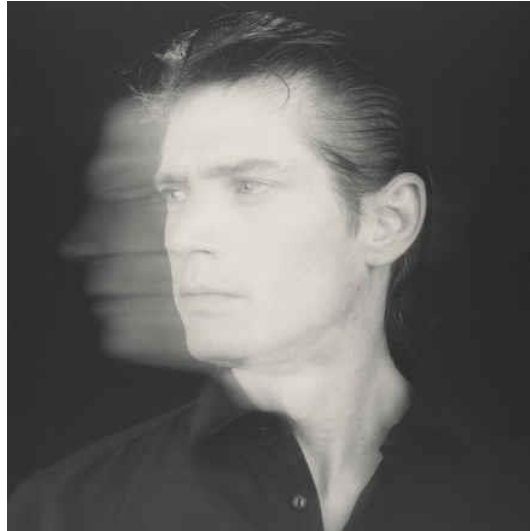


ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE'S VIOLENT LIGHT Unraveling the Startlingly Raw Work of the New York Photographer in Nine Images

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Born in Queens to a middle-class Catholic family, Robert Mapplethorpe rose to prominence in the New York City art world of the 1970s. Though he had worked in other media like sculpture and collage he took to photography as soon as he began shooting Polaroids and his talent developed quickly. He explored his sexuality through his photographs of NYC's gay party scene and, pairing classical aesthetics with violently erotic content, produced images of startling rawness—a thrilling counterpoint to the preceding decade of minimalist painting and sculpture.

His influence continues to be felt in both commercial and art photography. If sex doesn't shock like it once did, Mapplethorpe is one reason why. Even in fashion, he casts a shadow—Raf Simons' Spring/Summer 2017 collection is a collaborative effort with the Mapplethorpe Foundation and makes use of dozens of his photographs.

Mapplethorpe's artistic interests stretched beyond sex, and he accomplished a great deal with other subjects, as well. He was a sought-after portraitist, shooting celebrities of all stripes, and in his studio practice pursued his obsession with formal perfection with his studies of flowers and nude figures. "Focus: Perfection—Robert Mapplethorpe," a major retrospective now on display at Montreal's Museum of Fine Arts, offers a comprehensive overview of Mapplethorpe's career, paying equal attention to the sex photos, the portraits, and sculptural stills.



Patti Smith 1978

Robert Mapplethorpe and Patti Smith met in 1967, and their relationship, detailed in Smith's 2010 memoir *Just Kids*, proved formative for both.

As both lovers and friends, Mapplethorpe and Smith pushed and enabled each other artistically. Mapplethorpe developed his technique as a photographer shooting Smith, and his portraits of her, many of which were used as cover art for her albums, played a role in shaping her public persona as musician and poet—ask someone to picture Patti Smith and it is likely that a Mapplethorpe photo will be the first thing that comes to mind.



Joe/Rubberman 1978

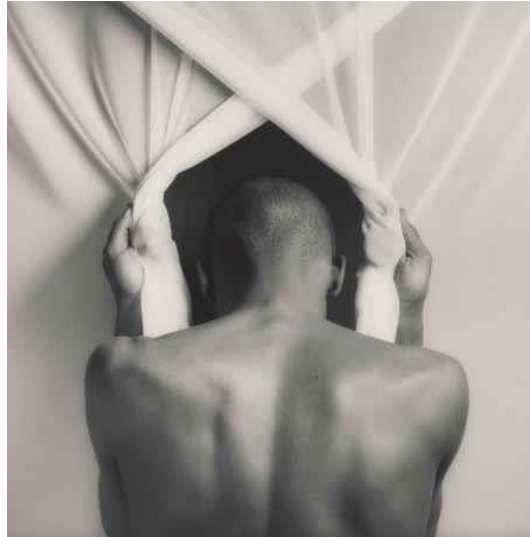
Mapplethorpe began actively exploring his homosexuality in the early 1970s and threw himself headlong into New York City's gay S&M culture. Transfixed by its rituals and regalia, he produced photographs featuring its participants that ranged from straightforward portraiture to elaborate, hardcore tableau. The infamous X Portfolio stands out in the latter category, a series depicting a variety of unorthodox sex acts. Mapplethorpe was no documentarian, though—his photos presented a new world of his creation, all the leather, latex, blood, and urine filtered through his measured, sumptuous classicism. Here, the intensity of his subject matter was transmuted through careful staging and lighting into deliberate, fantastical stillness.



Leather Crotch 1980

On the tamer side, images like Leather Crotch were subtly subversive, presenting an aestheticized image of male sexuality that would eventually work its way into the visual language of the mainstream.

Crotch shots echoing Leather Crotch showed up in fashion campaigns throughout the 1990s and 2000s—see Gucci campaigns shot by Mario Testino and Terry Richardson during the Tom Ford years—and there is no surer sign of pop cultural subsumption than being referenced in advertisements.



Philip Prioleau 1982

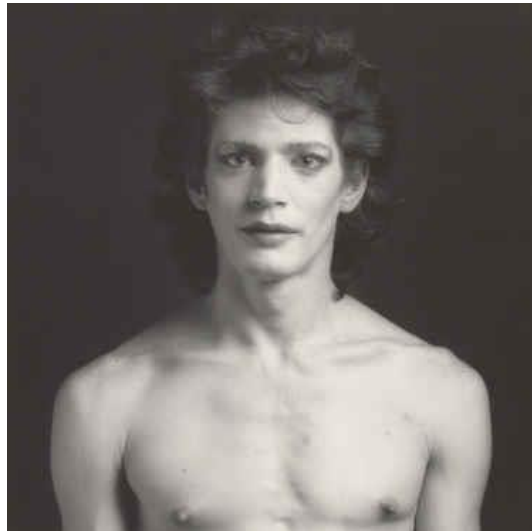
For all the attention Mapplethorpe has received over the past 40-plus years, he remains underrated as a storyteller. While his S&M photos could hardly help but intrigue, his studio practice also birthed arresting, surreal imagery.

For instance, this photograph of model Philip Prioleau: beyond its formal qualities—the symmetry of Prioleau's bowed head between the criss-crossing silks, the depth in their ripples, the precision of the lighting to highlight their transparency—its staging is loaded with peculiar tension. How many films and novels introduce an interesting premise but fail to deliver a satisfying conclusion? A photograph like this one sidesteps that problem by remaining forever frozen, its potential as limitless today as the day it was shot.



Louise Bourgeois 1982

Portraiture was not only an important source of income for Mapplethorpe but a valuable networking tool and testing ground for new techniques. He photographed a who's who of New York's avant-garde from Andy Warhol to Kathy Acker, prominent artists like Louise Bourgeois and Alice Neel, musicians, art dealers, and ordinary citizens who could afford his substantial rates.



Self-Portrait 1980

Mapplethorpe was methodical in his pursuit of fame and renown and knew how to sell himself as well as his work.

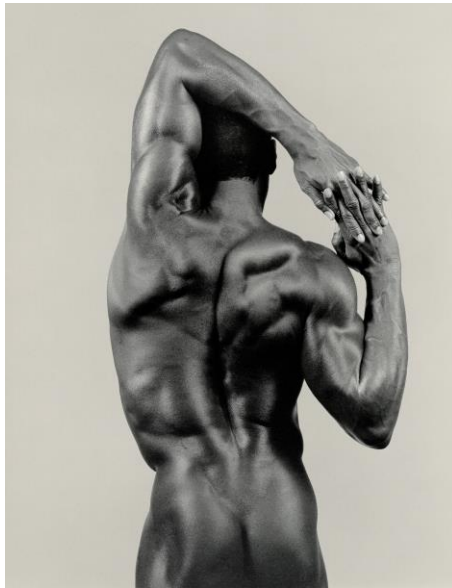
He was actively interested in crafting his legacy and not shy about self-mythologizing. His self-portraits from early in his career to the end of his life see him adopting different aesthetic poses, showcasing his sense of humor, and eventually reckoning with his impending death.



Calla Lily 1988

Given the classical bent of Mapplethorpe's sensibilities, it is no surprise that flowers inspired some of his best work.

Approaching them from unconventional angles and honing in on their sweeping curves and stark protrusions, he gave weight to their delicacy, producing truly original work from one of art's most well-worn subjects. Mapplethorpe claimed that no one shot flowers like he did because no one saw them the way that he saw them. That may have been true when he said it, but not today—the austere, eerie grace of these photographs surely has people worldwide seeing flora through Mapplethorpe's eyes, or at least attempting to.



Derrick Cross 1983

The most enduringly relevant critique of Mapplethorpe's work concerns his treatment of black men, one of his favorite subjects.

In his celebrity portraits and S&M tableaux his subjects were afforded agency, their identities allowed to fill the frames. Even if the sex photos fix on one aspect of their subjects' personalities to the exclusion of others, one gets the sense this was welcome—a performance. By contrast, many of Mapplethorpe's photographs of black men have more in common with his floral still lifes. They are formal exercises, explorations of light, shape, texture, and composition. Here, Mapplethorpe used men as raw materials, fixing on his favorite bits of geometry, framing their bodies into abstraction, and in doing so captured an unsettling, exoticizing dynamic between himself and his models. It is one thing to give this treatment to a flower, whose petals aren't attached to brains or souls, and another altogether to divide a thigh or a penis or a shoulder blade from the person to whom it belongs.



Thomas 1986

In his introductory essay to *Z Portfolio*, a series of Mapplethorpe's photographs of black men, Edmund White—another white, gay man—referred to Mapplethorpe's photos as irresponsible but excused them because of their honest expression of desire. We cannot control who we're attracted to, White argued, and it would be worse to censor ourselves and deny the world beautiful work than to risk manifesting demeaning or even racist attitudes. These photos needn't be excused of anything to be worthy of contemplation, though—they raise questions concerning objectification and exploitation that are as important today as ever. They draw audiences in on pure aesthetics, their depth and texture, and in time reveal complex, troubling dynamics with which their viewers are left to reckon. They offer no answers, and Mapplethorpe never intended them to. He never even meant to pose the questions—he just wanted to see things a certain way. His practice was, by his own admission, a selfish one. He always came first in his work, and his methodical pursuit of desire and perfection yielded a corpus that continues to prod, provoke, and enthrall decades later.