

# The Kitchen Center for Video and Music

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## ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

bag a few celebrities: Patti Smith, who centered herself against a stark white wall, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who flexed his famous muscles, and John Paul Getty III, who slumped in his poor-boy clothes at the foot of the stairs.

Like many other photographers, Mapplethorpe frequently backs his sitters against a wall or into a corner, virtually trapping them into a confrontation, which may account for their sometimes pouting expressions. Mapplethorpe also favors, and excels at, Vermeer-type side-lighting; his sitters are frequently illuminated by raking sunlight from a window. The lighting is particularly effective in the diptych portraits of Patti Smith (who leans against a wall that is diagonally bisected by sunshine) and Dani Curtis (who preens in front of a tapestry, seeming almost physically contained by a rhomboid of sunlight). Mapplethorpe has a knack for making light palpable in a refreshing, resourceful way that invigorates his compositions.

Just as the portraits update the sleek, high-fashion photography of Horst and George Platt Lynes, Mapplethorpe's erotic pictures appear informed by the put-on perversities of younger photographers like Helmut Newton and Deborah Turbeville. Mapplethorpe's stylized erotica has a brooding, expressionistic quality, due in part to the eccentric leather costumes, which restrain movement or force parts

of the body into unusual positions. While some of these photographs reveal only portions of anatomy, or entire bodies in states of bondage that camouflage the sitter's identity, nearly all are regarded as portraits by Mapplethorpe, who titled them according to subject. One of the more famous faces on view belonged to Peter Berlin, star of the all-male porn film, *Knights in Black Leather*. Skimpily attired in a leather hat, short shorts, and various metal paraphernalia, Berlin evidently relished showing off his Botticelli-type face and lean body as he strutted and postured in a ramshackle elevator with old-fashioned grills; in the resulting photographic triptych, Berlin looks like a caged animal whose attractiveness makes viewers unmindful of potential ferocity.

Marc Stevens, another porn star, had his most celebrated 10½ inches of anatomy featured in a memorable portrait. Only the midsection of Stevens' body is visible as he stands, wearing black leather chaps, leaning his naked torso over a cube, his tumescent phallus extending like a horizon line across the center of the composition. The cube connotes both a pedestal (trophy) and butcher's block (castration). The contrast between the curved body, which constitutes a quadrant, and the cube is coolly erotic, like something out of Ingres—whose presence is felt in the sinuous line and marmoreal texture of the body.

Many of the photographs were elaborately framed in various ways that turned them into a fugitive form of relief structure. For instance, Charles and Jim Kissing consisted of three photographs, arranged vertically to suggest a film strip and framed in wood that was stained violet. A diptych, titled Joe Hart, showing a handcuffed, blindfolded young man trussed up with ropes and chains, had its pair of framed photographs connected by X-shaped crossbars. In addition to the odd frames, the photographs had eye-catching mattes of various colored silks, which resembled a proscenium arch, since they covered only the top and sides of the prints. At first glance, the frames and mattes seemed obtrusive; with familiarity, they came to look no more kinky than the leather and metal costumes worn by the people in the photographs. The frames are, in a sense, another level of costuming. (All the works displayed were unique art objects in which the frame is an integral part. Mapplethorpe also will print the same images in a limited, unframed edition of five.) Collectively, Mapplethorpe's portraits and erotic images reveal a sharply defined sensibility, one that enjoys the absurdity and perversity that prevail in particular strata of society, yet is able to illuminate it for others in a meaningful, memorable way. [Holly Solomon, The Kitchen, February 5-26]

David Bourdon

Robert Mapplethorpe, Mr., 10½, 1977. Photograph. Courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery and The Kitchen.



Bare skin, black leather, rigid poses, trussed-up perils, and a prevailing atmosphere of etiolated eroticism constituted a winning combination for Robert Mapplethorpe, a 30-year-old New York photographer who recently mounted complementary exhibitions at the Holly Solomon Gallery and The Kitchen. The artist's clever announcement for the joint shows unfolded to reveal similar but contrasting photographs of a male hand, writing the "Pictures" on a sheet of paper. One hand was conventionally bare, and attached to a wrist that was routinely garbed in a watch and shirt cuff. The other hand was snugly outfitted in a black leather glove, designed to leave the extremities of the fingers bare, and further accessorized with an S&M-type metal wristband. The bare hand summoned people to the Solomon gallery to view about two dozen portraits, while its gloved counterpart lured the adventurous to the Kitchen to peer at esoteric arrangements of male flesh.

As gallery-goers quickly discovered, the portraits hardly began to qualify as "straight" photography, since the subjects themselves were uncommonly kinky. The sitters included a drug dealer, a composer, a transsexual, dissolute princesses, tops, and other types who obviously relished arranging themselves for the camera. Mapplethorpe even managed to

Robert Mapplethorpe, Patti Smith, N.Y., 1975. Photographs and Diptych. 25 x 23 1/2". Courtesy Holly Solomon Gallery.

