

Robert Mapplethorpe

Robert Mapplethorpe was born in 1946 in Floral Park, Queens, USA. Of his childhood he said, "I come from suburban America. It was a very safe environment and it was a good place to come from in that it was a good place to leave."

In 1963, Mapplethorpe enrolled at Pratt Institute in nearby Brooklyn, where he studied drawing, painting, and sculpture. Influenced by artists such as Joseph Cornell and Marcel Duchamp, he also experimented with various materials in mixed-media collages, including photographs cut from books and magazines. He acquired a Polaroid camera in 1970 and began producing his own images to incorporate into the collages, saying he felt "it was more honest." That same year he and Patti Smith, whom he had met three years earlier, moved into the Chelsea Hotel.

Mapplethorpe quickly discovered the satisfaction of taking Polaroid photographs in their own right and indeed few Polaroids appear in his mixed-media works. His first solo gallery exhibition, *Polaroids*, took place at the Light Gallery in New York City in 1973. In 1976, he acquired a Hasselblad medium-format camera and took to shooting his circle of friends and acquaintances – artists, musicians, socialites, pornographic film stars, and members of the S&M underground. He also worked on commercial projects; he created album cover art for Patti Smith and Television, three of several musicians with whom he would eventually collaborate, and shot a series of portraits and party pictures for Interview Magazine.

In the late 70s, Mapplethorpe grew increasingly interested in documenting the New York S&M scene. The resulting photographs are shocking for their content and remarkable for their technical and formal mastery. Mapplethorpe told ARTnews in late 1988, "I don't like that particular word 'shocking.' I'm looking for the unexpected. I'm looking for things I've never seen before ... I was in a position to take those pictures. I felt an obligation to do them." Meanwhile his career continued to flourish. In 1977, he participated in Documenta 6 in Kassel, West Germany and in 1978, the Robert Miller Gallery in New York City became his exclusive dealer.

Mapplethorpe met Lisa Lyon, the first World Women's Bodybuilding Champion, in 1980. Over the next several years they collaborated on a series of portraits and figure studies, a film, and the book, *Lady, Lisa Lyon*. Throughout the 80s, Mapplethorpe produced a bevy of images that simultaneously challenge and adhere to classical aesthetic standards: stylized compositions of male and female nudes, delicate flower still lifes, and studio portraits of artists and celebrities, to name a few of his preferred genres. He introduced and refined different techniques and formats, including color 20 x 24 inches Polaroids, photogravures, platinum prints on paper and linen, Cibachome and dye transfer color prints. In 1986, he designed sets for Lucinda Childs' dance performance, *Portraits in Reflection*, created a photogravure series for Arthur Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*, and was commissioned by curator Richard Marshall to take portraits of New York artists for the series and book, *50 New York Artists*.

That same year, in 1986, he was diagnosed with AIDS. Despite his illness, he accelerated his creative efforts, broadened the scope of his photographic inquiry, and accepted increasingly challenging commissions. The Whitney Museum of American Art mounted his first major American museum retrospective in 1988, one year before his death in 1989.

His vast, provocative, and powerful body of work has established him as one of the most important artists of the twentieth century. Today his work can be found in the collections of major Museums around the world. Beyond the art historical and social significance of his work, his legacy lives on through the work of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. He established the Foundation in 1988 to promote photography, support museums that exhibit photographic art, and to fund medical research in the fight against AIDS and HIV-related infection.

Xavier Hufkens

Sint-Jorisstraat 6–8 rue Saint-Georges
Brussel 1050 Bruxelles
T 32 (0)2 639 67 30
F 32 (0)2 639 67 38
info@xavierhufkens.com
www.xavierhufkens.com