

MAPPLETHORPE: LOOK AT THE PICTURES (TV)

Summary

This documentary explores the life and work of controversial American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe.

The film opens as curators from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and The Getty Museum prepare for a "twin retrospective" of Mapplethorpe's work, noting how he has been both revered and "demonized" for his provocative imagery. Older sister Nancy Rooney describes the siblings' relatively normal childhood in Queens, explaining that her "devilish" and clever brother, who was their mother's favorite of her six children, did not share their father Harry's interest in photography. Robert graduated from high school at 16 and headed to the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn where, still considering photography to be a "lesser art form," got heavily into drugs as he strove to find "what hasn't been done" by other artists. He then created a disturbing project using the skull of his deceased pet monkey, Scratch. Robert and famous musician/artist Patti Smith fell into a "storybook relationship" and moved to the Chelsea Hotel, where they befriended neighbor Sandy Daley and appeared in a nude photograph project entitled "The Garden of Earthly Delights."

Having created various collages and other works from pornographic photographs from magazines, Robert soon began experimenting with photos of his own, though Polaroid film was particularly expensive at the time. Smith was not bothered when Robert entered into a relationship with one of his models, David Croland, and a short film of the pair – with voiceover by Smith – was shown at the Museum of Modern Art, where it intrigued art critic Robert Colacello. Blondie's Debbie Harry, then a waitress at Max's Kansas City nightclub, describes Robert's charm and penchant for gossip. Daley agrees with writer Fran Lebowitz that he developed a powerful sense of ambition. Croland, uninterested in Robert's newfound fascination with S&M, set him up with wealthy curator Sam Wagstaff, who soon bought him a new camera and a loft on the then-seedy and dangerous Bond Street. Though Wagstaff was "slightly embarrassed" to pose for explicit photos, he was awed by Robert's commitment to total honesty in his portrayals of humanity.

Having met Robert on New York's infamous Fire Island, adult film star Peter Berlin notes that Robert was decidedly jealous of his fame and soon sought publication in *Drummer* magazine, which was geared toward the leather subculture of the gay world. Editor Jack Fritscher was intrigued by his work and soon sent Robert to the private island of Mustique in the West Indies, where he met and photographed the likes of fashion designer Carolina Herrera. He frequented the Mineshaft, an "outrageous" gay nightclub in downtown Manhattan that featured a variety of fetish scenes and sexual opportunities, and would often photograph his one-night stands after a wild evening. Journalist Carol Squiers recalls interviewing Robert and being shocked by some of his more explicit sexual images. Robert's brother Edward, who was also a photography student, admits that Robert's behavior caused "tension" with his parents, who were not entirely fooled by his claims of being married to Patti Smith.

Curator Holly Solomon agreed to host a show of Robert's non-S&M-related work, prompting Robert to hold a second show on the same day; he later "gifted" Solomon with a particularly salacious self-portrait. Fritscher, formerly a seminarian, comments on the lingering influence of Robert's Catholic upbringing, explaining that he often "confessed" to Fritscher in letters, and incorporated concepts of saintly martyrdom and torment into his works, even viewing Satan as a "convivial playmate." Marcus Leatherdale compares Robert to a "satyr" and explains that their affectionate relationship went south when he became somewhat famous and stirred Robert's envy. Robert soon hired a staff, including his brother Edward, to help process his many photos; they quickly grew desensitized to his shocking imagery, with Robert explaining that he strove to create "flawless" work despite having little understanding of the technical aspects of photography. As he gradually grew apart from Smith, he grew close to and began photographing bodybuilder Lisa Lyon. He also developed an "obsession" with African-American men, particularly one Milton Moore, whom he believed to have the "perfect" genitalia. "Man in a Polyester Suit," in which a "headless" Moore is depicted in a suit with his genitals exposed, attracted both positive and negative attention, and his work began selling at impressive rates and prices.

After his relationship with Moore fizzled, Robert grew close to the "kind of shy" Jack Walls, who would be his last long-term partner. Ken Moody and Robert Sherman joke about how critics read far too much social criticism into Robert's famous photo of their two bald heads next to one another, explaining that Robert had specific ideas about his models' "perfect positions." He began taking "elegant" celebrity photos and agreeing to pricey commissions, stating that he saw little difference in sexual images and simple pictures of flowers. When both Robert and Edward were invited to show their works in the same show, Edward sadly admits that his brother grew "nasty," even requesting that he change his name to avoid confusion of their pieces.

In September 1986, Robert was diagnosed with "a rare form of cancer," HIV, from which Wagstaff died mere months later. Robert's market increased because of his "death sentence," and he maintained his sense of competition with fellow artist Andy Warhol even after the latter's death in February 1987. Robert shot Princess Gloria von Thurn, Brooke Shields, and others for his "Some Women" project, and Edward took the famous "skull cane" photo of him in 1988. His "proudest day" came with a mid-career retrospective at the Whitney Museum, though some friends describe it as a pre-death memorial, given his waning health; his siblings and parents recall being particularly shocked by some of his more scandalous works. His final show, "The Perfect Moment," debuted in Philadelphia in December 1988, though Robert was too ill to attend. Frightened of his impending death, he threw a "going-away party" for himself and encouraged Croland to tell his biographer "everything" in order to preserve his memory; he died on March 9, 1989 at the age of 42. The "Perfect Moment" show then traveled to other cities and was met with protests, cancellations and even obscenity charges in Cincinnati, though the Contemporary Arts Center director was quickly found not guilty. Robert's fame sky-rocketed post-mortem, in part because of the controversy; his estate was valued at \$228 million by 1998. Lebowitz regretfully admits that she threw away some of his works years ago, unaware that photography would become such a strongly respected medium. Edward agrees that Robert's talent and ambition "took his life" to achieve.

Details

- **NETWORK:**
- **DATE:** 9:00 PM
- **RUNNING TIME:** 1:48:30
- **COLOR/B&W:** Color
- **CATALOG ID:** 128584
- **GENRE:** Public affairs/Documentaries
- **SUBJECT HEADING:** Biography; LGBT Collection; Photographers; Public affairs/Documentaries
- **SERIES RUN:** HBO - TV, 2016
- **COMMERCIALS:**

CREDITS

- Sheila Nevins ... *Executive Producer*

- Sara Bernstein ... *Senior Producer*
- Katharina Otto-Bernstein ... *Producer*
- Logan Hufford ... *Producer*
- Mona Card ... *Producer*
- Fenton Bailey ... *Producer, Director*
- Randy Barbato ... *Producer, Director*
- Jordan Papadopoulos ... *Associate Producer*
- Kathrin Lohmann ... *Associate Producer*
- David Benjamin Steinberg ... *Music by*
- Nancy Rooney ... *Interviewee*
- Sandy Daley ... *Interviewee*
- David Croland ... *Interviewee*
- Robert Colacello ... *Interviewee*
- Fran Lebowitz ... *Interviewee*
- Peter Berlin ... *Interviewee*
- Jack Fritscher ... *Interviewee*
- Carolina Herrera ... *Interviewee*
- Carol Squiers ... *Interviewee*
- Andy Warhol ... *Interviewee*
- Edward Mapplethorpe ... *Interviewee*
- Holly Solomon ... *Interviewee*
- Debbie Harry ... *Interviewee*
- Marcus Leatherdale ... *Interviewee*
- Lisa Lyon ... *Interviewee*
- Jack Walls ... *Interviewee*
- Ken Moody ... *Interviewee*
- Robert Sherman ... *Interviewee*
- Gloria von Thurn (see also: Princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis) ... *Interviewee*
- Harry Mapplethorpe

- Robert Mapplethorpe
- Milton Moore
- Patti Smith
- Sam Wagstaff

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