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Lawrence Biemiller

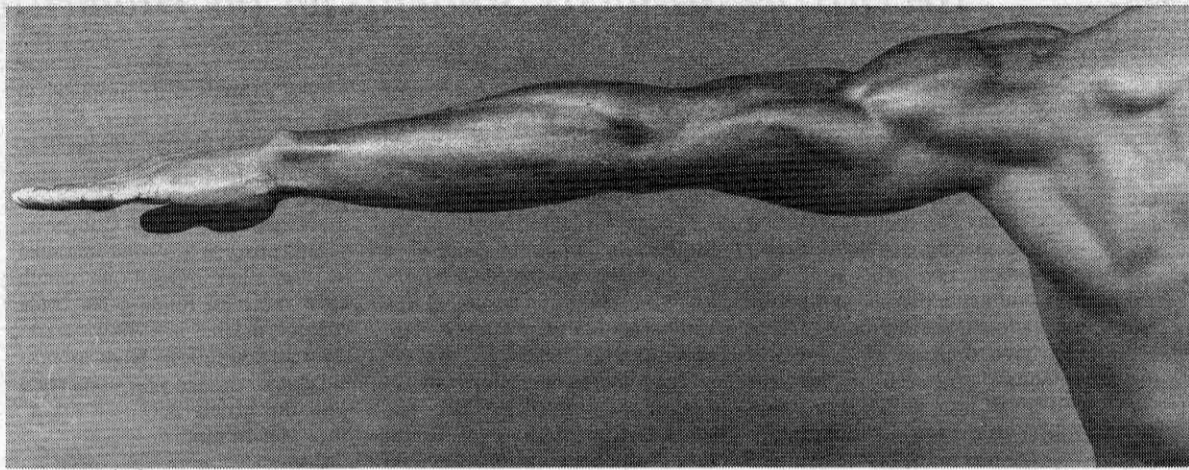
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DERRICK CROSS, 1982

ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

THE ARTS

Behind the Debate Over Mapplethorpe's Photographs

By LAWRENCE BIEMILLER

WASHINGTON

AS DEMONSTRATIONS HERE GO, it was both unusual and to the point: The Coalition of Washington Artists projected photographs from the canceled show "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment" directly onto the main façade of the Corcoran Gallery of Art the night before the exhibition was to have opened behind it. Close to 1,000 people gathered in front of the museum and art school, which is one block from the White House, to see the images and to hear speakers denounce the Corcoran's director, its trustees, and the Congress of the United States.

The photographs began with a self-portrait of Mr. Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS in March, and ended with a 1977 picture of the sun shining through a threadbare but proud American flag. In between, among portraits and still lifes, were several mild examples of the images that had suddenly made the show controversial: "Thomas in Circle," a 1987 photograph of a naked black man crouched inside a circular form; "Honey," a park-bench portrait of an unselfconscious little girl sitting in such a way that her dress is raised and her genitals are exposed (1976); and "Lydia Cheng," a 1987 photograph of a woman's nude torso.

"Tonight the slide projector is to the artist what the fax machine was to the Chinese students," one of the protest's organizers said from a makeshift speaker's platform. The comparison, however exaggerated, served as a measure of the response among artists and others—including some members of the Corcoran's faculty and curatorial staff—to the cancellation of the show.

"Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment" was organized by the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art, which received a \$30,000 grant for it from the National Endowment for the Arts. The 150-piece show includes a selection of nudes of women and men; a small number of them depict homosexual, sadomasochistic acts. The exhibition opened without incident at the university in December and at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art in February.

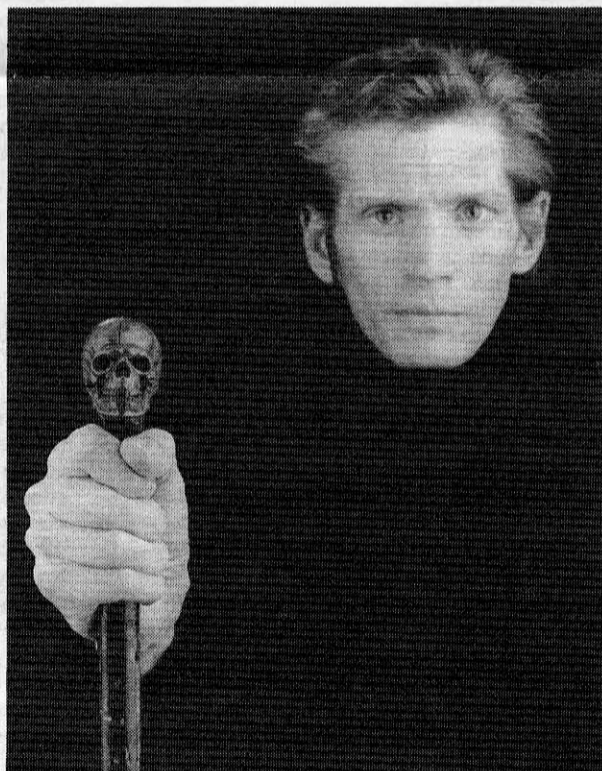
But the Corcoran's director, Christina Orr-Cahall, announced a month ago that she had decided to cancel the exhibition because it was becoming a political issue. Ms. Orr-Cahall said neither she nor the institution's trustees would allow the Corcoran to be "drawn into the debate" between Congress and the endowment over the appropriateness of federal grants for projects that might offend some people.

A few weeks before Ms. Orr-Cahall's announcement, Sen. Alfonse M. D'Amato, Republican of New York, and Sen. Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina, criticized the endowment for indirectly supporting a show that included "Piss Christ," a photograph by Andres Serrano of a crucifix immersed in colored liquid. The Serrano controversy prompted a move in Congress to limit the endowment's ability to make block grants to other grant-making organizations, such as the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, which gave Mr. Serrano a \$15,000 fellowship. Some observers here had predicted that the Mapplethorpe show would prompt a similar response among poli-

ticians, although few imagined that the Corcoran would take the extraordinary step of calling it off before it even opened.

Ms. Orr-Cahall, however, may have had in mind the experience of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which lost its annual appropriation from the State of Illinois after one student's work invited the public to walk on the American flag. The Corcoran, like other arts institutions in Washington, receives direct federal subsidies through the Fine Arts Commission's National Capital Arts and Cultural Affairs program.

The syndicated columnist James J. Kilpatrick was



SELF PORTRAIT, 1988

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among those supporting Ms. Orr-Cahall's decision, as was a former chairman of the endowment, Livingston Biddle. "In this current climate of confusion, exaggeration, and hyperbole," Mr. Biddle told the *New York Times*, "it would be very difficult for an artist like Mapplethorpe, who is very controversial, to have a good viewing of his work in Washington." Subsequently, the Washington Project for the Arts announced that it would present the show in its gallery for three weeks, beginning July 20.

Largely overlooked in the controversy have been the strengths and weaknesses of Mr. Mapplethorpe's work itself. He began making photographs in the early 1970's, after studying sculpture at the Pratt Institute, and he continued working until just before his death. In part because his photographs of nudes were unprecedented in their frankness, and in part because his technical skills allowed him to create unusually beautiful images—particularly of flowers—Mr. Mapplethorpe became one of the best-known photographers of his time.

Judith Tannenbaum, the Institute of Contemporary

Art's acting director, says the exhibition came about because her predecessor, Janet Kardon, had followed Mr. Mapplethorpe's career "and felt strongly that he was an artist of significance."

Ms. Tannenbaum says the institute is proud of the exhibition, which is half again as large as a 1988 Mapplethorpe show at the Whitney Museum in New York. She adds that the institute's application for a grant from the endowment was routine, and was approved by a peer-review committee of museum curators and scholars.

"People who do go to see the show will get a broader view" of Mr. Mapplethorpe's work than is available from news accounts of the Corcoran controversy, she says. "The explicit work was fairly early in his career, and then he moved on to other things he was interested in. His works that address sexuality are important, but in the show you see them in context—he treated human sexuality the same way you would treat anything of beauty."

Indeed, some of the exhibition's viewers find Mr. Mapplethorpe's flower images more graphic than his nudes—even those in which two people are posed to suggest a particular act or relationship. The interplay of shape and shadow in a 1984 close-up of a calla lily, for instance, emphasizes its curvaceousness and the texture of its surface to an extent that makes it unarguably sexual.

Meanwhile, many viewers laugh out loud at the famous 1980 photograph "Man in Polyester Suit"—a knees-to-shoulders shot, posed to recall the artificial action of a department-store ad, in which the black model's large penis hangs out of the polyester suit's fly, just below the buttoned vest. More thought-provoking are pictures of Lisa Lyon, a bodybuilder Mr. Mapplethorpe photographed in a variety of different costumes and poses. Some are seductively feminine, while others are unmistakably masculine.

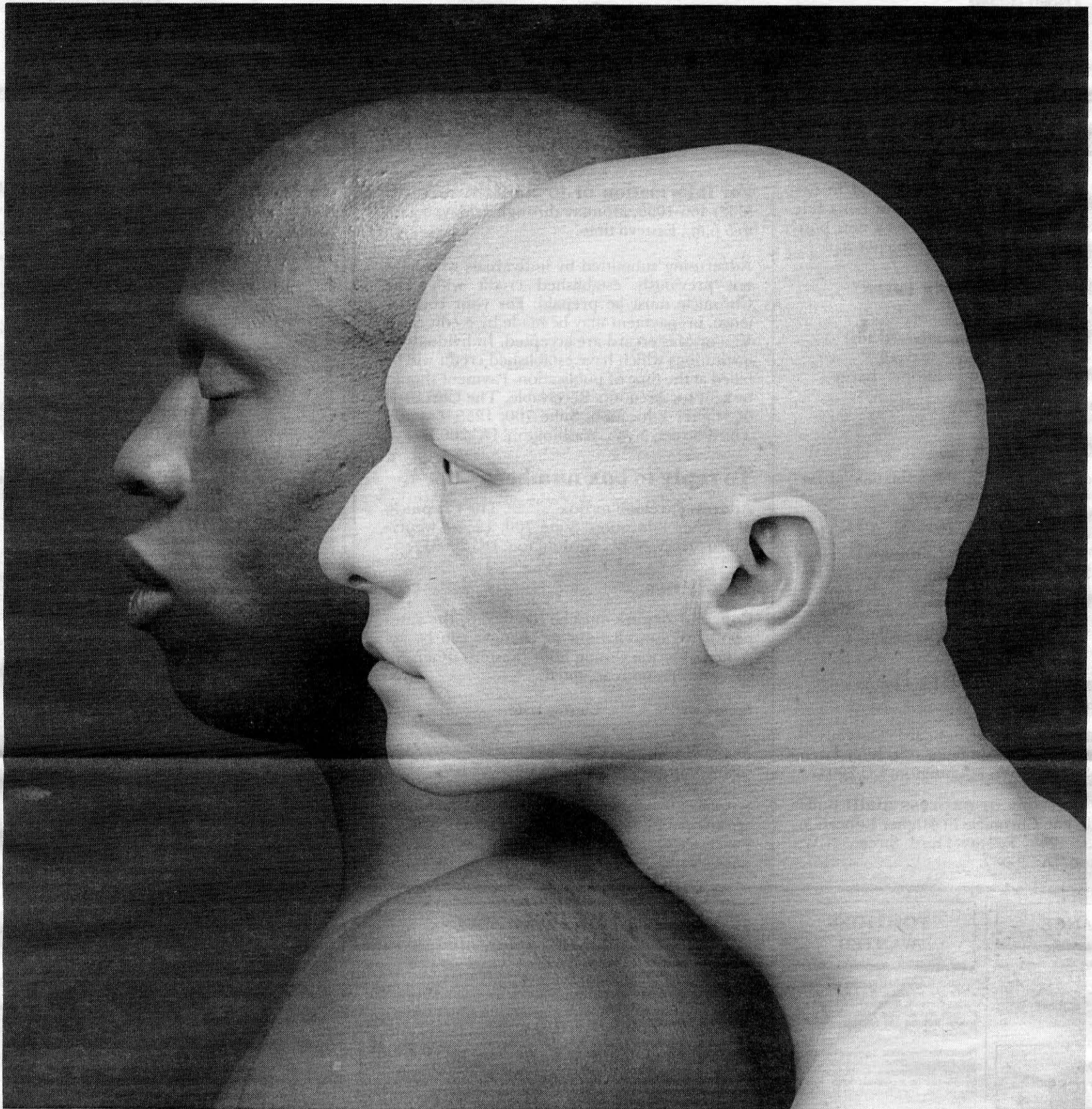
"Art should push you beyond what you'd normally be able to accept—it should confront and change you somehow," says Billy Howard, director of photography for Emory University's news service. "He can take images that are purely shock. At the same time, he takes images of flowers that are some of the most elegant that anybody could put on their wall. I'm a non-offendable person, but I guess I can understand how his images could be offensive to people who have clear ideas about what they want to be open to, visually. On the other hand, that may be Mapplethorpe's whole point."

Even Mr. Mapplethorpe's most explicit photographs, Mr. Howard notes, "are a document of a part of our society, and if you do that, the pictures are going to be rough, but not necessarily pornographic."

Harris Fogel, a photographer who is a visiting lecturer in photography at the College of the Desert, says Mr. Mapplethorpe's work is important for several reasons.

"The later work especially is very beautiful," he says. "The platinum prints on fabric, which are absolutely gorgeous, talk all about luxury and about the collision between painting and photography, because they're on fabric stretched over a frame. They were very expensive—\$7,000 to \$10,000 each—and they sold out before his shows even opened.

"To insiders, his work also represents the union of a



KEN AND TYLER, 1984

ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

patron and an artist," says Mr. Fogel. He adds that Sam Wagstaff, Mr. Mapplethorpe's early patron, "was kind of like the Medicis to a lot of photographers."

"The sexual work is especially important because of its sociologic implications—that was a time when the gay community in New York fought for its survival," Mr. Fogel continues. In his most explicit works, Mr. Mapplethorpe "views a culture that is gone forever, unless they find a cure for these diseases."

"Mapplethorpe's work was about courage—the courage it took for a gay man to come out publicly in the 1970's, to talk about very private things in a very public way, and to continue doing it as he was dying of AIDS."

Mr. Mapplethorpe's photographs of black nudes and of men in leather, Mr. Fogel says, "take what is clearly a private act, such as S and M, and transcend that."

"He was someone who was clearly enamored with the physical presence of these black men. It's a very mixed bag—a very explosive bag—in an art sense, because you've got all these taboos being played with. What tells us this work is not pornography is that it's informed by a different sensibility, by a different purpose."

Mr. Fogel adds that the sexual content of some of Mr.

Mapplethorpe's photographs presents other problems. "It's difficult to talk about any male homosexual photographer without engendering a certain amount of distance from people in the art world who are straight. I'm straight myself, and every time I've talked about Mapplethorpe, I've had people say to me, 'What do you use these images for?' A lot of people won't defend his work because it throws their own sexuality into question."

OTHERS see Mr. Mapplethorpe's work less positively. Hilton Kramer, the art critic, writes in an essay in the *Times* that the Corcoran controversy was "an event waiting to happen." The Mapplethorpe exhibition, he says, reflects the professional art world's "sentimental attachment to the idea that art is at its best when it is most extreme and disruptive."

The show, Mr. Kramer says, "consists of an attempt to force upon the public the acceptance of the values of a sexual sub-culture that the public at large finds loathsome—and here I do not mean homosexuality as such but the particular practices depicted in the most extreme of these pictures."

"We are being asked to accept the unacceptable in the

name of art," he continues, "but this is sheer hypocrisy, and all the parties concerned know it is hypocrisy."

In any case, Mr. Mapplethorpe's explicit photographs share several characteristics with his still lifes and his figure studies—technical proficiency, compositional formality, and an intensity that grows out of his unwillingness to clutter his images with superfluous details. In the exhibition catalogue, Ms. Kardon, the show's curator, maintains that Mr. Mapplethorpe "uses the medium of photography to translate flowers, stamens, staves, limbs, as well as erect sexual organs, into objets d'art."

"Dramatic lighting and precise composition democratically pulverize their diversities and convert them into homogeneous statements," says Ms. Kardon. "Different subjects, Mapplethorpe feels, do not alter the essence of his photographs, the perfection with which he cloaks every subject."

His works, she says, are timeless. "It isn't evening or morning, or early or late, or now or then, but some moment, not just before, or during, or after. Mapplethorpe captures the peak of bloom, the apogee of power, the most seductive instant, the ultimate present that stops time and delivers the perfect moment into history."