

# Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial photos arrive in Korea

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Page 1 of 1

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"Art is an accurate statement of the time in which it is made," said American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989). Now the world seen by Mapplethorpe some 40 years ago will get a chance to resonate with Korean audiences half a world away.

Best known for his black-and-white photographs of celebrities, sculptural nudes, BDSM scenes and flowers, Mapplethorpe is being introduced to Korean audiences belatedly through a retrospective at the Kukje Gallery in Seoul and Busan.

Titled "More Life," The exhibit consists of three parts — on the first and second floor of K2 in Seoul and at the gallery's Busan branch.

Lee Yong-woo, cultural studies scholar and Sogang University's Critical Global Studies Institute professor, organized the exhibit as a guest curator.

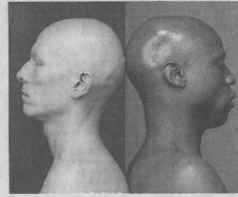
"The title of the exhibit comes from the lines of the Tony Kushner play *Angels in America*. I imagined what Mapplethorpe might have said if he had survived AIDS," Lee explained.

In the first section "Sacred and Profane," photos showing Mapplethorpe's ambivalent perspective are on display, starting with one of his self-portraits.

"We are flooded with photos and images these days. I tried to relate Mapplethorpe's photo with the present day," Lee said. "We compartmented the exhibition with a cinematic narrative, so visitors can fully experience Mapplethorpe's works in which the sacred and the profane co-exist."

Mapplethorpe was at the center of a controversy around art and censorship. His signature black-and-white photographs taken with a Hasselblad 500 camera show a sharp contrast between the object and background, or in composition.

His major subjects include punk rock musician Patti Smith and bodybuilder Lisa Lyon as well as other celebrities such as Richard



Robert Mapplethorpe's "Ken Moody and Robert Sherman" (1984)

Courtesy of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

Gere, Truman Capote and Louise Nevelson.

"From the perspective of photographic composition, Mapplethorpe's works are a highly calculated composition with the main object centrally positioned. His photos have the narrative coming from the perfect moment with the potential to start something," Lee said.

Mapplethorpe's self-portrait in drag queen attire hints his interest in exploring sexuality, which mainly unfolds on the upper floor.

"The Dark Room" section on the second floor shows what Mapplethorpe is most infamous for — the "X Portfolio" series featuring homoerotic and BDSM-themed images. Despite the portrayal of sexually explicit images, the gallery chose not to make the section off-limits and left the choice to visitors with a warning.

Mapplethorpe's raw portrayals of secretive S&M "rituals" and objectified genitals as well as his self-portraiture with a bullwhip in his rectum and gazing into the lens played a key role in questioning mainstream norms and censorship.

The photographer once said "Beauty and the devil are the same thing," and it is difficult to distinguish good and evil in his works.

"Mapplethorpe threw questions on the boundaries between pornography, eroticism and obscenity through his photos," Lee said.

"There are uncanny elements in Mapplethorpe's works beyond photography and it would be interesting to observe how contemporary Korean audiences, who are still conservative about sex, accept Mapplethorpe's photography."