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Mapplethorpe's Transformations

At WPA, the Controversial Exhibition

By Jo Ann Lewis
Special to the Washington Post


The most shocking thing about the Robert Mapplethorpe show, which opens today at Washington Project for the Arts, is how good it is.

And—given all the brouhaha—how tame.

We already knew what a bad boy the late Mapplethorpe was (unfortunately, that's all some know, one reason the Corcoran canceled the show last month). His reputation was based on the fact that he'd set out to chip away at the boundaries of what late 20th century Americans consider tolerable behavior—specifically by aestheticizing homosexual behavior with an interracial and, occasionally, a sadomasochistic twist.

Even in an age that embraced rebellion—and in an art world that co-opted every kinky nuance, politely sipping cocktails before his photographs of giant male appendages—Mapplethorpe has been too much for some people. Except in New York. They loved him in New York.

Last night, as hundreds here politely sipped drinks at WPA's opening AIDS benefit (Mapplethorpe died of AIDS in March), only one photograph was blatantly visible in the show's main galleries:

See ART, D4, Col. 1
Man in Polyester Suit, which features the torso of man in a tight three-piece suit, his fly wide open. It offended some, but others, amused, realized that Mapplethorpe was probably making fun of their button-down, buttoned-up lives. Women seemed riveted, men embarrassed. For women, customarily confronted with female nudes, it's a refreshing switch.

Mapplethorpe is no humorist, but he can be funny, and even makes fun of his own work in a photograph of a dramatically illuminated bunch of black grapes, seemingly strung up—S&M-style—by its stem.

As for the real S&M photographs, they constitute less than 5 percent of "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment," and all have been confined to the "blue room" set off at the rear of the upstairs space, with a carefully worded caveat to ward off squeamish adults and children. There are some stomach-turners there, to be sure; but there is also one image from the "X" portfolio that can be seen—in a far larger format—in the National Gallery's current photographic history survey.

In other words, anyone who chooses not to look at Mapplethorpe's most objectionable work can easily avoid it by simply not entering the final gallery.

Which leaves visitors to relax, fairly unburdened by the show's concern, and make some kind of level-headed appraisal of the work, which is what retrospective exhibitions are for, and museums suppose in business to provide. Whatever the conclusions about the quality of the art (and apart from the "blue room," this is clearly art, not pornography), the show's cancellation by the Corcoran seems altogether ridiculous.