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ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

(New York, USA, 1946 - Boston, USA, 1989)

I'm looking for the unexpected. I'm looking for things I've never seen before

Robert Mapplethorpe grew up on the outskirts of New York in a Catholic environment, with no ties to the art world. In 1963 he enrolled at the Pratt Institute of Art, in Brooklyn, where he studied drawing, painting and sculpture, and began to delve into the work of artists such as Joseph Cornell and Marcel Duchamp. In 1970 he acquired a Polaroid camera and started taking his first photographs, which he started incorporating to his collages.



Self Portrait, 1980 © The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, New York.

Progressively, he abandoned collage to focus exclusively on photography, presenting his first solo exhibition, Polaroids, at the Light Gallery, New York. During these years Mapplethorpe quickly expanded his social life and, simultaneously, developed his talent for photography by constantly taking portraits of his friends. These portraits offered, at the same time, a view of the most frenetic, underground nights of New York City.

He combined his artistic development with commercial projects such as the cover of Patti Smith's album - who became his best friend and inseparable muse - or photographs for Interview Magazine. During these years Mapplethorpe intensely immersed himself in the hurricane of New York's art scene in a search to find his place, shortly achieving an enormous social and cultural recognition.

Mapplethorpe attended the Pratt Institute of Art at a time marked by artistic currents such as body art, minimal and conceptual art, which made use of photography detached from its formal or aesthetic side. This period was also characterized by a strong return of painting, in which the use of the photography was notably reduced.

When Mapplethorpe evolved from collage and began to use his Polaroid camera as his primary artistic tool, the genres "art" and "industry" were still separated under the categories "high" and "low" culture. Photography was linked to merely commercial purposes, dependent on the trade, not considered an elevated form of art. His development as a photographer coincided with a general rise of kitsch culture within the artistic climate - the widespread exhibition of objects and attitudes reimagined both as luxurious and, simultaneously, affordable for all -.

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In this context, Mapplethorpe rescued the formal emphasis that photography allows and incorporated it into its conceptual research. Raw and direct images of sadomasochism combined with the most meticulous compositional direction, pure sexual acts with the most exact pictorial classicism, a simple flower with the most exaggerated sensuality and eroticism. Mapplethorpe's poetics demonstrated a total fusion between art and life, aesthetics and reality, in which his own life was placed at the centre.

In April 2018, the film Mapplethorpe (2018), directed by Ondi Timoner, premiered at the Tribeca Festival in New York. Likewise, several exhibitions have been recently held around the world, such as a solo exhibition at Galleria Franco Noero in Turin; Robert Mapplethorpe, Coreografía per una mostra, at the Museo Madre - Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donnaregina, Naples; or Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe Now, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.



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