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The power of the muse

Robin Muir looks back at an anomalous shoot of the bodybuilder Lisa Lyon by the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, *Vogue* May 1984

By 1984, American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe was one of the art world's most controversial figures. His polished, sometimes bloodless portraits were much admired, while his nudes, just as elegant, possessed a shock value that followed him to his death in 1989, and resonated for years afterwards.

This set of photographs, Mapplethorpe's only commission for British *Vogue*, was half fashion shoot, half portrait sitting, and in the end the magazine found it difficult to place. Laid out on single pages at the front of book, it is flanked by advertisements and you have to look hard to find it. The model was also unconventional for the magazine – although not for Mapplethorpe. Bodybuilder Lisa Lyon, shot wearing the latest in swimwear, was his current muse. They had met at

a party in a Manhattan loft, where he had admired her form encased in black latex. "I had never seen a woman like that before. It was like looking at someone from another planet," he later recalled. In 1983, the year before this shoot, they had collaborated on the cult book *Lady: Lisa Lyon*.

A commercial assignment by Mapplethorpe was a rarity. While keen to work for magazines, he was often a hard sell. Anne Kennedy of the Art & Commerce agency told his biographer that magazines "wanted things that were funnier and lighter, more amusing, and Robert was not really about that". Defiantly not. He was hardcore, emotionless, transgressive, shocking. This shoot for *Vogue* was a one-off. It remains an anomaly, a brave choice of photographer and a stunning set of images – even if they confounded the magazine at the time. ■