

Aesthetics, form, and details

Robert Mapple- thorpe

The year 2016 flies by as a silent Robert Mapplethorpe year all around from Europe to America. With the first half of the year behind, a new Mapplethorpe exhibition is added on top of two comprehensive ones in America's two large museums. On the occasion of the Robert Mapplethorpe 1979 – 1989 exhibition at Galeri Nev in Istanbul, open until the 31st of July, we pieced together the headlines of the artist's visual world.

Words Sami Kısaoğlu

Few artists lived their lives in front of the public eye like Robert Mapplethorpe did at the last quarter of the 20th century. And few artists led mind practices in the artistic field to change, to transform with what they took away from the lives they lived. As a signature behind the widely discussed, hell raising, investigated photographs from 1975 until his death in 1989 at the age of 42, Mapplethorpe succeeded in two things, maybe unexpectedly. With his works that emulated Antique Greece, and sought the excellent, he played a major role in photography being accepted as a branch of art; he also caused the change of the conventional points of view in photography through his selection of subjects. Mapplethorpe took his position in the stage of art history during a period when photography was perceived as an academic discipline in American universities, and a branch of art in the museums; the first photography auction took place at the Sotheby's in NY in 1975; and Susan Sontag's *On Photography* was published in 1977. This period when the artist started his commercial career as a photographer also corresponds to the same period when the sexual revolution took place in the

societal sense, America's most famous gay bar Stonewall Inn was busted by the police, significant protests took place, and New York's first gay movie theater opened its doors. All of this was sure to have various reflections on his art in the years to come. His relationship to poet and rock musician Patti Smith as a lover, and then a friend, his relationship to American curator, and collector Sam Wagstaff as a friend and then a lover, were also to become diversely inspiring experiences in his short life.

Mapplethorpe has always been a much-debated artist with his male and female portraits highly stylized, his nudes referencing the Antique Greek, and Roman sculpture art, *nature morte* series with erotic connotations, self-portraits, his shots of sado-masochism variations, and the scenery he transferred from the gay culture of the 1970's. A couple of months before his death on the 9th of March, 1989, his touring exhibition entitled *Perfect Moment* at Philadelphia's The Institute of Contemporary Art put him under the spotlight of major debate yet again. The exhibition where over 150 works from photo-collages, to polaroids, and to gelatin silver prints, etc. produced

with diverse techniques from different periods of his 25-year career were shown, was to take place in 5 more museums in the USA yet things didn't really carry on as planned. While the fact that this exhibition was pursued with public budget was highly criticized at the American Congress, The Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington D.C) dismissed the agreement two weeks before the exhibition upon the reaction they received. His XYZ portfolios at the *Perfect Moment* exhibition, which were subject to the obscenity lawsuit started against an art center and its director for the first time in American art history (Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati), were made up of 3 main headlines. The (X) that took gay sado masochism as a subject, the (Y) made up of flower *nature mortes*, and the (Z) that included naked portraits of Afro-American men.

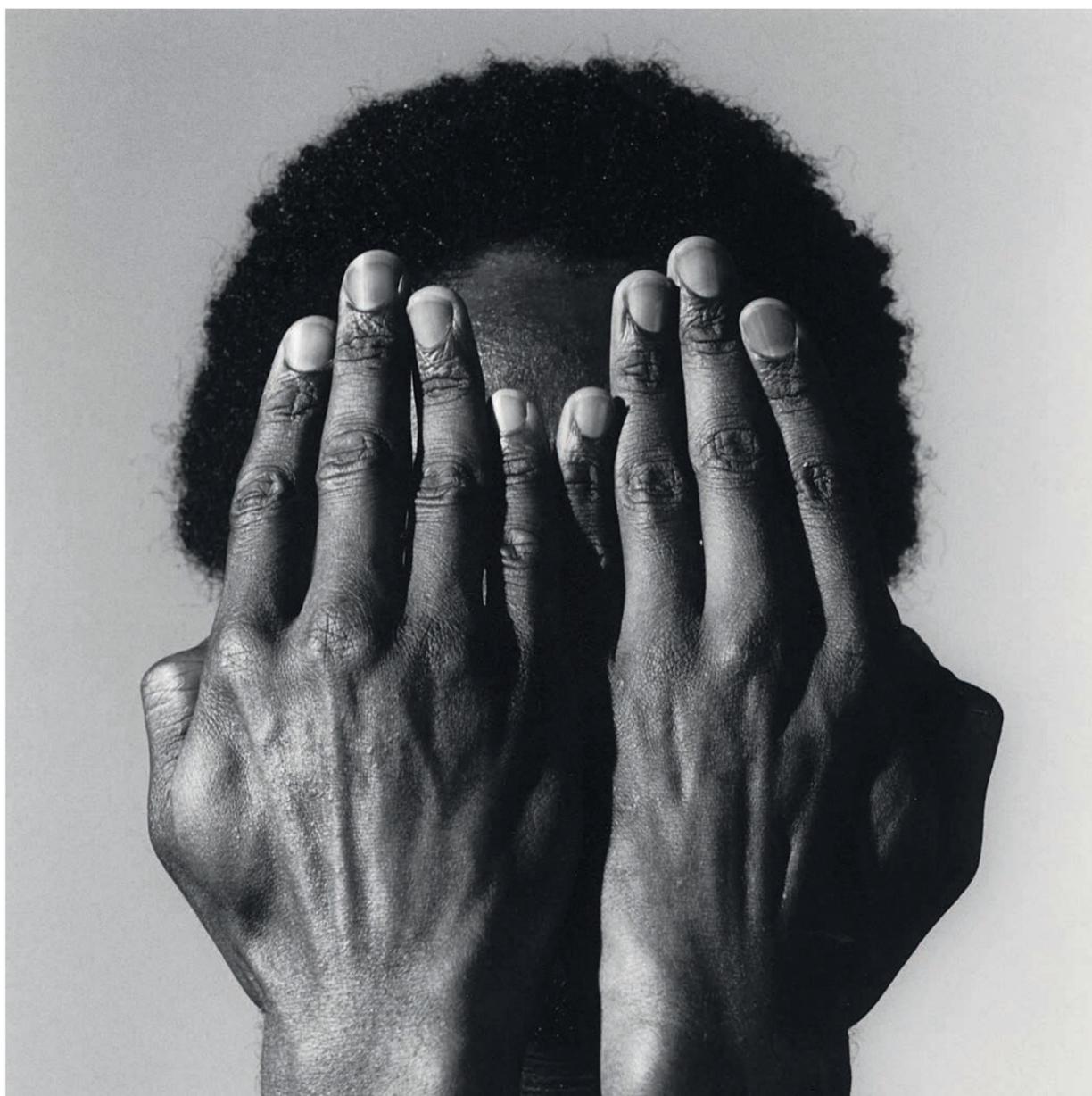
Mapplethorpe 25 years after *Perfect Moment*

For Mapplethorpe who is yet again on the agenda of the art world with the two concurrent retrospectives in memory of the *Perfect Moment* exhibition that completed its 25th year, and the events that took place around it, 2016 is almost

like a year dedicated to him. The exhibition entitled *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium* that J. Paul Getty Museum, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art hosts until the 31st of July is surely the foundation of the quietly developed Mapplethorpe year. While one of Paris' major galleries, the Galerie Thaddaeus Ropas, showcases the artist's stirring series XYZ under the title *Robert Mapplethorpe: XYZ*, the English publishing house Phaidon presented to its readers a book including the flower photographs he took from 1973 until 1989. Besides the 368-pages specially bound book *Mapplethorpe Flora: The Complete Flowers*, the *Mapplethorpe* documentary directed by Fenton Bailey, and Randy Barbato is also touring festivals around the world. Named after American senator Jesse Helms' critical exclamation, *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Picture*, the documentary was shown at the Sundance and Berlin film festivals as well as the If Istanbul film festival.

What brought the artist, remembered by the international art world via various events, under the spotlight of the local art scene after 5 years is the exhibition at Galeri Nev in Istanbul that opened its

His portraits of Philip Glass to Arnold Schwarzenegger as a studio photographer, led Mapplethorpe to gain recognition.



TOP: ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE, ALISTAIR BUTTLER, 1980, SILVER GELATIN, 20X16 INCH, EDITION 15/15, COURTESY ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE FOUNDATION

LEFT TOP: ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE, HAND, 1980, SILVER GELATIN, 20X16 INCH, COURTESY OF ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE FOUNDATION

LEFT BOTTOM: ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE, HANDS, 1981, SILVER GELATIN, 20X16 INCH, EDITION AP 2/2, COURTESY OF ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE FOUNDATION

doors on the 3rd of June. Curated by Serra Yentürk, and focusing on the artist's quest for form rather than the established works, the exhibition of 36 black and white photographs, is consisted of body images, outdoor shots, portraits, and *nature mortes*. As a selection from the 10.000 photographs of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation's digital archive, the exhibition shows a sequence of the artist's production from the last ten years of his life. The exhibition hunts for his quest for classic form in photography starting with his use of a medium format machine in 1975, and does not include his polaroids that allowed him various experimental opportunities. The purpose of this selection where sculptural and geometric forms are more apparent, and inspection and fiction are in the foreground, is to present a different point of view, and to read his work, otherwise. Another crucial resource is the exhibition *Proportio* that Yentürk visited a couple years ago in Venice. Curated by Axel Vervoordt and Daniela Ferrati, the exhibition founded a structure that lets the proportional parallelisms amongst different disciplines (music, architecture, art, science) during the history of civilization

from the Antique to the contemporary. Observing a similar link in the works of Mapplethorpe, Yentürk wants to draw attention to the artist's unique perception of form in this sense.

It is possible to trace down the beauty that the artist sees in the details in most of the photographs that we get the chance to see in Istanbul, dated to the second period of his career when he runs after eternal beauty. Photographed in studio, close shots of hand, faces, and other body parts make up the most elegant examples of the human body being framed as a form, starting with Edward Weston in the 1920's, and continued with Minor White. Mapplethorpe's view founded with his unique sense of aesthetics, in time, becomes his hallmark. With his poetic point of view, the artist gives a different sense to any object that can be perceived as repellant or ugly by the society. It would be meaningful to end an article on Mapplethorpe, a true radical in his lifestyle, and his works, with the following quote: "I went into photography because it seemed like the perfect vehicle for commenting on the madness of today's existence. I tried to catch this madness, and put it in order."