

17 March 2015 Cameraderie

Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989)

Do you know Robert Mapplethorpe? If you do, then you know him in two senses. One, he has produced some great black and white photography, and, two, some of his subject matter is very edgy—to put it delicately. I am not going to discuss his edgy material as such—you can go look it up yourself on the Internet—but I am going to discuss through Mapplethorpe the more general question of artistic boundaries, who sets them, and how they set them.

Mapplethorpe died young, of AIDS. In a relatively brief career, he defined his work both in a striking style and in his presentation of subject matter without boundaries.

Before he died, Mapplethorpe set into being The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, found here: <http://www.mapplethorpe.org/>. Please view his work at this official website. You may also Google his name either in Google or Google Images to see additional works by him. It is interesting to note from the Foundation website the following goal: “Serving as the first president on a five-person board of trustees, he [Mapplethorpe] established an initial mandate of furthering the recognition of photography as an art form of the same importance as painting and sculpture.” Recall that this was the very same goal that Alfred Stieglitz (Jan. 2013 and May 2013) had in 1913 when he set about displaying modern photography in his 291Gallery. The Foundation website also notes: “During the last weeks of his life, he [Mapplethorpe] added the second mandate of supporting medical research in the area of AIDS and HIV infection.”

Mapplethorpe worked almost exclusively in black and white, and often in his studio, so his photographs from this environment are extremely well-composed, carefully illuminated, and pin-point sharp. After people like Ansel Adams (March 2014), Edward Weston (Oct. 2012), and Imogen Cunningham (Dec. 2014), one would not have thought there was anything left to do with images of natural objects. But there seems to be no end, however, to the creativity at the hands of a talented photographer like Mapplethorpe when he turned his eye on floral photography.

Mapplethorpe became controversial in 1989 when the Corcoran Gallery of Art prepared to be one of the presenters of Mapplethorpe’s traveling solo show, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, which included unconventional subject matter.

In brief, the Corcoran, being the recipient of Federal support, was pressured by members of Congress and certain independent organizations not to allow Mapplethorpe’s show to be presented at the Corcoran. The final result was that the Corcoran refused the show; it was displayed elsewhere in Washington to huge crowds; Mapplethorpe’s reputation increased; and his works’ prices doubled and tripled. In reaction, a large private grant promised to the Corcoran was cancelled and given to the Phillips Collection instead.

This, not for the first time, raised the question of who can determine what is artistically valid to show (or print). We must ask about art (and writing) as free speech—when can it be limited in a legal context? No calm has returned to date on the troubled waters of this controversy, which has been going on for a long time. I am recalled of the entry of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* into the United States, which had to go to court before it could appear in print here.

Certainly the curators of museums and owners of galleries have the right to decide what to show in their venues. They decide all the time what is good art and what is bad art, and reject bad art and show good art. So in this case the Corcoran had obviously decided Mapplethorpe's show was artistically good enough to show. Only the subject matter was the problem, and this was freely admitted by the objectors. From this we could argue that artistic freedom should prevail. But now suppose the subject matter had been violence against women, or a racist portrayal of a minority group? How would we feel about the "free speech" rights of the artists of such work? This leads us to ask if there is a general rule that can be followed in all such controversial cases that is universally satisfactory. Or must each controversy be argued and decided on individual grounds? Suddenly, we are at the heart of law and philosophy, no longer photography. I personally cannot accept the idea of extremely good art with a racist or sexist message ever being displayed. Is there a distinction that can be carved out here between edgy subjects and hateful and denigrating portrayals? Probably so, in that Mapplethorpe's work, while edgy, is not hateful. This leads me to propose the generalization that free speech in art should prevail in all circumstances except where the art is hateful, discriminatory, or harassing. I realize that this discussion can go on to examine the complexity and cases of this issue much more deeply. I won't say more on this subject here except to urge everyone to consider deeply this question raised by a few photographs, this question of art, free speech, and the right and wrong of showing that art.

Here now is one of Mapplethorpe's outstanding floral photographs. This is *Tulip*, shot in 1985. Look at the crossing stems, the kissing flowers—it's suggestively intimate. Note the daring origin of the stems precisely from the lower left corner of the frame. Notice how the light/dark background divides 60/40 and introduces a subtle tension into the composition.



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Finally, here are two of Mapplethorpe's signature self-portraits. In the first (1980), he is young, handsome, and stylish. In the second (1988), he is dying, and the death's head cane makes that perfectly clear, in case one misses his actual death's head. He has chosen his model well—he has a striking face, and his intense personality shows all over it. The complexity of him photographing himself and engaging us in the event with his direct gaze seems like an infinite regress of roles and involvements: he watches us watching him photographing himself for us—no kidding, that's all there. But the photograph with the camera was taken *then*, yet he is staring at us *now*. So we can separate the interactions into 1) Mapplethorpe taking his own picture and staring into the camera knowing that someday we would see him staring at us, and 2) Mapplethorpe staring at us now, having taken his photograph years ago. All photographs have this duality of then and now, taking and viewing, but Mapplethorpe's two self-portraits show an acute self-awareness of all these time/place nuances of photographic art.



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