In his studio, the highly artificial setting for virtually all his photographs, Robert Mapplethorpe arranged the world for his viewfinder.1 “I’d look at a scene,” said Dimitri Levav, the photographer’s friend and art director, “and see what the essence of it was and try to figure out how to make it into a perfect form.”2 Another friend, Susan Sontag, explored a similar notion in the preface Mapplethorpe asked her to write for Certain People (1986): “What he looks for, which could be called Form, is the quiddity or inner essence of something. Not the truth about something, but the strongest version of it.”3 Sontag, the New York intellectual most attuned to fellow aesthetes like Mapplethorpe, isolated one key quality most others have overlooked. The photographer constructed his own truth, expressing himself with carefully crafted images. Though Mapplethorpe enjoyed socializing with the cultural elite, he repeatedly emphasized that he was not an intellectual. Mapplethorpe presented himself as he perceived as the essence of his subject. In, in its most intimate state.

Mapplethorpe found raw material in his corner of New York City in the 1970s and 1980s, In his studio, the highly artificial setting for virtually all his photographs, Robert Mapplethorpe cropped bodies. He usually photographed them straight on, in perfect focus, and well illuminated, without filters, unusual lenses, or multiple exposures. These highly calculated artistic choices create the illusion of a direct, straightforward depiction of the world. Many sex icons in his work, and the slippery concept of truth winds through discussions about him. Mapplethorpe himself observed, “I think there is a directness in my approach to life which comes through in the photographs. I would like to think it’s about being honest.”4 But Mapplethorpe did not confuse this with any pretense of objective truth. On the beauty of the sitters in his portraits, he said, “It’s seen as a perfect form.”5 Another friend, Susan Sontag, explored a similar notion in the preface Mapplethorpe asked her to write for the book Certain People (1986): “I think there is a directness in my approach to life which comes through in the photographs. I would like to think it’s about being honest.” But Mapplethorpe did not confuse this with any pretense of objective truth. On the beauty of the sitters in his portraits, he said, “It’s seen as a perfect form.”

1. **The Artist’s Hand**

2. **Mapplethorpe’s Search for Intense, Ordered Beauty**

3. **JONATHAN NELSON**

4. **Mapplethorpe, alla ricerca di una bellezza intensa e ordinata**

5. **JONATHAN NELSON**

6. **Certain People**

7. **JONATHAN NELSON**

**Fig. 1** Robert Mapplethorpe (from Mapplethorpe’s Apartment, 2005)
Most critics and viewers do not focus on these two qualities, much less on their sources. Beginning in about 1975, the artist’s many friends and lovers no longer played the leading role in Mapplethorpe’s photographs. The true protagonist became Mapplethorpe’s use of two fundamental qualities, identified in a previously unpublished interview from 1978: “The formality and intensity. … One man’s truth is another man’s lie.”6 Many authors, however, continue to confuse the vision of Mapplethorpe with the vision of the artist himself. “It becomes an event, being photographed by me. … It’s completely controlled. There are no surprises happening between me and the subject.”7

Though Mapplethorpe’s interest in cropping appeared in some Polaroids, this passion for the choice of backdrops that appear in most works. An obsession with organization dictated the overall composition, as it appeared in the viewfinder of his Hasselblad 500 (1975, Fig. 1). This high-precision, fully manual camera, which Mapplethorpe started using in 1975, forced the photographer to work slowly and to arrange his work within a perfect square. “I like the formal consideration of a square on a rectangular piece of paper.”8 This interest is already apparent in his first Hasselblad portraits: Self Portrait, 1975 (Fig. 2) focuses our attention on both his hand and his handling of the composition. He had boldly cropped the glossy face and languid body, keeping only a sliver of the edges of the portrait. In his celebre immagine, Rock ‘n’ roll è un combattimento regale15. Invece, in un altro ritratto poco noto eseguito l’anno successivo (1976, Fig. 5), Mapplethorpe ci offre l’immagine di una Patti Smith particolarmente timida. La fragilità della figura nuda, aggregata alla radice, contrasta con la forza e l’orientamento mentalmente definiti della figura. La Sontag ravvisava questa caratteristica in tutti i ritratti pubblicati da Mapplethorpe in Gentile Popula. La scrittrice suppone che il titolo, scelto dall’autore, avesse un doppio significato: “Da un lato ’certo’ nell’azione di alcune e non altre, dall’altro ’certo’ nel senso di sicurezza di sé, determinate, ben definite.”8 Ritroviamo questa consapevolezza di sé non solo nei personaggi ma anche nel modo di esprimersi, caratteristico dello studio. Nella maggior parte delle sue opere Mapplethorpe ne esalta l’aspetto con uno stile chiaro e deciso. Nella sua celebre immagine, Rock ‘n’ roll è un combattimento regale15. Invece, in un altro ritratto poco noto eseguito l’anno successivo (1976, Fig. 5), Mapplethorpe ci offre l’immagine di una Patti Smith particolarmente timida. La fragilità della figura nuda, aggregata alla radice, contrasta con la forza e l’orientamento mentalmente definiti della figura. La Sontag ravvisava questa caratteristica in tutti i ritratti pubblicati da Mapplethorpe in Gentile Popula. La scrittrice suppone che il titolo, scelto dall’autore, avesse un doppio significato: “Da un lato ’certo’ nell’azione di alcune e non altre, dall’altro ’certo’ nel senso di sicurezza di sé, determinate, ben definite.”8 Ritroviamo questa consapevolezza di sé non solo nei personaggi ma anche nel modo di esprimersi, caratteristico dello studio. Nella maggior parte delle sue opere Mapplethorpe ne esalta l’aspetto con uno stile chiaro e deciso. Nella sua celebre immagine, Rock ‘n’ roll è un combattimento regale15. Invece, in un altro ritratto poco noto eseguito l’anno successivo (1976, Fig. 5), Mapplethorpe ci offre l’immagine di una Patti Smith particolarmente timida. La fragilità della figura nuda, aggregata alla radice, contrasta con la forza e l’orientamento mentalmente definiti della figura. La Sontag ravvisava questa caratteristica in tutti i ritratti pubblicati da Mapplethorpe in Gentile Popula. La scrittrice suppone che il titolo, scelto dall’autore, avesse un doppio significato: “Da un lato ’certo’ nell’azione di alcune e non altre, dall’altro ’certo’ nel senso di sicurezza di sé, determinate, ben definite.”8 Ritroviamo questa consapevolezza di sé non solo nei personaggi ma anche nel modo di esprimersi, caratteristico dello studio. Nella maggior parte delle sue opere Mapplethorpe ne esalta l’aspetto con uno stile chiaro e deciso. Nella sua celebre immagine, Rock ‘n’ roll è un combattimento regale. 

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The selected images not only exemplify Mapplethorpe's highly distinctive style but also reveal his decisions. Not long before his death in 1989 at the age of 43, he stated, “My work is about order. I am trying to capture what could be sculpture.”23 Mapplethorpe said, “I love working with bounce light, but it is very hard to do, that triangle of light. I do that with portraits. I do it with cocks. I do it with flowers. It's not different from one form to the next. I am trying to capture what could be sculpture.”23

He often explained the originality of his approach: “I had the idea of taking sexual images and doing it a little differently than it had been done before—the form, the idea of sculpture.”23 Some Women (1982, cat. 71), a nude black male model positioned within a white circle (Thomas, 1987, cat. 34), is an arresting, white, female bodybuilder covered in clay (Lisa Lyon, 1980, cat. 40), a flexing, white, female bodybuilder covered in clay (James Ford, 1987, cat. 3–6), a frightening figure in leather crouching beside a ladder (Jim, Sausalito, 1977, cat. 54). The theme of this exhibition, though broad, does not encompass several powerful works by Mapplethorpe, such as the portraits of Andy Warhol and Vincent van Gogh. However, without a doubt, one of the most significant images is the one with a sleeping black man lying with a cat (Vanity Fair, 1987, catt. 3–6) or a frightening figure in leather crouching beside a ladder (Jim, Sausalito, 1977, cat. 54).

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about Mapplethorpe’s work over the last twenty years, in both popular and scholarly journals, focus almost exclusively on two topics: censorship and “gay art.” Both Mapplethorpe’s supporters and detractors have pigeonholed the artist and shifted attention away from his own stated goals. In about 1980, Mapplethorpe finished making S&M images, and a few years later he described ceramics in particular; there are shapes I had not seen before. I’ve incorporated some of them in my approach” to relatively traditional subjects: flowers and muscular nudes with “classically” sculpted bodies. Mapplethorpe’s obsession with the New expressed itself primarily in the gender and race of the sitters; he often depicted female bodybuilders, above all Lisa Lyon, and black males. Speaking about the photographs of African-American men, Mapplethorpe specifically noted their absence to offer into the scheme of things new eyes: a new way of seeing. And he moved from world to world in pursuit and prying of those eyes. Obsessively, wholeheartedly as he extracted the essence, the mystery of each world.”

Mapplethorpe’s close relationship with Smith, their mutual search for novel self-expression, his radical decision to represent explicit sexual activity, and his propensity for wearing black leather all contributed to his public persona. Mapplethorpe became the bad boy of the art world, the punk photographer. But Smith, as poet-performer, and Mapplethorpe, as photographer, developed quite different artistic languages. She broke down the rules of prose, grammar, and harmony to transmit a message of unbridled energy; on her first album, she cried out, “I see something in the camera that I’ve never seen before, and that’s my point in taking pictures: to see something a little differently.”

Even outside of the studio, Mapplethorpe continued his search for “perfection in form,” which extended to all aspects of his life. “I like to collect things that other people are not collecting… I collect Scandinavian ceramics in particular; there are shapes I had not seen before; I’ve incorporated some of them in my photographs… I love objects, and I love arrangements.” In his home (1988, 1996, 6, 7), and in his studio, he carefully arranged objects and statuesque figures to create original, perfect forms. Patti Smith conveyed her passion about originality and intense observation. “He sought … to offer into the scheme of things new eyes: a new way of seeing. And he moved from world to world in pursuit and prying of those eyes. Obviously, wholeheartedly as he extracted the essence, the mystery of each world.” Mapplethorpe’s choice relationship with Smith, their mutual search for novel self-expression, his radical decision to represent explicit sexual activity, and his propensity for wearing black leather all contributed to his public persona. Mapplethorpe became the bad boy of the art world, the punk photographer. But Smith, as poet-performer, and Mapplethorpe, as photographer, developed quite different artistic languages. She broke down the rules of prose, grammar, and harmony to transmit a message of unbridled energy; on her first album, she cried out, “Get to lose control and then you take control.” By contrast, the “events” staged in Mapplethorpe’s Mapplethorpe was able to dedicate all his photographic endeavors in the 1980s to a more coherent and coherently structured approach to his work. In the early 1980s, Mapplethorpe finished making S&M images, and a few years later he described ceramics in particular; there are shapes I had not seen before. I’ve incorporated some of them in my approach” to relatively traditional subjects: flowers and muscular nudes with “classically” sculpted bodies. Mapplethorpe’s obsession with the New expressed itself primarily in the gender and race of the sitters; he often depicted female bodybuilders, above all Lisa Lyon, and black males. Speaking about the photographs of African-American men, Mapplethorpe specifically noted their absence to offer into the scheme of things new eyes: a new way of seeing. And he moved from world to world in pursuit and prying of those eyes. Obsessively, wholeheartedly as he extracted the essence, the mystery of each world.”

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A cross in granite appears on the same wall of his home and in an austere photograph that explores (1976 cat. 83) for their revolutionary album

Cameron, together with David Octavius Hill, was promoted by the Photo-Secessionists as one of this, up until this point."45

I realized that photography could, in and of itself, be an art, and I probably wasn't convinced even though Mapplethorpe, on the day of the session, had given his friends the impression that

in the child's hand. Mapplethorpe had a special interest in this form, and used it in several works.

invented this, and they had precursors going back to the 19th century."42 Mapplethorpe knew in 1976 to describe works in which “the photographer consciously and intentionally

not rough-edged punk songs but another radical development from the same period, Minimalism.

in his work.”40 We find this attention to composition in the double portrait of Glass and Wilson, and the number paintings — and in a number of artists in the 1980s, Rauschenberg, Sol LeWitt. It’s

my pictures, there’s nothing to question — it’s just there.”39

in the “real world”: scenes, figures, or objects that enjoy an existence independent of the photographer. The
directorial mode, now often called staged photography, has become increasingly popular in the early

Cameron is great because there is a sentimentality works like Music in 12 Parts. (1984, cat. 37). Mapplethorpe once explained that, “I like the “photographer pittorico”, che molto si avvicinava alla pittura di quel periodo. E, in qualche

sitting was rather spontaneous. After they had spent some time socializing in the living area of

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Fig. 8  Robert Mapplethorpe (from Mapplethorpe’s Apartment series), 1988

“‘My personality is with the portrait as much as the person I’m shooting — it’s somehow fifty-fifty.’53

“It’s rather like theatre in a sense. … It has to do with words, talking out a fantasy and relating it back to life.”

These comments from 1988 pick up the same theme Mapplethorpe had discussed in his very first performances:

“… the sex pictures … I want the people to come up with the meaning.”52

He repeated the same proportions in another interview that year, discussing another genre: “… the visual realization of the narrative.”51

By the late 1970s, Mapplethorpe had mastered those compositional techniques which transformed this theatre into visual art, without the need for words. In 1978, he again emphasized the staged quality of his photography, especially of his S&M images: “… like theatre that was happening for the photo sessions — it wasn’t sex.”49

Mapplethorpe did not share the interest of Victorian photographers in moralizing or allegorizing their subject matter. He opened his photos to a wide range of interpretations — sometimes playing upon sexual meaning, other times upon the drama of the scene. Mapplethorpe often discussed the staged quality of his photography, especially of his S&M images. “It was almost like theatre that was happening for the photo sessions — it wasn’t sex.”49

Mapplethorpe’s photography could be interpreted as a directorial mode, such as Cindy Sherman. Many made extensive use of irony or parody; nearly all a directorial mode, so prominent in the photographs of both Cameron and Mapplethorpe.

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We can see the photos as a record of the qualities that struck his artistic sensibility. They document if we recognize Mapplethorpe's place in the history of staged photography, we can avoid the question of trust, in the sense of willing collaboration, has no bearing on a large percentage of Mapplethorpe's own comments help us interpret a frequently misunderstood comparison he often used to define his approach. "What separates the pictures that I take from the pictures somebody else could take," he said, "is the essential truth."68

Mapplethorpe replied that he had discovered a hidden truth in his subjects. "There is a certain truth in my pictures that is somewhat consistent, a certain personality," he said. "I put it into children or flowers. And I can put it on landscapes, although I've only done a few, and carry it on over objects, furniture, fashion."65 A few years later, when asked to define his greatest virtue as an artist, Mapplethorpe replied, "What separates the pictures that I take from the pictures somebody else could take, is the essential truth."68

Mapplethorpe's approach to subjects was often driven by his personal relationships. He was known for his ability to create a sense of intimacy with his subjects, and he often used his photographs to explore the themes of his life. For example, his portraits of friends and lovers often reveal a deep connection and understanding between them.

Mapplethorpe's approach to staging was also a key element of his photography. He was known for his attention to detail, and his ability to create a specific mood or atmosphere in his photographs. For example, his portraits of friends and lovers often reveal a deep connection and understanding between them.

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influence on those pictures is, I suppose, Pop Art, especially Warhol and Lichtenstein. Asked about this a few years later, the artist replied that this was "the way I approach art in general. . . . I don't have this peddler notion that I think a lot of photographers have when they photograph celebrities. . . . Most accurate was when Mapplethorpe put everyone and everything up on a pedestal, at times quite literally. In 1984, Mapplethorpe did recognize the impact of Warhol (Fig. 8), but clarified, "I'm not talking so much about the product as the statement— I mean the fact that Warhol says, 'Anything can be art,' and then I make pornography art." Just how he transformed his sex pictures, flowers, and portraits into art illuminates Mapplethorpe's distance not only from Pop Art but from the very notion that his theatrical works depict an "honest" representation of the world as we see it.

2. Creating a "Mapplethorpe"

When a work of art is a photograph, the public generally expects it to have been created entirely by the photographer. Yet, that was not the Mapplethorpe method. So, just how did Mapplethorpe create a "Mapplethorpe"? One important aspect of his procedure recalls that of Andy Warhol at his famed Factory: Warhol provided the idea, determined the appearance of a work, and then had assistants produce the actual object. Though this practice does not represent the "directorial mode," it certainly shows how artists often express themselves through their direction of others. We expect artists to use the "Factory" approach when, for example, they design watch faces or furniture. Mapplethorpe had not actually constructed the glass and plastic laminate table that he proudly displayed in the center of the living room and mentioned in many interviews (Fig. 9). In 1979, he provided the idea of the intersecting geometric forms and had a firm produce it. Similarly, for sculptures such as Tulips, 1978 (Fig. 10) or Star, Mapplethorpe established the appearance of the work; he also decided on the location of the wires on the back, thus determining how it would hang on a wall. As for his frames, Mapplethorpe explained in 1979 that he designed them himself: "I was working with one frame which had a large assortment of rather exotic wood. So I would choose the color of the wood to go with the color of the silk." He described Tulips, 1978 (Fig. 10) as "a double picture. They were presented in a double silk mat. In other words, the color of the silk around the picture and the shape and the proportions of the mat are important—in the way that F. Holland Day or De Meyer were involved in presentation. I got involved, I suppose, through seeing that. Only afterwards do I realize that it is probably where it came from." Over the next decade, Mapplethorpe continued to design the frames, often in black or white, that played such an important role in the presentation of his works.

Mapplethorpe often made it clear that, in a break with photographic tradition, he did not print his own photographs. Indeed, as he said publicly, "Even when my assistants do virtually all the work, the picture still has me in it." The photographer Lynn Davis, a close friend of Mapplethorpe, confided that, "I'd never heard of a photographer that did not do his own printing, and that of artists more anxious, to his contemporaries. "A Mapplethorpe is not interested in guarding the house versus the Los Angelesbased". With lui si era allo stesso livello, in un rapporto empatico tra pari. La maggiore influenza su queste opere sorprendono l'abbia avuta la Pop Art, in particolare Warhol e Lichtenstein. Quando, alcuni anni dopo, gli fu rivolta una domanda su questo punto, l'artista rispose che la trattava dell'approccio che aveva rispetto all'arte in generale... Non mi appiattisce l'idea del pittore, che ritiene avessero molti fotografi quando ritraggono le celebrità. Ad esempio, Mapplethorpe avrebbe potuto realizzare un'opera di Stuck, a voler anche lateralmente (Fig. 16). Il fotografo riconosce l'impatto di Warhol (Fig. 8) nel suo lavoro, ma chiarisce: «Non parlo tanto del prodotto quanto dell'idea — mi riferisco al fatto che Warhol sostiene che tutto potenzialmente è arte — e trasformò la pornografia in arte».

3. The Mapplethorpe Factory

When an opera d’arte è una fotografia, il pubblico in genere si aspetta che essa sia stata creata interamente dall’artista. Ebbene, non era questo il metodo seguito da Mapplethorpe. Come può vedersi, infatti, «un Mapplethorpe»? Un aspetto importante del procedimento adottato dal fotografo ricorda quello di Andy Warhol e della sua celebre Factory: l’artista metteva l’idea, definiva l’aspetto dell’opera, poi gli assistenti si occupavano di produrre il “living room” e del fotografo stesso non dirimerebbe dire il final prodotto. Tale pratica non rappresenta il cosiddetto “directorial mode”, ma afferma veramente le intuizioni che impiegavano altri. Potremmo addirittura escludere, con esempio, che l’approccio “Factory” venga adottato nel caso in cui si tratti del logo di uno degli alberi di arredo. Infatti, Mapplethorpe non aveva il vantaggio del tutto personalizzato il tavolino da salotto in vetro e l’immagine in sedia che veniva in bella mostra al centro del suo soggiorno e che spesso stavano nelle interviste (Fig. 9). Nel 1984 aveva fornito l’idea per alcuni forme geometriche interessanti, che poi aveva fatto realizzare a un’asta. Analogamente, nel caso di sculture come Arrows (cat. 23, 24), realizzate nel 1983, o Star, Mapplethorpe aveva fornito precise indicazioni sull’aspetto finale dell’opera, arrivando a scrivere persino dove dovrebbe collocarsi il filo di ferro sul tavolo, per determinare come l’oggetto avrebbe dovuto essere appeso al muro. Il fotografo spiegava, nel 1979, che egli disegnava personalmente le cornici delle proprie foto: «Collaboravo con un oraffica che disponeva di un vasto assortimento di legni piuttosto esotici. Così sceglievo il tipo di legno che poteva andare bene con il colore della seta». Egli descriveva l’opera Tulips, 1978 (Fig. 10) come un’immagine doppia. Si presentavano come in un doppio passepartout di seta. In altre parole, il colore della seta intorno all’immagine e la forma nonché le proporzioni del passepartout sono importanti — proprio come E. Hollander Day o De Meyer si interessavano agli aspetti della presentazione. Immagine di sasuior epista, appassionato osservandoli. Anche capito solo in seguito che probabilmente erano da loro che avevano tratto quest’aspetto. Nei dieci anni successivi Mapplethorpe continuò a disegnare le cornici, in bianco e in nero, che avevano un ruolo particolarmente importante per il modo in cui le sue opere venivano esposte.

Mapplethorpe puntualmente spesso così, rompendo con la tradizione della fotografia, egli non stampava personalmente le sue foto. Tuttavia egli diceva: «Anche quando sono i nostri assistenti a svolgere praticamente tutto il lavoro, c’è molto di me nell’immagine finale». La fotografa Lynn Davis, una amica di Mapplethorpe, confermò: «Non avevo mai sentito di un fotografo che non stampasse personalmente le proprie foto, ma poi vidi che era effettivamente molto efficace per Robert, poiché non era così coinvolto in questo passaggio... Egli era interessato soprattutto al momento della ripresa, all’espressione e, solo da ultimo, alla stampa... in questo modo poteva dire: “chiedere, dovete provare così”». Infatti egli sperimentò vari tecniche di stampa su supporti diversi. A proposito delle fotoincisioni (cat. 31, per esempio) Mapplethorpe disse: “Era rimandando vedere una fotografia trasposta in un altro medium... Mi piace ancora pensare alla mia vita come un’occasione per nuove esperienze. Dunque per me è molto più scattare una foto nuova, fotografare su lino e poi su pannelli di altri tessuti. Non ho mai visto foto realizzate in modo simile. Voglio spiegare che non ho mai visto prima”.

La presentme collaboratori consegnati a Mapplethorpe di esplorare nuove forme di espressione. «Collaboriamo con stampatori che fanno cose mai fatte prima. Almeno per quanto ne so io, è la prima volta che la tecnica al platino viene combinata con la fede. Quindi, in qualche modo il fotografo può fornire l’impianto alla gente che lo circonda, ai tecnici, per fare cose che possono produrre forme solamente perché lui ha direttamente le operazioni. È possibile raggiungere un certo grado di creatività anche senza avvicinamenti personalmente alla camera oscura». Le stampi al platino
Collaborators allowed Mapplethorpe to explore new forms of expression. "I also have printers. Many of these wonderful offerings were brought by his art director, Dimitri Levas. He designed and strived in these works to do so. It may be hard to imagine, but even at the time of these works, photography was not yet accepted as fine art in the way painting and sculpture was." Mapplethorpe also appreciated the high quality of these platinum prints, claiming, "As a photographic object it's probably the finest you'll ever see. You haven't seen any blacks any blacker or any whites any whiter."89 Though Baril found this attention somewhat excessive, his employer thought it a crucial step.

Robert was very intent on breaking the boundaries between painting, sculpture, and photography and entered in these works to do it. It may be hard to imagine, but even at the time of these works, photography was not yet accepted as fine art in the way painting and sculpture was. Mapplethorpe appreciated the high quality of these platinum prints, claiming, "As a photographic object it's probably the finest you'll ever see. You haven't seen any blacks any blacker or any whites any whiter."89 Though Baril found this attention somewhat excessive, his employer thought it a crucial step.

Robert was mainly interested in the shooting, in the experience, and then, in the final print … so he'd be able to say, 'Well now I'd like to try this.' And he'd try various printing techniques on a range of supports. Talking about his assistants, Levas said, "It was clear to me that Edward was absolutely in control. … People brought him all sort of wonderful offerings, but it was Robert who's doing the selecting. … An anecdote helps illustrate how they collaborated. Once, Robert was looking for. Robert did select a paper, [then] I received the negatives…. I had no prints to look at. Robert was interested in my interpretation. I sent him three or four proof prints of each image. He would return his choice, sometimes with comments; changes were made and this selection became the 'guide' for the edition."90

To his studio and darkroom assistants, Mapplethorpe gave very different directions. Rather than encourage independent interpretations, the photographer warned them to help him realize his own vision. In the early years, Mapplethorpe himself set up the very basic lights used for his sessions, when possible. Staring in April 1987, when his brother Edward began working for him, Robert had a series of assistants to set up the increasingly sophisticated systems of illumination. Most importantly, he started using diffused light with "soft boxes", which have a cloth-like filter in front of the light. Robert Mapplethorpe would have one placed on either side of the subject, thereby reducing shadows to a minimum, and shoot with a small lens aperture. In this way, he created photographs of figures with perfect skin and an otherworldly air. Edward recounted that, for a shoot, he would propose the type of lighting he thought his brother wanted, but, "Believe me, if he didn't like it, we didn't do it." Lynn Davis, who witnessed several sessions, observed that Robert "would add to and change the lighting, and you'd see his vision in absolute control. … People brought him all sort of wonderful offerings, but it was who put it all together."

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In "terms of quality, surface quality, actually having the prints in your hands, not under glass, not in a frame, it's a great way to see the purity of the images. And I think that's the ideal, to hold a Le Gray in your hand and see what the surface is about."

Mapplethorpe apprezzava il contatto con i suoi colleghi, qualificando il loro lavoro come "stesura sofisticata che era esaurientemente chiara alla base, dall'altro tramite il "mascheramento" o "ombreggiamento" selezionale in grado di schiarire una parte dell'immagine, tentando di creare uno sfondo. Contemporaneamente, non era interessato alla realtà, voleva qualcosa di più scultoreo." A questo proposito, Mapplethorpe "non era particolarmente interessato alla realtà, lui voleva qualcosa di più scultoreo".

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Accounts by the model and the photographer himself help us understand just how Mapplethorpe “had a skeleton of a plan; usually, he had an idea about the kind of images he wanted,” Moody recalled, “He told me what he was looking for weeks before, and he said: ‘Do you know Mapplethorpe’s principal male model between 1983 and 1985, recalled just this type of direction. He did not follow a straight path to create the elegant and powerful look that we are so familiar with in his mature works. By briefly considering the road not taken, or rather the elements dropped along the way, we find the familiar themes of portraits, male and female nudes (including sex pictures), and still life. By 1985, there’s not much difference. I just think it’s the way I’ve always seen it. I’ve refined it with in his mature works. By briefly considering the road not taken, or rather the elements dropped along the way, we find the familiar themes of portraits, male and female nudes (including sex pictures), and still life. By 1985, there’s not much difference. I just think it’s the way I’ve always seen it. I’ve refined it.

Ken Moody’s principal model between 1983 and 1985, recalling just this type of direction. The directions were minute. ‘Ken, turn your head slightly…’ It would never be anything dramatic.” Moody thought that before the shoot, Mapplethorpe “had a skeleton of a plan; usually, he had an idea about the kind of images he wanted, but then he would watch you, just watch you. … I would be saying something, doing something, and he would say, ‘Yes, and you’ll do it again.’ He would do this again, and it would be recorded. And there were these minutes during their frequent sessions. Mapplethorpe’s ‘directions were minute. “Ken, turn your head slightly…” It would never be anything dramatic.” Moody thought that before the shoot, Mapplethorpe “had a skeleton of a plan; usually, he had an idea about the kind of images he wanted, but then he would watch you, just watch you. … I would be saying something, doing something, and he would say, ‘Yes, and you’ll do it again.’ He would do this again, and it would be recorded. And there were these minutes during their frequent sessions. Mapplethorpe’s ‘directions were minute. “Ken, turn your head slightly…” It would never be anything dramatic.” Moody thought that before the shoot, Mapplethorpe “had a skeleton of a plan; usually, he had an idea about the kind of images he wanted, but then he would watch you, just watch you. … I would be saying something, doing something, and he would say, ‘Yes, and you’ll do it again.’ He would do this again, and it would be recorded. And there were these minutes during their frequent sessions. Mapplethorpe’s ‘directions were minute. “Ken, turn your head slightly…” It would never be anything dramatic.”

Mapplethorpe’s subject was not marble, he could not follow a straight path to create the elegant and powerful look that we are so familiar with in his mature works. By briefly considering the road not taken, or rather the elements dropped along the way, we find the familiar themes of portraits, male and female nudes (including sex pictures), and still life. By 1985, there’s not much difference. I just think it’s the way I’ve always seen it. I’ve refined it. By 1985, there’s not much difference. I just think it’s the way I’ve always seen it. I’ve refined it.
In his early years, Mapplethorpe explored another theme closely related to movement: the dancer, Gregory Hines (1985, Fig. 19), but in retrospect, we see that he virtually abandoned this investigation.

**Fig. 18** Robert Mapplethorpe
*Made in Canada,* 1970

**Fig. 19** Robert Mapplethorpe
*Untitled (Self Portrait),* 1973

life. But the analysis of this enormous body of early works presents a methodological problem. For the Polaroids, Mapplethorpe never carried out the essential job of editing, which he considered a major part of being an artist. After 1975, he never exhibited, published, or sold his Polaroid prints.104 Today, critics and curators who make a selection of his Polaroids cannot know whether this grouping reflects Mapplethorpe’s own interest in the early 1970s. To circumvent this difficulty, we can focus on the images that Mapplethorpe himself chose to set into custom-made frames. These demonstrate, as the photographer once observed, that “Polaroids were my tool for learning.”105 For the Polaroids, Mapplethorpe never carried out the essential job of editing, which he considered a major part of being an artist. After 1975, he never exhibited, published, or sold his Polaroid prints.104 Today, critics and curators who make a selection of his Polaroids cannot know whether this grouping reflects Mapplethorpe’s own interest in the early 1970s. To circumvent this difficulty, we can focus on the images that Mapplethorpe himself chose to set into custom-made frames. These demonstrate, as the photographer once observed, that “Polaroids were my tool for learning.”105

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Several were included in his 1973 exhibition. For Made in Canada, 1973 (Fig. 17). Patti Smith, the dancer who lived at the Chelsea Hotel, and Mapplethorpe, the photographer who had just moved in, had been introduced by Sandra Daley, an artist who lived at the Chelsea Hotel.106 Mapplethorpe, for his part, had been struck by their showings of works from the period, he enclosed in a leather frame. Other works from that period document Mapplethorpe’s interest in “double exposures,” a theme he had discovered in a virtually unknown interview.115 For readers familiar with the quiet, crystalline beauty of Mapplethorpe’s mature work, one particular image is impressive. Mapplethorpe, in a leather frame. Other works from that period document Mapplethorpe’s interest in “double exposures,” a theme he had discovered in a virtually unknown interview.115 For readers familiar with the quiet, crystalline beauty of Mapplethorpe’s mature work, one particular image is impressive. Mapplethorpe, in an interview, said: “I think I will be more involved in that as time goes on.”118 Mapplethorpe did explore this in his 1973 show, Made in Canada. For Made in Canada, 1973 (Fig. 17). Patti Smith, the dancer who lived at the Chelsea Hotel, and Mapplethorpe, the photographer who had just moved in, had been introduced by Sandra Daley, an artist who lived at the Chelsea Hotel.106 Mapplethorpe, for his part, had been struck by their showings of works from the period, he enclosed in a leather frame. Other works from that period document Mapplethorpe’s interest in “double exposures,” a theme he had discovered in a virtually unknown interview.115 For readers familiar with the quiet, crystalline beauty of Mapplethorpe’s mature work, one particular image is impressive. Mapplethorpe, in an interview, said: “I think I will be more involved in that as time goes on.”118 Mapplethorpe did explore this in his 1973 show, Made in Canada.
Though many of his early works were inspired by the Surrealism, Mapplethorpe quickly lost his interest in creating Conceptual art.109 After about 1973, he also stopped using his photographs, or even his films, to recount a story or show sequences of events over time. In the late 1970s, he made a few more works with multiple images, but these explore a theme, often by showing a whole image alongside a detail. A favorite phrase of his friend Philip Glass, to describe his own music, applies perfectly to Mapplethorpe’s late photographs: he “invented the narrative.”

In their different arts, both these composers began making extensive use of repetitions with slight variations. As early as 1974, Mapplethorpe created a sculpture by uniting a mirror of colored glass with mirror images of an earlier Polaroid (Patti Smith, 1974, Fig. 20). A year earlier, Mapplethorpe had taken a highly expressive portrait of Patti Smith.123 He then doubled this image, colored one version, and reversed the other, so that the whole read as a pattern of symmetrical forms. In 1978, this was the only early work on view in Mapplethorpe’s apartment: Fig. 21.124 With his Handblud, Mapplethorpe translated this aesthetic into a single photograph. For example, Bread, 1979 (cat. 76) represents a humble roll, reflected on a shiny surface. Both Mapplethorpe and Glass created compositions of timeless beauty in which the repetition of a single element produced an entirely new Form.

One curious observation made in the 1974 interview indicates a key quality also found in Mapplethorpe’s later work: he “invented the narrative.”

His handblud, Mapplethorpe explained in 1978, “is like a verb in the passive voice. It is an artist’s way of saying ‘I did this and I am doing this.’”128 The handblud is a tool used by artists to extend their creative process beyond the point of exposure. It allows them to manipulate the image after it has been recorded on film or digitally. The artist can then make multiple prints from the same negative, each with slight variations. As early as 1974, Mapplethorpe had created a sculpture by uniting a mirror of colored glass with mirror images of an earlier Polaroid (Patti Smith, 1974, Fig. 20). A year earlier, Mapplethorpe had taken a highly expressive portrait of Patti Smith. He then doubled this image, colored one version, and reversed the other, so that the whole read as a pattern of symmetrical forms. In 1978, this was the only early work on view in Mapplethorpe’s apartment: Fig. 21.124

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was Wagner. A timeline helps us follow their interaction: Mapplethorpe and Wagstaff met in 1972, and both began collecting photographic art the following year. Mapplethorpe, Wagstaff believed, 

"helped me enormously, and I assume, perhaps, I helped him. I had for one thing a collection of Nadar.

Speaking in 1978, Mapplethorpe explained the look he sought in his works: "Quality is so obsession with perpendicular lines — to a good number of portraits by Nadar.

or experimental look which gives some of his Polaroids their freshness. Instead, he adopted and 

I was very pleased one day when Robert gave an interview. When asked, ‘Who is your favorite

personality. Mapplethorpe rarely found these qualities in works by the other early photographers

he also admired, such as Julia Margaret Cameron, David Hill, or Baron von Gloeden. At least

several “Nadarian” traits appear in virtually every portrait Mapplethorpe made from 1975 on, and 

even in the Witt cover of 1973. Nadar’s influence is not evident in many of Mapplethorpe’s earlier

portraits, especially those made before 1975. Nevertheless, no one would confuse a Mapplethorpe

for a Nadar. The American did not imitate the French photographer’s style but adopted his

method. When Mapplethorpe titled of this instant image thing”, he also abandoned the casual

or experimental look which gives some of his Polaroids their freshness. Instead, he adopted and

the assured directional mode that he found in early photographers. As Wagstaff noted about

Mapplethorpe’s works, "The willful geography seems to be a formalism brought up to date from

to the great formalizations of the 19th century and especially Nadar’s."

Speaking in 1978, Mapplethorpe explained the look he sought in his works: “Quality is so

important to me that I want everything in focus. I want the shadows to fall in the right places,

for few of Mapplethorpe’s early framed Polaroids, but to all of his later works, and — aside from the

perpendicular lines — to a good number of portraits by Nadar.

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Mishchenko's *Prismen* (cat. 7–10), we perceive the precise placement of the figure's arms and legs; we sense the coiled tension in his powerful body. The artificiality of the pose, setting, and illumination neatly transform the figure into a bronze statue, an analog often made by Mapplethorpe about his African-American models.118 The camera records every slight variation on the surface, even the tiniest threads of flesh. The model takes his pose inside a prop that recalls a Minimalist sculpture. The square photograph frames a perfectly square structure whose opening defines a black circle. Nothing indicates time or place: no clothing, no background, no natural lighting. Indeed, as in his still lives and portraits, Mapplethorpe isolated, distanced, and amplified what he saw as the primary nature of his subject.

We know from interviews that Mapplethorpe was “looking for perfection in form.” In the context of his statements and works, this does not mean that the photographer sought to find and reproduce perfect forms found in nature. He found perfection instead in the best of his works, in which he felt that everything was unquestionably in its right place. But especially for these pictures, at least one question remains: Why did Mapplethorpe find them perfect? The answer must lie in the photographs themselves and, perhaps, in Mapplethorpe’s words. One of his favorite works, he told friends, was Thomas (cat. 3–6).119 Even though he felt that nothing about the picture could be questioned or moved, Mapplethorpe still believed that he could extend the power of his original photograph. He created a unique version of Thomas: a platinum print on linen, framed together with a leopard-skin fabric (1987, fig. 25).120 Mapplethorpe placed this in his living room, flanked by two pieces of tribal art (cat. 11). The very display emphasizes its formality and intensity.

Beyond the staged quality of Thomas, the photograph evinces a fundamental characteristic of Mapplethorpe’s aesthetic, briefly alluded to in the 1978 interview: “I want . . . lines to be perpendicular.” In most of his mature works, but not in paintings by his contemporaries or by Victorian photographers, all the elements within a work line up perfectly with each other and with the sides of the image itself. The perfectly square image in the viewfinder of the Hasselblad helped Mapplethorpe construct these compositions. Once again, it seems, a technical feature of Mapplethorpe’s camera encouraged him to develop a long-standing interest, a fascination with geometric forms that is evident even in his earliest works. The geometric forms have a prominent place in the decoration of one of Mapplethorpe’s earliest surviving three-dimensional works, a tambourine he made for Patti Smith in 1969.121 Curved and triangular forms proliferated in other works from the late 1960s, such as the collage with Raffaello’s *The Three Graces or the Tie Rack* (1969, Fallers, *Geometry of Form*, fig. 6).122 Mapplethorpe also expressed his interest in shapes beyond the frames he designed for many of his Polaroids. Geometric patterns appear in the compositions of some Polaroid pictures, though rarely in those Mapplethorpe framed for display. These patterns abound in many of his later pictures. Most importantly, after 1973, geometric forms provided the very subject and structure of Mapplethorpe’s art, as seen in works like Thomas.

Mapplethorpe did not merely scatter circles, squares, and diagonals throughout his works. The use of these reflected a fundamental shift in his aesthetic. Mapplethorpe abandoned the busy, often baroque appearance of his juvenilia; his geometric forms became clean and sharp, his works austere. To find a source of inspiration for Mapplethorpe’s attention to geometric forms, we need only look at the work that he hung next to his Cameron photograph in his living room: a grid painting by Brice Marden, one of the leading Minimalist painters. Marden was a decade younger than Mapplethorpe, from the early 1970s, a close friend and neighbor of Mapplethorpe. Over the years, the photographer took several portraits of Marden, his wife, and their children. In one early example (1976, inv. 145), he carefully positioned Brice Marden just off center and balanced the composition with a cardboard rectangular box that recalls one of the painter’s works.123 In that period, Marden was creating monochromatic panels, usually horizontal, and often united in compositions of two or three. Though Mapplethorpe never shared Marden’s interest in pure abstraction, his photographs show a similar interest in rigid and pristine form. The way *The Good Soil*, 1978 (inv. 21) is divided, Levas observed, “It’s like one of those Brice Marden works on its side.” Lynn Davis recognized a Minimalist aesthetic in the backgrounds of many of Mapplethorpe’s photographs, such as *Philip Glass and Robert Wilson*. An even more obvious connection between Mapplethorpe and Minimalism appears in his sculptures like *Arrow Cross*. “I wanted to make just a pure statement of defining space on the wall.”124 The artist’s words nearly echo opinions voiced by Donald Judd, who was a founder of Minimalism and an artist whom, according to Mapplethorpe, he saw as having cited his work as an influence. In their simplicity, their use of industrial materials, and above all their concentration on Form, Mapplethorpe’s sculptures make fitting companions to Tony Smith’s *Throne* (1969). The prominent work in molten Minimalist sculpture, was eventually displayed in Mapplethorpe’s home (inv. 164) after he inherited *Throne* and two other works by Tony Smith upon the death of Wadge.125
Long before meeting Mapplethorpe, Wagstaff had earned a reputation for organizing extremely innovative and influential exhibitions of Minimalist art. He had a decisive impact on Tony Smith’s career as a sculptor. Wagstaff persuaded Smith to “put them in real time,” that is, to create works that were in constant evolution and not merely static objects. Wagstaff, who, in the mid-1970s, was not only a collector but also a curator, had an intimate understanding of the Minimalist movement and its key artists, including Smith. Wagstaff’s interest in Smith’s work was not only aesthetic but also philosophical. Smith’s sculptures, with their emphasis on form and materiality, were a perfect fit for Wagstaff’s vision of a museum dedicated to the expression of pure forms. Wagstaff’s relationship with Smith was characterized by a deep mutual respect and admiration. Smith referred to Wagstaff as “the great sculptor” and Wagstaff as “the great minimalist.”

Throughout his career, Wagstaff was a vocal advocate for the Minimalist movement and its artists. He was instrumental in the development of the movement and played a key role in the establishment of the Dia Center for the Arts, one of the first institutions dedicated to contemporary art. Wagstaff’s influence extended beyond the art world, as he was a key figure in the promotion of Minimalist art in other fields, including music and literature. His commitment to the movement was evident in his collection of Minimalist art, which included works by artists such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Dan Flavin. Wagstaff’s collection was not only a reflection of his personal tastes but also a commentary on the state of contemporary art.

In conclusion, Wagstaff was a visionary and a trailblazer in the world of contemporary art. His contributions to the Minimalist movement were immeasurable, and his legacy continues to inspire artists and scholars alike. Wagstaff’s death in 1992 was a significant loss for the art world, but his impact will be remembered for generations to come.
Mapplethorpe did not know this, but he was certainly familiar with the opinion stated by Lyon belledi: "I was trying to telephoto female beauty, to make a new statement about female power and strength. … I had this vision of an animal body, neither masculine nor feminine, but feline."156

Just before his quote about muscular women, Mapplethorpe made a comment suggesting a significant connection with Michelangelo: "If I had been born one hundred or two hundred years ago, I might have been a sculptor, but photography is a very quick way to see, to make sculpture." Mapplethorpe suggested that Michelangelo had established a point of reference for the extraordinarily sculptural quality of his mature work, which far exceeds anything found in his Polichinello or in photographs taken by his contemporaries.157 Though some of Mapplethorpe’s early works show sculptures, the images themselves are not particularly sculptural. In another interview, Mapplethorpe observed, "I see things like sculpture… It’s about how that form sits in space and I think that kind of approach comes from my… an historical training."158 That training certainly included study of the most famous sculptor in the Western world. Later, during the period occasionally included muscular men, but rarely if ever did he show them as compressed in their dynamic plasticity contributes to the intensity of Mapplethorpe’s mature works. This, combined with a Minimalist sense of austere structure, allowed the photographer to create perfection in form.

... while stating that he was searching for Form. Mapplethorpe even said, “My whole point is to transcend the subject … go beyond the subject somehow, so that the composition, the lighting, d’arte altrea. Siamo, quindi, di fronte a un’elaborazione di un approccio presente solo nel periodo giovanile. In altri casi, somigliante piuttosto generale nelle pose hanno lasciato campo libero agli studiosi, che hanno proposto vari collegamenti. E il caso di James, avvicinandosi a qualcuno al solo nome toscano di Michelangelo di, o dell’immagine con James, 1979 (cat. 70), passando alla Marrò di Marrò di David.153 Pari Smith sostiene nientemeno questa interpretazione: “Robert non cerca di stabilire questo tipo di riferimenti nelle sue opere. Seppure, mentre creava James, Ford, Mapplethorpe avesse avuto a mente il prologo David, non vi è motivo di credere che il fotografo, sentendosi alla ricerca dell’originalità, puntasse alla riconoscibilità della forma.

Tuttavia, in una delle tante interviste, Mapplethorpe fece riferimento all’arte di Michelangelo come precedente ideale per il proprio lavoro di artista. Anch’egli in questo caso, come in quello dell’interesse del fotografo per Man Ray, sembra che la critica non abbia mai chiesto a Mapplethorpe di esprimersi sul suo interesse per Michelangelo. Il riferimento al grande scultore emerse solo una volta, in una conversazione registrata: “L’Arte di Michelangelo, perché lui fa cose da donna muscolose.”159 Di certo, prima dell’apparire delle opere di Michelangelo. L’artista dava vita a un’immagine con James, 1979 (cat. 70), passeggiando alla Marrò di Marrò di David.153 Pari Smith sostiene nientemeno questa interpretazione: “Robert non cerca di stabilire questo tipo di riferimenti nelle sue opere. Seppure, mentre creava James, Ford, Mapplethorpe avesse avuto a mente il prologo David, non vi è motivo di credere che il fotografo, sentendosi alla ricerca dell’originalità, puntasse alla riconoscibilità della forma.

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The photograph affirms the virility of the specific person while transforming his faceless figure. Perhaps this is one of the paradoxes of Mapplethorpe’s art. The titles, which are the only words Mapplethorpe ever wrote about his works, the titles, reveal his interest in the nominal subjects. Though he shared James Whistler's interest in figurative images with a high degree of abstraction, Mapplethorpe never called one of his portraits “untitled.” Rather, with each title, he drew the viewer's attention to the identity of the subject in the day-to-day world, outside the world of an art. Thus, the titles are not just an inventory; they are a reminder of the subject's existence. Mapplethorpe succeeded in creating something new and meaningful.

Fig. 27  Robert Mapplethorpe

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Fig. 28  Robert Mapplethorpe

Mapplethorpe emphasized both the nominal and the transcended subjects. In this way, there retrieves the fundaments of Mapplethorpe’s artistic method. In Mona Lisa (Fig. 7) and Race Riot (Fig. 8), the Pop artist expected us to recognize his sources and appreciate how he had used them to create something new.

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Fig. 29  Robert Mapplethorpe

Mapplethorpe often identified even the fragment of a figure—an arm, a hand, or a leg—with the title. With each title, he drew the viewer’s attention to the identity of the subject in the day-to-day world, outside the world of an art. Thus, the titles are not just an inventory; they are a reminder of the subject’s existence. Mapplethorpe succeeded in creating something new and meaningful.

Fig. 30  Robert Mapplethorpe

Mapplethorpe never created truly abstract works. The photographer remained wedded to the subjects, rarely veiling them in abstract forms. In his Tunnel (1983, cat. 87) and Race Riot (Fig. 8), the Pop artist expected us to recognize his sources and appreciate how he had used them to create something new.

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Fig. 34  Robert Mapplethorpe
The figures in the end panels, nearly mirror images, both turn their bodies inward; their attributes (calla lilies, a branch of thorns) curve toward the center. The elements in this modern polyptych in one of his most famous photographs, Mapplethorpe referred not to bilateral symmetry, given that the subjects in his photographs and contrast between a black man and a white man. He created the composition, in which the two figures can be depicted as a black, eroticized male. In its daring depiction of Christ, and even in its presentation, the Titus Mosaic piece recalls the Seven Words, 1989 (cat. 76) and F Holland Day. But here, in and in all his works, Mapplethorpe used a highly personal visual language, utile different from that of earlier artists.

In one of his most famous photographs, Ken Moody and Robert Sherman, 1984 (cat. 73), Mapplethorpe played close to the edge of racism, given that the very subject is the comparison between a black man and a white man. He created the composition, in which the two truths of his time through the use of timeless forms and figures, compositions and articulations. His obsession with symmetry be seen as proof of this concern.”

Unlike Neoclassical artists, however, Mapplethorpe did not use his rarefied visual language to make grand pronouncements. He repeated in an interview about his little-known Titus Mosaic piece, 1989 (cat. 76), one of several works by different artists commissioned to commemorate the 1980 earthquake in Naples. “I take pictures without trying to make a specific statement. I could say only that the basic statement I make with my work is that it’s about today. Even the Titus Mosaic piece, which is somewhat old-fashioned, and very formal, would have never been made before the Eighties.”

The work consists of five panels, plus a self-portrait with a knife (1989, fig. 85). “The center panel was taken in front of a Naples church. The others were taken in different studio shootings, then put together into one piece, with the Titus Mosaic project in mind.” When first presented, the overall composition and much of the imagery must have appeared “old-fashioned and very formal.” The figures in the end panels, nearly mirror images, both turn their bodies inward; their attributes (calla lilies, a branch of thorns) curve toward the center. The elements in this modern polyptych probably reflect the workshop Mapplethorpe saw in Neapolitan churches, specifically the images of Christ, Mary Magdalene, angels, flowers, and thorns.174 Certainly, Mapplethorpe often cited his experience of a church every week at his local Catholic church in Queens. “A church has a certain magic, which he also defined as “passion,”176 through the perfection of his forms. As early as 1968, in a letter to Patti Smith, he played on the edge of sacrilege, forcing us to ask if a religious tableau approach that the Church has.”173

In this case the photographer played at the limits of sacrilege, indulging the public to demand to see if a religious theme, which he defined as a “magic”174 through the perfection of the forms. As early as in 1968, in a letter to Patti Smith, he played on the edge of sacrilege, forcing us to ask if a religious tableau approach that the Church has.”173

The symmetry in the pictures … somehow came out of these early experiences. … The way I arrange things is somehow parallel to a tableau approach that the Church has.”174

Here, Mapplethorpe refers not to bilateral symmetry, given that the subjects in his photographs frequently appear off center. Instead, everything is set down in a specific place, for a specific reason; nothing can be moved. Mapplethorpe perceived the existence of a second order as a child, when he attended Mass every week at his local Catholic church in Queens. “A church has a certain magic and mystery for a child,” he recalled. “It still shows in how I arrange things. It’s always a little dark.”175 As an artist, Mapplethorpe recreated that sense of ritual and stylization in his art. When asked if he considered himself a spiritual person, Mapplethorpe replied, “Not in the normal sense of the word – I believe in certain kinds of magic. Sort of an abstract sense of magic. I think there’s a magic that can invest photography sessions.”177 Mapplethorpe sought to transmit this magic, which he also defined as “passion,”176 through the perfection of his forms. As early as in 1968, in a letter to Patti Smith, he played on the edge of sacrilege, forcing us to demand to see if a religious theme, which he defined as a “magic”174 through the perfection of the forms. As early as in 1968, in a letter to Patti Smith, he played on the edge of sacrilege, forcing us to ask if a religious tableau approach that the Church has.”173

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Un po’ vecchio stile e assai formale. Le figure nei pannelli collocati ai due estremi, che si presentano quasi come immagini speculari, hanno si al corpo si attribuisce (la calla e il ramo di rovi) orientarsi verso il centro della composizione. I vari elementi di questa sorta di moderna politica rimandano probabilmente alle pale d’altare che Mapplethorpe posò vedere nelle chiese di Napoli e, in particolare, le immagini di Cristo, Maria Maddalena, angeli, fiori e spine175. Sicuramente egli faccia spesso riferimento al fatto che il suo background cattolico aveva esercitato un influsso significativo sulla sua estetica. «Un certo approccio alle mie foto ricorda un senso cristiano, ha a che fare con la ritualità… la simmetria delle immagini mi dà qualche cosa di magico e di misterioso… il modo in cui dispongo gli oggetti in qualche modo recapitato l’approccio al tavolo che ha la Chiesa»176. Qui, ovviamente, Mapplethorpe non si riferisce alla simmetria bilaterale, dato che i soggetti delle sue foto spesso sono in posizione senz’altro, quanto al fatto che tutto è collocato in un posto particolare per un motivo specifico e niente può essere spostato. Da piccolo, Mapplethorpe aveva percepito l’esistenza di un ordinato divino, dove ogni sentima andava a messa nella chiesa cattolica del quartiere, il Queens. «Per un ragazzo la chiesa ha qualcosa di magico e di misterioso”, egli ricorderà. “Emerge ancora nel modo in cui dispongo le cose. Sono sempre come piccoli altari177. Con la sua sensibilità da artista, Mapplethorpe cercava di riproporre nella propria arte queste temi della ritualità e della stilizzazione. Quando gli fu chiesto se si considerava la spiritualità vicina alla spiritualità, il fotografo rispose: “Non nel senso letterale della parola. Credo in certe forme di magia, di trasmettere questa magia, che egli definiva anche “passione”178. Già nel 1968, in una lettera a Patti Smith, egli paragonava l’arte di disegnare a quello di essere tenuto per mano da Dio179. Ne conosce molte caratteristiche di Titus Mosaic dove stato di stare, come abbiamo già accennato, l’interesse si risentiva del tono assolutamente moderno e originale. Mapplethorpe osservava: “Anche se il teatro nella foto centrale è stato per secoli la fascinazione di quella chiesa, esso non è mai stato giustapposto nel modo in cui si vede qui”. Possiamo solo concordare. A sinistra di esso il “cappello di Cristo” si trova con un disegno di spino180. Lo stesso si può dire per Dennis Spiegel, il fotografo afro - americano che appare nei due pannelli più esterni. Nelle pose e negli attributi egli ricorda certi angeli rinascimentali e barocchi, come la statua della vergine, le muscolature e i genitali piuttosto prominenti accostano al contrasto con quei prototipi. Sebbene Mapplethorpe tendesse a trascendere i soggetti delle sue foto, alla sua stessa tempo faccia in modo di attrarre su di essi l’attenzione della spettatore. In questo caso il fotografo gioca ai limiti del sacrilego, inducendo il pubblico a domandarsi se davvero una figura religiosa possa essere rappresentata da un uomo di colore fortemente eziatore. Per la presenza di questa audace raffigurazione di Cristo, nonché per il modo di presentarla tutta l’opera, Terre Motus ricorda la serie, 1984 (cat. 80) di F Holland Day. Tuttavia, in questo caso come in tutte le sue foto, Mapplethorpe si ritrova ai confini con il sacro, giocando proprio sul confronto-contrasto tra un nero e un bianco. Egli creò una composizione nella quale i due uomini, perfettamente di profilo, guardano nella stessa direzione. Moody e Sherman, entrambi colpiti da eloquenza, erano completamente glabri. Per mezzo dell’illuminazione soffusa e delle diffusione, Mapplethorpe provvedeva a eliminare qualsiasi imperfezione della pelle. Tutti questi fattori contribuiscono a dare l’impressione che il fotografo avesse trasformato i modelli in carne e ossa in una, di blanco e di muro di marmo. In questa opera, in particolare, molti storici dell’arte hanno voluto leggere un
men face the same direction in perfect profile. Moody and Sherman both had the rare condition of alopecia, which left them completely hairless. Mapplethorpe erased any of their skin imperfections through the use of diffusion and soft lighting. All these factors contribute to the impression that Mapplethorpe transformed these living models into statues, one of bronze and one of marble. Especially in this work, many art historians have searched for the cultural statements that Mapplethorpe always denied making. According to one scholar’s interpretation, “Black Karens” series, in which the models are closed eyes, white Robert’s are open, as if to suggest that the black symbolizes the unconscious which the white fears.178 Moody laughed off such interpretations. “But the black man in the back and close his eye, that sounds like something that is, really, really intense. But I was supposed to be in front, only I didn’t have a long enough neck. I had trouble keeping my eyes open because I was always blinking my eyes, so Robert [Mapplethorpe] said, ’Ken, close your eyes’.” Poor Robert. And his take on this was . . . that people overanalyzed. He would shake his head [and say], ‘I was just trying to do a cool picture.’”

In a recent essay, appropriately subtitled “The Point of View of the Art Historian,” Robert Rosenblum reconsidered this work. “With flesh pressing inexorably against flesh, the image Before a wall covered with dimly visible graffiti, a man crouches in a cube of light. His black leather mask, pants, and gloves create a rather sinister atmosphere, accentuated by the shadowy setting. He grasps a ladder that dominates the left side of the work, its rungs creating a series of horizontals exactly parallel to the upper and lower sides of the cube. The man gazes off to the side, his squinting eyes, and even his clothing create an impression of compact energy; a striking contrast to the rigid geometry. Recently the curator Keith Hartley compared Jim to a devil found in a medieval depiction of hell. “He is not, however, lost and damned forever. … The fact that he has his arms on the rungs of the ladder suggests that he may be about to climb out of the Stygian darkness to the light above.”185

“Ma io cercavo solo di fare una foto figa.”

Il punto di vista di uno storico dell’arte dell’opera è indirizzato collettivamente il fotografo, ma contemporaneamente, con della stoffa viola? (cfr. il saggio di Marshall, Fig. 10). “Forse Mapplethorpe gioca con le antiche connotazioni cromatiche della rarietà e del lusso, collegate alla regalità”183. Di sicuro né le parole di Mapplethorpe né i commenti della sua cerchia di amici contribuiscono a supportare simili interpretazioni. Al margine egli ricorda agli oggetti presenti nelle sue fotografie un ruolo evocativo di una certa atmosfera. Nel 1983 disse, commentando una delle sue foto ehe compiva una parola: “Penso sia un’immagine contemporanea… Nell’aria c’è una certa violenza, che fa parte dell’azione. Sicuramente non l’apporre ma altro contesto che è l’aria.” Se uno si trovasse a dover dare una definizione all’arte, come faccia in – così un’intreccio di quel particolare momento – allora in qualche modo la componente violenta dovrebbe esercitarsi.”184 Dunque le armi, come altri oggetti spesso raffigurati, realmente assumono un ruolo simbolico nelle foto di Mapplethorpe. Il senso di minaccia per una violenza incombonente rende Jim, Szalda (cat. 142), realizzata nel 1977, un’immagine che inciampa spavento. Un uomo accostato appare come all’istante di un colpo di luce, davanti a una coperta di grafia appena visibili. La maschera, i pantaloni e i guanti in pelle nera creano un’atmosfera misteriosa, accentuata dalle ombre sullo sfondo. La figura è aggregata alla scala che domina il lato sinistro dell’opera, dove i pioli crearono una serie di linee orizzontali, perfettamente parallele ai lati superiore e inferiore del cubo. Lo spazio tridimensionale dell’opera, la posa accosciata dell’artista e uno degli oggetti che sempre perde e danno . . . Il fatto che abbia la braccia appoggiate ai pioli della scala suggerisce che egli starebbe per emergere dall’oscurità dello Stige, verso la luce che lo sovrasta.”

A parte i commenti storici, che Mapplethorpe volle presentare questo tipo venne di tutta la cultura come un Danzante – dato che sta, come in molte altre opere, l’autrice celebrava il mondo satanico – tale interpretazione sembra voler suggerire che la fotografia incarna un allusione moralizzante. Ma, come sosteneva convincentemente Germano Celant, il fotografo manifestò voler sfruttare il riscontro al “simbolico”. La metafora doveva fare espressione innata. Anzitutto quindi delle allegorie e idealizzazioni, di astuta mitologia e di mentalismo impersonalizzato.”

Aside from the impossibility that Mapplethorpe wanted us to see this leisuresman as damned, (here, as in many works, the artist glorifies the S&M world), this interpretation suggests that Mapplethorpe wanted to capture the moment when nature appeared most artificial. The symbolic associations of triangles, lozenges, and pentagons take us far from the meaning, beauty, and importance of Mapplethorpe's works. The logic of these pictures seem to the tight balance between Form and Content.

Abstract images are open to many varying interpretations. In modern art photography, one established way to link abstract images with content was proposed by Alfred Stieglitz. As described by his follower, Minor White, an artist should use abstract natural forms as “equivalents” for human actions and emotions. In a constructivist analysis of Mapplethorpe’s, his friend Ingrid Sischy argued that Mapplethorpe showed no interest in this approach. “Instead of photographing rocks to suggest sex,” Sischy observed, “he prefers to use nature to create an atmosphere.” Stieglitz observed, “But his nature appears to have been naturalized.” Ingrid Sischy, in an analysis convincingly of the opera of his amico Mapplethorpe, considers that the photographer never used flowers as vehicles of sexual allusion, because he worked with sex directly. “Le immagini astratte aprono la strada a una molteplicità di possibili interpretazioni. Nell’ambito di un’analisi affascinante dell’opera del suo amico Mapplethorpe, la fotografa, che spesso faceva riferimento ai fondamenti paralleli tra foto di soggetto sessuale e fiori, non ci ha mai detto che un tema e una forma potevano essere usati come simboli dell’altro. C’è in ogni caso una sua sottile ma massiccia che Mapplethorpe amava recitare: ‘Il mio approccio quando fotografo un fiore non si discosta da quello che ho adottato per fotografare un uomo’.” (Arthur Danto, “La vera sfida consiste nel prendere vari periodi e culture dispersi e la composizione. Non fa tanta differenza. Corrisponde a una stessa visione.”

In one interview Mapplethorpe referred to “the three areas of my work: still lifes, sexuality, and portraits.” He thus confounded “heads” and “sex pictures,” which most critics consider to be separate categories. To underline the fundamental similarities in these works, Mapplethorpe always tried to show them together. When he designed a screen in 1986, he adorned it with many photographs, including flowers and both male and female nudes, though no portraits. In Mapplethorpe’s choice of his own choice of photographs in 1986, he uses a range of imagery: flowers, trees, and portraits. Mapplethorpe also included works of art from vastly different periods and cultures. In an article about his home, the photographer is quoted as saying, “The real challenge is to make many and come up with an aesthetic that run through them all.”

More typical is a famous photograph of Mapplethorpe’s, the cover of Patti Smith’s Horses. Most viewers overlook the illuminated triangle. It was used natural lighting to create striking effects in many later works. An examination of the contact sheets for the portrait of the photographer Robert Wilson (1976, cat. 29) reveals that he set up his figures in his studio where the sunlight formed a parallelogram or a motif of a losanga sul pavimento. In contrast, the artist extended his walking cane decorated with a skull, clearly symbolic of his impending death.

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In one of his last portraits with the Hasselblad, the portrait of the musician John McLaughlin 1975 (fig. 4), may well have been a “deliberate exercise in double entendre.” One of his last self-portraits, from 1988 (cat. 108), shows Mapplethorpe in the background, dressed entirely in black so that his body virtually disappears. The artist extends his walking cane decorated with a skull, clearly symbolic of his impending death. Mapplethorpe also used natural lighting to create striking effects in many later works. An examination of the contact sheets for the portrait of the photographer Robert Wilson (1976, cat. 29) reveals that he set up his figures in his studio where the sunlight formed a parallelogram or a motif of a losanga sul pavimento. In contrast, the artist extended his walking cane decorated with a skull, clearly symbolic of his impending death.

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in terms of this exhibition, Mapplethorpe made a point of uniting photographs of different subjects for public presentations. Already in his first exhibition, in 1973, Mapplethorpe included examples of the three areas he would explore for the rest of his life: still lifes, sexuality, and portraits; these last being, in that show, of himself and Patti Smith. He also had no hesitation about removing works that some might find offensive. Smith recalls the event in detail: when Mapplethorpe knew his mother was coming to see the exhibit, he took down some of the more explicit sex images and replaced them with flowers. This led one member of the “Whashul crowd” to snore, “Oh, here’s the photographer who never compromises; now he compromises when his mother comes.” Mapplethorpe replied that he didn’t understand anything; the subject was the same if it was a photo of sex or a flower.

The photographer was aware that some galleries and museums preferred to avoid showing certain explicit images. Throughout his career, Mapplethorpe repeatedly expressed the view that this did not disturb him.204 In 1978, he agreed to “tone down” a show on “male sexuality” that he planned to do in San Francisco. In an interview later that year, Mapplethorpe drew a distinction between paired examples of his sex pictures. In reference to the two versions of 

\[\text{Pierre} 1977.\]

Patrice, “It’s not really a book about photography. It’s a book about him.”205 As for the 1978 exhibition in San Francisco, Mapplethorpe explained that the show in San Francisco included works that “were only suggestive, they weren’t explicit; a cock in a jockstrap as opposed to a cock outside a jockstrap.”206 Roland Barthes evidently knew of only the “suggestive” version included in the X portfolio (1978), when he defended Mapplethorpe in his book on photography (1980). “Mapplethorpe shifts his close-ups of genitalia from the pornographic to the erotic by photographing the fabric of underwear at very close range.”207 Roland Barthes himself had little interest in attempting to differentiate between pornographic and erotic works. “I don’t like the word ‘erotic.’ I think it’s pretentious: ‘Erotic Art.’ Either it’s art or it’s not art.”208 He also expressed little interest in Barthes’s study. As Mapplethorpe astutely noted, “It’s not really a book about photography. It’s a book about him.”209 As for the 1978 exhibition in San Francisco, Mapplethorpe lamented that if there had only been flowers and portraits, the author of one highly critical review “probably would have liked the show, but she couldn’t even see beyond those few suggestive photographs.”210 The following year he observed, “It is amusing how you put up a show where only one-third of it has to do with sexuality, people will dismiss just everything else and talk about that.”211 At the end of his life, Mapplethorpe felt that his mother was coming to see the exhibit, he took down some of the more explicit sex images and replaced them with flowers. This led one member of the “Whashul crowd” to snore, “Oh, here’s the photographer who never compromises; now he compromises when his mother comes.” Mapplethorpe replied that he didn’t understand anything; the subject was the same if it was a photo of sex or a flower.

This disappointment did not stop Mapplethorpe from organizing exhibitions that promoted his unified vision. “When I’ve exhibited pictures … I’ve tried to juxtapose a flower, then a picture of a cock, then a portrait, so that you would see they are all the same. I just would like people to be able to get the real meaning.”212 At the end of his life, Mapplethorpe felt that his way of presenting sex pictures had not been successful. “I thought people’s eyes would be opened, but it wasn’t. I always showed with other pictures … My intent was to open people’s eyes, get them to realize anything can be acceptable. It’s not what it is, it’s the way it’s photographed. It has made people hate the flowers and hate the people in the pictures. I did not intend that at all.”213 At least the authors of many essays, both positive and negative, have agreed that Mapplethorpe’s work “outdoes the boundaries of public taste.”214

The present exhibition brings together, in each section, photographs of still lifes, nudes, and portraits, in a sequence that puts the emphasis on their formal qualities, not on their chronology. It focuses less on the subjects themselves but on the way they were photographed. These works evoke Mapplethorpe’s search for intense, ordered beauty.

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Il tuo testo
Chamorro, 1988. Forse Wagstaff conosceva l’intervista inedita a Mapplethorpe del Wolf, 2008, 52, fig. 32, riteneva che l’immagine ritraesse una persona sconosciuta, 135

Immediately to the right appears to be a Robbiand Islands wooden ceremonial
124 Mapplethorpe applied the same approach to
Kardon, 1988, 25.
120 Wolf, 2008, 48–49, fig. 28.

129 Horton, 1986. He continued, “I think one of the problems with many
127 Mapplethorpe’s friends and assistants confirm that the photographer preferred

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Pete Seeger, di cui si diceva fosse una copia di amicizia, che aveva riconfermato la sua
tematica negli anni successivi. Hershkovits, 1983, 10. For

so many in the creation of this figure four times in different colors. For a discussion and reproduction,
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In four, the subject appears in profile; in one he is frontal. According to Levas,
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