

Blog

PHOTOOCRACY

EVOLUTIONS AND REVOLUTIONS IN THE FUTURE, IN THE PRESENT AND IN THE PAST OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC

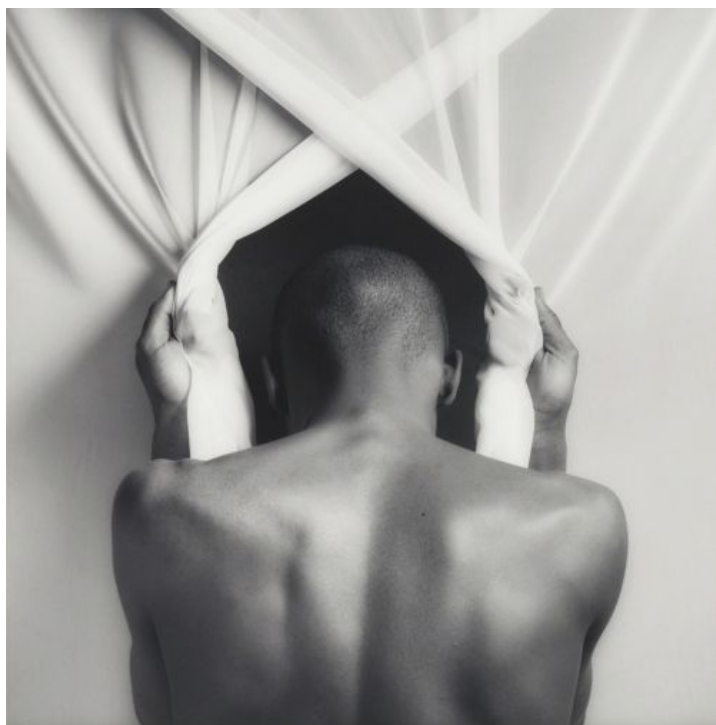


Michele Smargiassi

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Mapplethorpe beyond the veil of the sublime

From the paradise of the libertines, where he has moved for thirty years now, we can be sure that Robert Mapplethorpe is laughing. He laughs at us.



He says "guys this is incredible, they still fall for it!". He reads the reviews of his exhibitions, the critical essays of the scholars who disdain his classicism, on his "evocation of archetypes and stylistic features of the history of art", on the "perfect gray scale" of his signed prints (but he didn't print them him, his photos ...).

And he laughs, he finally laughs happy and serene, because let's say, in the last years of his life, marked by the ruin of his body in his early forties massacred by AIDS, he didn't have much to laugh about.

But now, yes, a long time has passed, the pain is **gone**, and the purified imprint of a Great Photographer, of a Revered Master, of whom one can only speak well, has remained on earth. it also deserves, but also of his photographs which instead require a certain effort, it is not easy to sublimate an anal penetration into ideal beauty, however beautifully printed on platinum paper, framed and sold at very respectable figures.

Even in the great retrospective that the Museo Madre in Naples now dedicates to him, the enthusiasm for the artist and his "desire for harmony and balance, for formal composition and

control, for that research that the artist himself defined as order and perfection in the form "have not been able to avoid that the most explicit part of his work, the well-known" Portfolio X ", is exhibited in a separate room, probably with warnings not to let children in.

He laughs, from up there (or from there? Mah ...), Mapplethorpe, because he knows very well that it was our own effort, and damn what an effort, to redeem morally, culturally ennoble, aesthetically authorize his work. He didn't even try. He never even pretended that the bdsm, *leather sex* with accessories, *scat* scenes (you won't ask me to explain what that means, will you?) Were simulated in front of his lens for the benefit of art. Mapplethorpe did not photograph metaphors.

He photographed the life around him. Then he sold it to us. And we white heterosexuals of progressive and tolerant ideas have done everything to convince ourselves that it was something else. Without realizing that the real product of Mapplethorpe's short life, perhaps the only demanding and conscious effort of his career as an artist, was just that: not to produce works of art, but to produce *us*, his audience.

In the sense that he was able to convince us to defend with the sword from the persecutions of his numerous relentless censors what he in reality was not and did not want to be, that is a rebellious artist-esthete, a provocateur who uses leather pants open on the buttocks as a abstract symbols, the erect members as metonymies of pistils of flowers (and vice versa), the sadomasochistic whips as purified sublimations, to break taboos, proclaim the right to sexual freedom, protest against discrimination and homophobia etc. etc.

Not at all. Never been a civil rights activist. "For me, pornography is a more interesting sexuality," he candidly confessed to Germano Celant. Has anyone ever really told us why his critical political views on sexuality were?

One of his most inconsolable widowers, Jack Fritscher (editor, writer, protagonist of the American gay scene of the seventies), in an unveiled biography claims the opposite: that between his views and those of his arch enemy, the reactionary Republican Senator Helms, the fiercest of his many censors, there was not such an abysmal distance: "He was neither a free spirit nor a free thinker. To tell the truth, Robert was an intolerant crypto-republican, so women, blacks and gays had to stay in their place".

Simply, at some point in his life, a Polaroid camera he received as a gift from his friend Sandy Daley had opened his mind like a bolt of lightning: all that little porn he bought in Manhattan *sex shops* to make unlikely *collages* for us, he could have made it himself. . And maybe even sell it. It went well for him, even for a series of lucky encounters. His muse, Patti Smith, who taught him enough underground poetry on the unmade beds in room 1017 of the Chelsea Hotel.

Or a cultured critic and collector, Sam Wagstaff, who was also the most intense and enduring of his loves, and opened the doors of the New York art scene to him. "Robert discovered", Fritscher rages, "that the camera was an easy tool of power in the incestuous world of art, magazines and fashion, made of kisses in the wind and ass licking".

Stylistically, Mapplethorpe is a conservative. Even a man of order. The square format of his Hasselblad allowed him to rest on the often symmetrical central and front composition, without ever undertaking any less than orthodox exploration of the composition. This is why his images resemble classical sculptures. His visual language is clear, well focused, calligraphic, pictorialist. Polite.

It is evident that, for him, the subject is everything. Photography is a means, the event of photographing is the end, both when it is static like one of his portraits (perhaps the best part of his work) and when it is dynamic like his even extreme sex scenes. Here, perhaps the Neapolitan exhibition hits the mark: Mapplethorpe's photography is performative, it is always the product of a mobile interaction, of an act not meditated but practiced - it will in fact be accompanied by theatrical *performances* inspired by his work (a bit embarrassing imagine how).



Maybe we should have the courage to abandon our role, the one he wisely imposed on us. The role of progressive white heterosexuals that we strive to forgive him for any alleged "transgression" or "provocation", of not wondering if his sculptural black males recruited to *Eagle* or *Spike* are passive objects of desire, with some racial implication, of not asking ourselves how our *politically correct* sensibility would have reacted if the subjects of some of his extreme photos had been women.

Perhaps we need to change the seats at the table. To oust Mapplethorpe from the throne of guru, of sublime artist, and return to him that of actor, of *insider* (he said himself), of *unscripted performer* of his own life and of his own era, which were then the seventies of the carefree summer of desires on which catastrophe was already looming, the abrupt end of innocence, when AIDS broke in like an avenging fire from heaven, invoked by the Puritans to punish the new Sodom.

L'autoritratto del 1988, pochi mesi prima della morte, drammatico, quel volto già scavato che raddoppia un dettaglio fin troppo esplicito, troppo smaccato, il bastone col pomello a teschio che ci sbatte quasi in faccia: quell'autoritratto è la nemesi di quell'altro del '75 che era riuscito a sedurre Roland Barthes, in

una celebre pagina di *La camera chiara*, quando la stessa mano che un giorno reggerà quel bastone del destino era ancora semidischiusa in un gesto di "erotismo allegro e lieve", di invito, di leggerezza, di desiderio di vita e di piacere che andava al di là di ogni arte, di ogni politica, di ogni morale.

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UN COMMENTO

Ancilla Artusi 11 giugno 2019 alle 16:49

"The demanding and conscious effort of his career as an artist was to produce us": interesting. Patti Smith says in her book that Robert Mapplethorpe absolutely adored Andy Warhol and his way of making art. So yes. His talent in this sense is also found in his provocative statements: life is about using people, and being used by people.

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