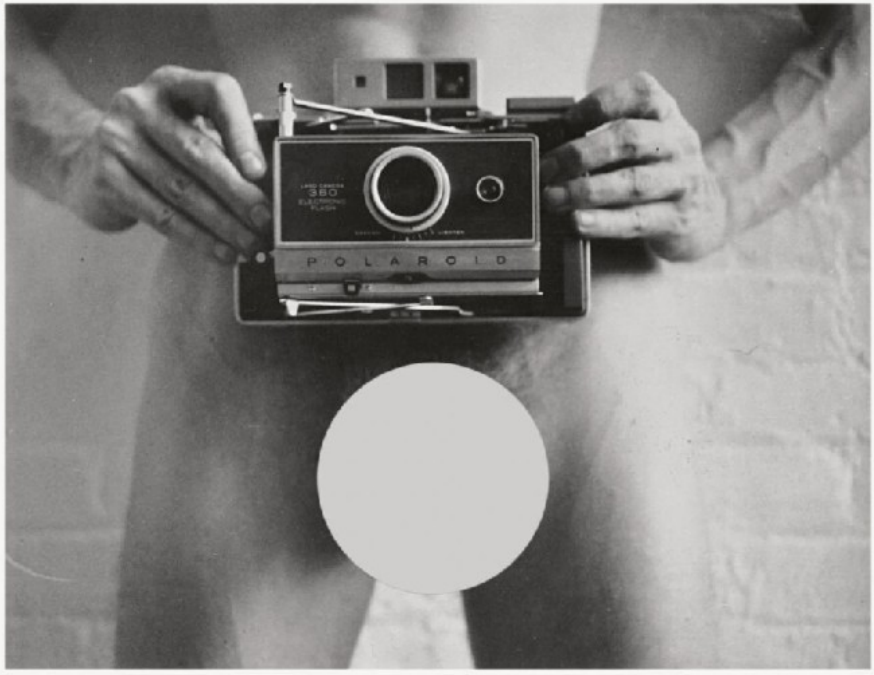
Polaroids



ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

Mapplethorpe

PRESTEL

Plate 1. *Untitled (self-portrait)*. 1971

Plate 2. *Untitled (Patti Smith)*. 1970

Plate 3. *Patti Smith (Don't Touch Here)*. 1973

Plate 4. *Untitled (Patti Smith)*. 1971

Plate 5. *Untitled (Patti Smith)*. 1971/73

Plate 6. *Candy Darling.* 1973

Plate 7. *Candy Darling*. 1971/73

Plate 8. *Untitled (Sam Wagstaff)*. 1972/73

Plate 9. *Untitled (Sam Wagstaff)*. 1973/75

Plate 10. *Untitled (self-portrait)*. 1970/73

Plate 11. *Untitled*. 1970/73

Plate 12. *Untitled*. 1970/73

Plate 13. *Untitled*. 1970/73

Plate 14. *Untitled*. 1975

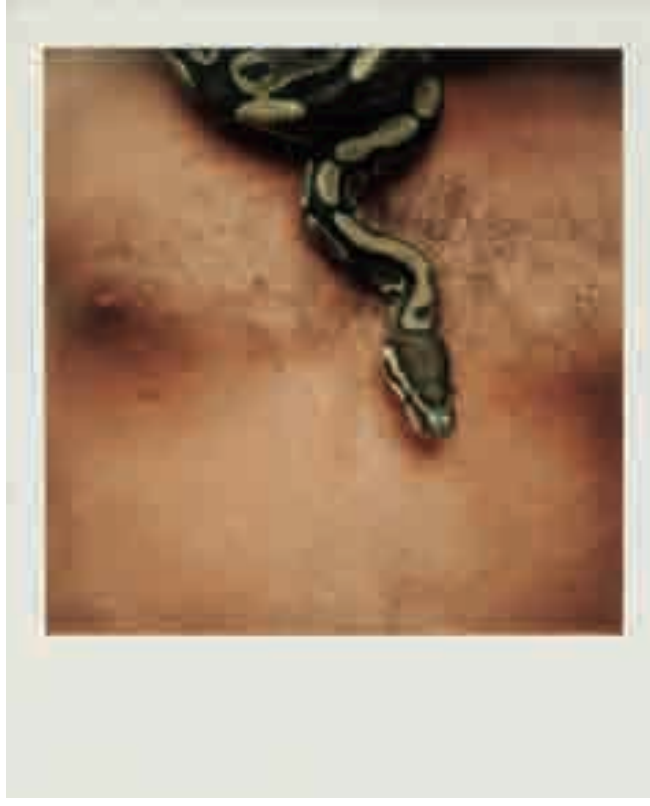
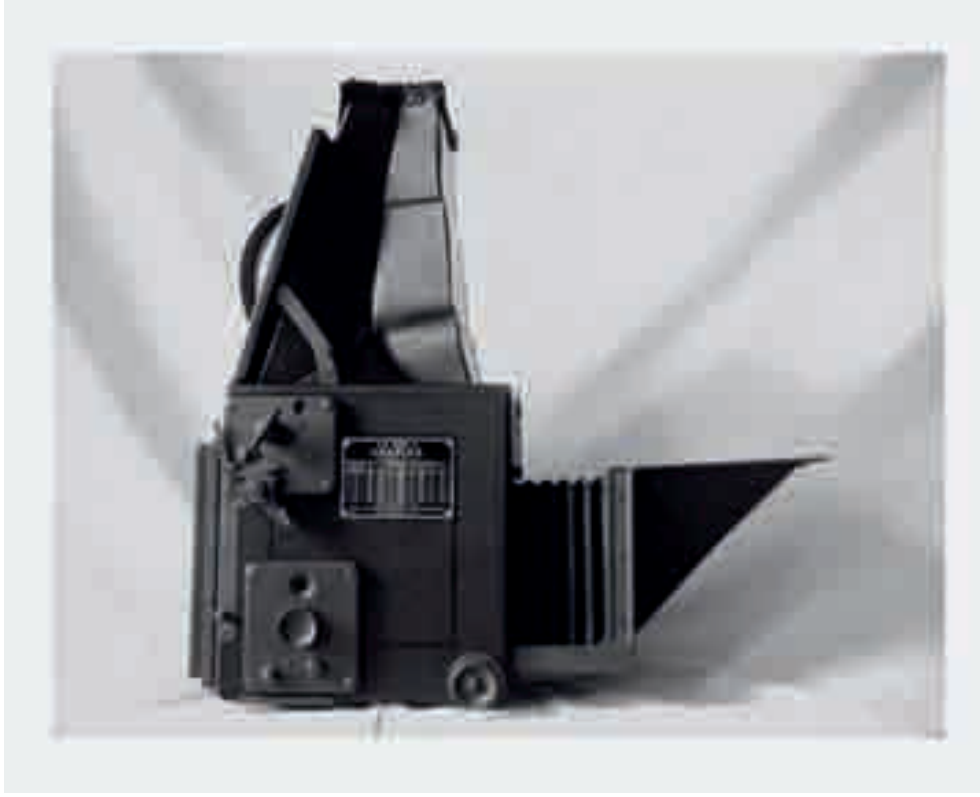


Plate 15. *Untitled*. 1975



Polaroids

Mapplethorpe

Sylvia Wolf

WHITNEY

PRESTEL

Munich · Berlin · London · New York

Contents

Fig.1. Harry Mapplethorpe. *Robert Mapplethorpe in ROTC Uniform*. 1963. Gelatin silver print from color transparency, 7 x 5 in. (17.8 x 12.7 cm). Collection Edward Mapplethorpe

An Authentic Artlessness

Robert Mapplethorpe's Polaroids 1970–1975

In the summer of 1963, Robert Mapplethorpe was caught stealing a magazine of gay pornography from a newsstand in Times Square, New York. At age sixteen, working as a messenger in the months before entering art school, he had only just discovered that such publications existed and was legally too young to buy pornography, yet the longing to see proved too great for him to withstand. Gay pornography would make a lasting impression on him and would come to inform his artistic practice. In an interview in the late 1980s, he would recall,

I became obsessed with going into [magazine stands and storefronts] and seeing what was inside these magazines. They were all sealed, which made them even sexier somehow, because you couldn't get at them. . . . I got that feeling in my stomach, it's not a directly sexual one, it's more potent than that. I thought if I could somehow bring that element into art, if I could somehow retain that feeling, I would be doing something that was uniquely my own.[1]

For a young man who was only beginning to explore his sexual impulses, such raw and powerful emotions were both threatening and exciting—and the shame of being caught was likewise terrifying. (In fact, Mapplethorpe managed to break free of his captor and escape[2]). Perhaps out of fear, then, Mapplethorpe buried his feelings and in the year ahead renewed his efforts to conform to heterosexuality. But the desire to experience what is taboo, to get past veils of censorship and gain access to the forbidden, would return with visceral power, and in his second and third year in art school he would construct collages out of the very kinds of pictures found on Times Square newsstands. Later in his career, of course, his portraits, sexually explicit photographs, male nudes, and still lifes of flowers, all throbbing with homoerotic overtones, would make him famous.

The highly stylized, neoclassically inspired works that Mapplethorpe made between the late 1970s and his death, in 1989, did not emerge fully formed, however; nor did the homoerotic photographs that made him one of the most notorious photographers of the

1980s and a lightning rod for conservatives. His mature work was preceded by a largely unknown body of over 1,500 photographs, made with Polaroid cameras and film, during the six-year period 1970 to 1975. Unlike the carefully crafted and controlled images that Mapplethorpe would stage later in the studio, his Polaroids are marked by spontaneous invention. Some convey an unexpected tenderness and vulnerability; others have a toughness and immediacy that would give way in later years to a more-refined formalism. Compared to the work for which Mapplethorpe is best known, these are imperfect pictures that provide a glimpse of his early concern with light, composition, and design. An examination of this single aspect of his career, in the context of the period, the culture, and the artist's background, allows us a better understanding of the whole. Above all, though, Mapplethorpe's Polaroids give us access to his creative development at a time when he was shaping his identity as an artist and as a man.

In Formation

Before Mapplethorpe began experimenting with a Polaroid camera, he had shown no particular interest in taking pictures, despite the presence of photography in his history. His father, an engineer by profession, was an amateur photographer who kept a darkroom in the basement of the family home in Floral Park, Queens.[3] Robert's mother, in addition to maintaining the house, often assisted her husband in his hobby. Born on November 4, 1946, Mapplethorpe was the third of six children. Life in Queens was ordinary and unchanging: "I came from suburban America," he once remarked. "It was a very safe environment. And it was a good place to come from in that it was a good place to leave."[4] When it came time for college, Mapplethorpe longed to study out of state, but his father insisted that Robert attend his own alma mater, Pratt Institute, in the nearby borough of Brooklyn. Mapplethorpe enrolled there in September 1963 and declared a major in advertising design. Because he had graduated early from high school and was only sixteen when he entered Pratt, he spent his freshman year living at home.

Mapplethorpe's college years, from 1963 to 1969, coincided with a volatile time in American history. The civil rights movement, aimed at producing legislative change that would end discrimination against blacks, was becoming a powerful national force. In 1968 violent protests against the Vietnam War broke out across the country and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated. The women's movement was developing strength and visibility, as evidenced at the Miss America Pageant of 1968, where protesters threw bras, girdles, curlers, makeup, and high-heeled pumps into a garbage can, discarding them as "instruments of torture." On June 28, 1969, New York police officers raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in

Greenwich Village, inadvertently sparking an assertive national gay-liberation movement.[5]

Against this backdrop of civic engagement and violence, a growing appetite for erotic experience emerged in both heterosexual and same-gender circles. In the decade to come, sex shops, x-rated movie houses, and adult bookstores would crop up not just in big cities but all over the country. New York's first gay cinema, the Park-Miller on 43rd Street, opened in the summer of 1969.[6] In 1971, Wakefield Poole's film *Boys in the Sand* would become the first gay pornographic film to receive crossover attention and widespread success. A year later, Gerard Demiano's *Deep Throat*, one of the first feature-length pornographic films, ran in theaters nationwide, achieving a cult status that signaled the potential of heterosexual pornography to move from an illicit form of entertainment to a popular one. By 1973, birth-control pills would be available at women's health centers across the country, and the Supreme Court decision in Roe v. Wade would legalize abortion.

During the growth of this sexual revolution, Mapplethorpe moved from conformism to rebellion. On entering college, he vowed to shed the homosexual desire that had nearly gotten him arrested that summer and to lead a "normal" life. In his freshman year he joined the ROTC and pledged the National Honor Society of Pershing Rifles, to which his father had belonged years before (fig. 1). The Pershing Rifles was a military-oriented drill company that prized leadership and discipline. Acceptance in this honorary fraternity involved weeks of training designed to break the spirit of the hopefuls. The trial period culminated in a night of brutal tests in which pledges were stripped of their clothes, blindfolded, and subjected to physical violence, sexual humiliation, and infantilizing cruelty.[7] Mapplethorpe endured the ordeal and was admitted into the fellowship. For months he projected an image of heterosexual masculinity, which included dating a Jackie Kennedy-like brunette, Nancy Nemeth, who was voted the queen of the 1965 ROTC Military Ball.

By the fall of that year, a growing number of students at Pratt were moving to the left, embracing the countercultural movement that would come to define the 1960s. Attracted by this lifestyle, Mapplethorpe began to distance himself from his military buddies and found kinship with the art students at Pratt. He switched majors from advertising design to graphic arts, which allowed him to study drawing and painting.[8] He also started to smoke marijuana, beginning a systematic use of drugs that would last the rest of his life. Mapplethorpe's works of these years reflect his appreciation for the Cubists, the Surrealists, and the artists Francis Bacon and Joseph Cornell. An untitled canvas from 1965, for instance, features a fragmented figure as a metaphor for multiple facets of the self, a motif that would reappear in his later collages and Polaroid photographs (fig. 2).

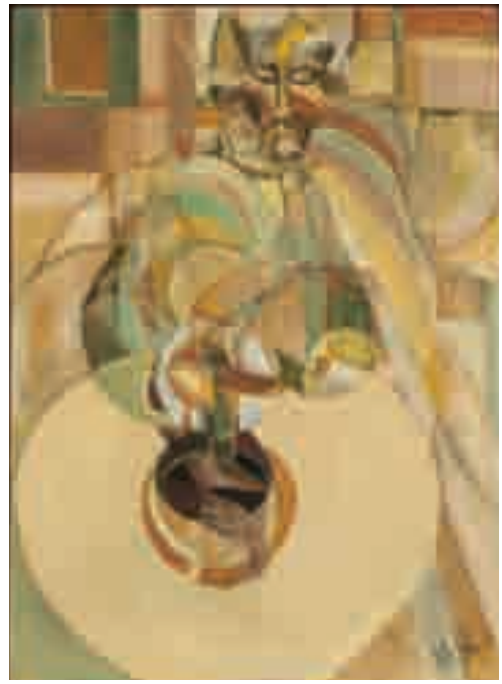


Fig. 2. Robert Mapplethorpe. *Untitled*. 1965. Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 22 in. (76.2 x 55.9 cm). Collection Edward Mapplethorpe

In the spring of 1967, Mapplethorpe met Patti Smith. Then a young poet, the future rock singer would become his soul mate. They lived together for the next five years, first as a couple, later as friends. Today, Smith remembers them as starving young artists who often had to decide between buying two sandwiches for dinner or sharing one to allow them to buy film or writing supplies.[9] They challenged one another, exchanged ideas, and fed off each other's energies and moods. Robert encouraged Patti to write and occasionally made artwork to accompany her poems. Patti read Rimbaud to Robert and contributed prized possessions to eclectic installations he made in their apartment.

Inspired and provoked by his Catholic upbringing, Mapplethorpe often made shrinelike works out of a broad range of materials, from men's underwear to prayer cards. Of his integration of the sacred and the profane, he once remarked that his most vivid memories of his childhood were of visits to Coney Island and to church.[10] The link between the two is not so distant: both incorporate visual stimulus, pageantry, and display. In Mapplethorpe's youth, the Catholic mass was held in Latin and included the burning of incense and the ringing of bells. "A church has a certain magic and mystery for a child," Mapplethorpe explained. "It still shows in how I arrange things. It's always little altars."[11]

In addition to the formal appeal of Catholic iconography, Mapplethorpe found fodder in stories and characters from the Bible. Extraordinary individuals who endured suffering and elicited devotion from the Virgin Mary to Andy Warhol, who had been shot in 1968—would be an ongoing fascination. (In 1987, after Warhol's death, Mapplethorpe would enshrine a portrait he had made of the artist, surrounded by a halo of light, in a cruciform frame.) For another of his early assemblages *Tie Rack* (1969; fig. 3), Mapplethorpe enshrined a painting of the Madonna in black neckties. He marked the lintel of the frame with an X, as if it were a Station of the Cross, and outlined the Virgin's halo with a thin line of yellow pigment that pierces her neck. He also added sparkles to her white shift, over her chest and lungs, and painted a triangle over her eyes (the veiling or covering of eyes

Fig. 3. Robert Mapplethorpe. *Tie Rack*. 1969. Mixed media, 24 x 18 x 4 1/2 in. (61 x 45.7 x 11.4 cm). Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

would appear again and again in his work). It is common in portraits of the Virgin that she holds open her robe to reveal her heart. In Mapplethorpe's rendition, however, the gesture seems more like an erotic invitation, in part because of his alterations to the painting, which make it more a fetish object than a devotional image.

The sexualization of the spiritual has a long history in Catholic iconography, going back to the orgasmic swoon of Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–52) or the thinly veiled genitals of the damned and the saved in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (1535–41). Church doctrine is paradoxical in its ideas on the body, as the critic Eleanor

Heartney has written: its assertion that human beings are created in the image of God would suggest that human sexuality must be godly too, but instead the Church mandates that the demands of the flesh be harnessed or transcended rather than celebrated or indulged.[12] Mapplethorpe was not the only Catholic-raised artist to find contradictions in these teachings, nor was he the only one in our time to make art that is part reverent, part sacrilegious. (Among others are the filmmaker Martin Scorsese, the photographer Andres Serrano, the painter Chris Ofili, and the pop star Madonna). While Mapplethorpe may have been embittered by Catholicism's condemnation of homosexuality, he also found in it a resource for artmaking. He equally embraced the sacred and the profane, and even found a biblical alter ego in the fallen angel Lucifer.

Mapplethorpe's fascination with religious tradition and his burgeoning interest in homosexuality appear clearly in an album he made in 1970, a store-bought sketchbook that became a highly individual object of devotion. The album opens with a photograph of Mapplethorpe, nude, his genitals and nipples covered by red paper dots of the kind found in office-supply stores (fig. 4). The photograph is set above a small calendar for the year 1970. Turning the page reveals a collage that has windows, which open to reveal pictures, (fig. 5), just as Advent calendars mark each day of the four-week period of penitence and preparation before Christmas. Among these hidden images are store-bought angel stickers and hand-painted photo-booth snapshots of Patti Smith. Farther on, the album introduces homoerotic imagery with a magazine picture of a tumescent penis, framed with black tape and enclosed by four triangular panels that close over it in the peek-a-boo style of children's pop-up books (fig. 6). Mapplethorpe has painted the head of the penis red, placed a star above the photograph, and set the name "Davey" below. In addition to the questions that the collage invites (who is Davey? Is he red hot?), the star, the patriotic colors, and the typography recall the flags that were placed in windows during World War II when a loved one was lost in battle. Military motifs appear often in Mapplethorpe's early work, perhaps inspired by his ROTC experience.

With its range of subjects and materials, the album manifests a visceral discontinuity between the childlike and the erotic. The use of stars and stickers, for example, conjures up childhood arts-and-crafts projects, and the format of the Advent calendar reminds us of the impatience of youth. (What Catholic child has not had the impulse to open all of the windows in one of these calendars at once?) Inviting suspense and withholding gratification can be an agonizingly pleasurable experience, particularly in the realm of sex. By 1970, Mapplethorpe had begun to explore his sexual attraction to men, trying to determine whether he was gay, straight, or bisexual.