

Press Release

ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE: SUBJECT OBJECT IMAGE

30 November 2023 – 20 January 2024

Opening: Thursday 30 November, 6-8:30 pm



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Arnold Schwarzenegger*, 1976 (each) © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission

“If you say too much, you lose some of the mystery that ends up being there. Somehow I am able to pick up the magic of the moment and work with it. That’s my rush in doing photography; you can get to a place where you can do it with a flower, with a cock, with a portrait... You’ve tapped into a space that is magic”.

— Robert Mapplethorpe in *Arena*, 1988, BBC documentary directed by Nigel Finch

Marking 24 years of collaboration between Alison Jacques and The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, we are proud to present a solo exhibition of works by iconic American artist Robert Mapplethorpe (b.1946 – d.1989). Widely acknowledged as one of the most groundbreaking photographers of the 20th century, Mapplethorpe’s unapologetic and provocative exploration of objectivity in his subjects challenged societal norms and pushed the boundaries of the times. While some of his photographs remain controversial, Mapplethorpe’s legacy is unquestionable, evidenced by work acquired and exhibited by major museums worldwide.

Mapplethorpe lived a life of contradictions, existing in two different worlds, from the uptown glamour, fame and intelligentsia of Manhattan, to the hedonism of Studio 54, drugs and open sexual activity, and the underground BDSM subculture. His vision was a relentless pursuit of aesthetic equilibrium through meticulous attention to detail, lighting, and composition. This brought a sense of formality and precision to his subjects, often portraying them as inanimate objects. Mapplethorpe stated in 1983, *“I’m trying to make sculpture without having to sculpt. I’m trying to get the head in just the right spot where everything looks perfect. I’m looking for perfection in form... It’s no different from one subject to the next...”*

ALISON JACQUES

'SUBJECT OBJECT IMAGE', spans 13 years of Mapplethorpe's life and covers the breadth of his subject matter. The show begins in 1976 when Mapplethorpe had already evolved from Polaroids and begun using a Hasselblad 500 camera. The exhibition concludes with images made in the final year of the artist's life before his tragic death in 1989 at the age of only 42. Mapplethorpe's own words in 1983 communicate the premise of this exhibition: *"It's a different subject, same treatment, same vision, which is what it's all about - my eyes as opposed to someone else's..."* Regardless of who or what he chose to photograph, Mapplethorpe's aim was to objectify his subject. In 1988 his close friend, the artist, Lynn Davis, summed this up: *"He looked at it all in the face whatever it was..."*

Many of the images included in the exhibition have not been widely exhibited before. These include still lifes created using everyday objects – Italian glass, antique silver and classical statuary – some of which Mapplethorpe collected together with his long-term partner, Sam Wagstaff. Mapplethorpe's focus on the nude is evident throughout the exhibition, from the recurrent male muses – Ajitto, Derrick Cross and Ken Moody – whose portraits have become synonymous with Mapplethorpe's photography, to female models including bodybuilder Lisa Lyon. They demand that the viewer reconsider perceptions of the human body and its beauty. Rare Dye-transfer colour photographs portraying flowers, including orchids and roses, as erotically beautiful, punctuate the otherwise monochromatic works grouped together in the exhibition.

A second space encapsulates a classic portrait gallery featuring artists and creatives from New York in the 1970s and 80s. Willem de Kooning, Richard Gere, Yoko Ono, Paloma Picasso and Andy Warhol hang alongside an oversized portrait of British musician Steve Strange, who stares out at the viewer. A grouping of four portraits of Arnold Schwarzenegger from a single shoot are shown alongside the artist's intimate circle including his brother Edward, his lovers Milton Moore and Jack Walls, and poet and musician Patti Smith. Many of these portrait sessions were held in his fifth floor studio at 24 Bond Street, Lower Manhattan.

Accompanying some of the portraits in the show, are recollections of the subjects' experience of being photographed by Mapplethorpe:

"I had been working with Robert for just about one year when he asked if he could take my portrait. At the time, I was deep into the New York rockabilly revival scene so I was always fairly precise with my hairstyle which Robert rather enjoyed.

Having already been by his side a countless number of times when taking portraits, I was well aware of what to expect and what would be required of me that day. We set the studio lighting evenly (two strobe heads with umbrellas) and we decided a white background would be best to contrast the dark tones of my hair and coat.

Like so many others before me, I got lost in my head listening to his instructions to turn, lift and look. It was this genius of his attention to detail that has made so many of Robert's portraits so revealing.

Now, forty years later... I see a rather cocky, self-assured young man in this picture. Isn't it wonderful how innocent some of us can be in our youth?"

Edward Mapplethorpe (2023)

ALISON JACQUES

His portraits are a testament to the internal and external beauty of people – of friends, celebrities and those who pushed against the fixed conventions of their time. As Mapplethorpe stated in the 1988 BBC “Arena” documentary, on one of the few occasions he spoke on film: “*I captured New York of its time*”.

Mapplethorpe would at times incorporate mirrors into his work. One of his earliest sculptures, *Mirror* (1971), allows the viewer to see their own reflection through a wire mesh, inviting them to imagine how they might have been captured by the artist’s camera at an imaginary photo shoot. A self-portrait hangs nearby, one of the only portraits in the exhibition not to reveal the sitter’s face, showing instead, the back of the artist’s head and leather jacket.

Mapplethorpe’s still lifes, flowers and portraits fall within the same tradition of the *memento mori* – they are reflections on the inevitability of death, but also celebrations of the potential abundance of life that precedes it. The fact that Mapplethorpe’s legacy is so renowned is testament to his enduring belief that beauty and “perfection in form” can be found in any walk of life.

Robert Mapplethorpe was born in Floral Park, Queens, New York (1946). A strictly Catholic and suburban upbringing led him to leave home at age 16 and enrol at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, to study Advertising Design before transferring to Graphic Arts. His first solo exhibition, ‘Polaroids’ at Light Gallery took place in 1973, and subsequent shows followed at Holly Solomon Gallery and The Kitchen. In 1977, Mapplethorpe participated in ‘Documenta 6’ in Kassel, Germany, followed later in Europe with a solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (1983). London’s support for Mapplethorpe continued with a survey of his portraits at the National Portrait Gallery (1988). The year before Mapplethorpe’s death from AIDS-related complications, The Whitney Museum of American Art mounted Mapplethorpe’s first major American museum retrospective (1988). It was followed by the exhibition ‘The Perfect Moment’ in December 1989, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. This exhibition toured in the United States and created one of the fiercest episodes of America’s “Culture Wars” – joining a recurring debate about federally-funded cultural projects and support of homoerotic, sexually explicit or perceived sacrilegious art.

Robert Mapplethorpe established The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation on May 27, 1988, the year before his death, to protect his work, to advance his creative vision and to promote the causes he cared about. Serving as the first president of its board of trustees, he established two mandates: to promote photography as an art form in order to achieve its recognition and respect at the same level as painting and sculpture; and to financially support HIV/AIDS medical research. 34 years later, in keeping with Mapplethorpe’s wishes, The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, stewarded by Michael Ward Stout, continues to support photography programming at major museums as well as small institutions, for exhibitions, acquisitions, and publications. The Foundation has donated millions of dollars to fund medical research to help eradicate HIV and AIDS which killed over 100,000 people during Mapplethorpe’s lifetime.

For further information:

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Forthcoming exhibition:

Monica Sjöo
1 February – 2 March 2024