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Photo 109 Online Photo 1

Even after his death in 1989 of complications related to AIDS, Robert Mapplethorpe remains one of the most controversial and riveting photographers of the twentieth century. The tone of his art ranges from brutal to subtle, but all of his photographs challenge social paradigms, expand the notion of artistic traditions, and demand attention.

Mapplethorpe was born just after the end of World War II to a Roman Catholic family in Long Island, New York, a place from which he happily fled, according to the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Mapplethorpe studied graphic art and other artistic mediums in college, but did not seriously attempt photography until sometime later. After receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, he began taking photographs with a Polaroid camera. Photography was not a main implement in Mapplethorpe's art; he primarily integrated these photographs into other works of art, until he obtained a large format press camera ("Biography"). From there, he embarked upon a remarkable career.

Mapplethorpe pursued subject matter both visually intriguing and socially scandalous. He demonstrated a keen interest in the human body and its ability to be manipulated through stark black-and-white photographs. His photographs often contain nudes, genitals, homoeroticism, or sexual acts, and are sexually transgressive. "The profane and sublime are celebrated with an unwavering gaze upon male and female bodies," Andrew Cornell Robinson writes in an exhibition review, "and contemplative compositions, moments of intimacy and violence, representations of cool downtown culture, and neoclassical sculpture and the varied scenes of sadomasochism [are] all equalized in their representation and celebration." Mapplethorpe also photographed flowers, which are often displayed alongside prints

of nudes and genitals, alluding to Georgia O'Keefe's famous flowers; the diptyches and triptychs twist the feminist subtext of O'Keefe's paintings, for Mapplethorpe focused primarily on male sexuality.

Even after his death, his work still sparks debate: in 1989, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. cancelled an exhibit of Mapplethorpe's last work; that same year, the curator of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center was nearly jailed after being charged with obscenity and pandering for hosting an exhibit. Mapplethorpe's photographs of children nude or with their genitals exposed have caused harsh backlash (see *Dirty Pictures*, 2000). In April 2009, children have been banned from entering a gay-friendly exhibit in Glasgow, Scotland, due to the explicit sexual nature of "Jim and Tom, Sausalito" (*The Herald*). Mapplethorpe helped to tear away the veil obfuscating homosexuality, fetishes, and gender ambiguity in society. In doing so, he expanded the notion of free speech and of art.

I am attracted to Mapplethorpe for the social implications of his work as well as his aesthetic techniques. Mapplethorpe's photography typically contains visual surprise (see "Man in a Polyester Suit"). He uses empty space to create or enhance meaning. "Calla Lily," "Dominick and Elliot," "Ken Moody and Robert Sherman," and his self-portrait in which he inserts a bull-whip into his anus demonstrate Mapplethorpe's affinity for sharp contrast within the black-and-white medium. Robinson writes that "the radical and wonderful relevance of his work resides in the way in which it manipulates [Classical artistic techniques and] tactics used to celebrate beauty and employs them to elevate the sexual and socio-political elements which live on the fringe." Robinson's analysis that Mapplethorpe twisted Greco-Roman notions of the "ideal" body to upend cultural norms was essential to my study of Mapplethorpe and to understanding his photographic process. Mapplethorpe needs the contrast, aided by bright lights, sharp angles and intense, complicated subjects, to affect meaning.

I chose to replicate "Phillip Prioleau, 1982" due to the subtlety of the photograph, its diffused contrast, and its lack of any direct sexual subject matter. The nature of black-and-white photography is,

of course, contrast, but “Phillip Prioleau” is much more restrained than other Mapplethorpe images. This photograph lacks the impact we come to expect of Mapplethorpe – and thus makes this photograph more interesting to me. When subjects turn away from Mapplethorpe or their faces fall out of the frame, another body part becomes the focus. Phillip Prioleau has turned away from the camera. His upper body and the white curtains are two visual planes; there is little beyond this, besides slight shadows created by the folds in the fabric and his muscles. The lack of direct visual contrast, however, accentuates the emotive quality of the photograph. Prioleau’s curled hands and slightly tensed shoulders suggest sadness and frustration, and he has nothing but flimsy, transparent fabric to hold onto.

Replicating a photograph by Mapplethorpe was a challenging yet ultimately rewarding experience because I was able to delve deeper into the work of this photographer than I ever have and to learn more about the power of photography. I decided to invert the black and white shades in the photograph because I had a white model and I wanted the visual impact of the photo to be similar to “Prioleau.” My model and I debated whether the texture of the curtains should be inverted too, from sheer to something heavier such as velvet, before eventually deciding on the sheer curtains. The interplay between the solid body and the diaphanous fabric is dramatic in both photographs. I originally had the light directed straight at the model’s back before I consulted the photo again and saw the slight shadow on Prioleau’s left. We moved the light to the side and immediately the photograph improved. I also worked with other lighting in the room to see how it affected the photo and my camera settings. Finally, recreating this photograph with a model was a fascinating and stressful process because I had direct input at all times. We both had our own ideas about how the photograph needed to be framed and how he needed to hold himself as he modeled. I also felt anxious for him when he had to face the wall while tensing his muscles, and felt compelled often to reassure him. The process took a lot longer than expected. I have to wonder how much interaction Mapplethorpe had with his models and how much input they had as he manipulated them, and himself, in his photography.

## Works Cited

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