

SEXUAL LIBERATION IN 1970S NEW YORK: A NEW BOOK REVEALS THE TRUTHS AND TALENT OF ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

This month, as cult 1992 photography book *Robert Mapplethorpe* returns, we honour the artist that redefined beauty to become one of the 20th century's most influential figures. Here's why we need the fearlessness of Robert Mapplethorpe's work now more than ever.

Julia Hobbs and Jamie Spence, *Vogue India*, 11 June 2020



Self-Portrait, 1980. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation Inc.

It is all too easy to label the work of Robert Mapplethorpe, an original star of New York's downtown scene, as 'taboo-breaking' or 'controversial'. In truth, the images the Long Island-born artist created during his 18-year photography career (1970 to 1988) that form the subject of the newly expanded tome, *Robert Mapplethorpe*, are laced with something common to us all: primal lust. Equally universal is the sense of restraint in Mapplethorpe's work—the classical, often statuesque staging of his subjects—which vocalises the tension between our public and private-facing personas today just as succinctly as it did in the 1970s.

Musician Patti Smith was his confidante, muse and frequent collaborator, the two meeting in New York in 1967, first becoming lovers, then lifelong friends. It's fitting

ALISON JACQUES

that a new poem from Smith graces the revamped 2020 edition of the book. “It was the summer Coltrane died, the summer of Crystal Ship. Flower children raised their empty arms and China exploded the H bomb. Jimi Hendrix set his guitar in flames in Monterey. AM radio played Ode to Billie Joe. There were riots in Newark, Milwaukee and Detroit,” Smith says of the summer they first met in her autobiography, *Just Kids* (2010).

Mapplethorpe would shoot the cover for the poet’s seminal debut album, *Horses* (1975), famously taking just 12 frames. By the eighth, he’d got it—‘it’ being the photograph that would come to define Smith’s agenda-setting androgynous style.

The photographer turned his lens on other similarly bright-minded friends—artists Andy Warhol and Cindy Sherman—as well as himself. Under his own gaze, Mapplethorpe embodied the sexual liberation of New York’s 1970s gay scenes. He gave credence to the artistry that kink and character play offered, appearing in drag, starring as a toughened biker, a BDSM archetype and, towards the end of his life, chronicling his changing appearance while living with, and ultimately dying from, Aids as the disease decimated the core of New York’s creative communities.

With the financial patronage and mentorship of his art dealer partner Sam Wagstaff, Mapplethorpe’s work exploded on to New York’s gallery scene, then the world. Right up until his death in 1989, the photographer engendered outrage. *The Perfect Moment*, a 1988 travelling exhibition which presented explicit works from his *X Portfolio*, sparked a national debate in the US on whether the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) should sponsor art that conservatives deemed ‘morally reprehensible’.

Today, we honour Mapplethorpe’s honesty. His gift for presenting subjects just as they were; proud, liberated, and characteristically empowered—be that Arnold Schwarzenegger, Debbie Harry or ‘Joe Rubberman’. He challenged norms, taking on issues that many shied away from, becoming one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. But, most of all, he shared truths. As Patti Smith notes in *Just Kids*, “He will be condemned and adored, his excesses damned or romanticised. In the end, truth will be found in his work.”

Robert Mapplethorpe, edited by Mark Holborn and Dimitri Levas, an introduction by Andrew Sullivan and a new poem by Patti Smith, is available now from Phaidon.

ALISON JACQUES



Patti Smith, 1987. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation Inc.



Amanda Lear, 1976. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation Inc.

ALISON JACQUES



Patti Smith photographed for her *Horses* album artwork, 1975. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation Inc. / Phaidon



Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter, 1979. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation Inc. / Phaidon

ALISON JACQUES



Alistair Butler, 1980. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation Inc. / Phaidon



© Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation Inc. / Phaidon