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Jo Ann Lewis

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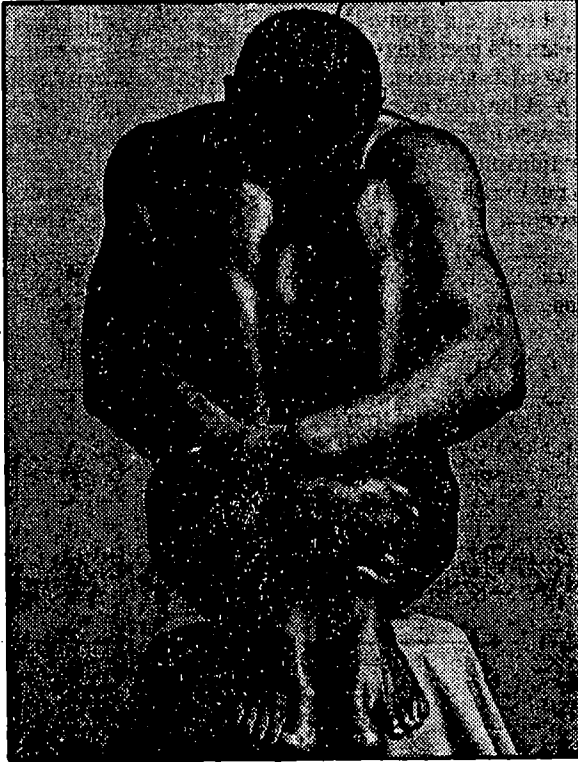
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Robert Mapplethorpe's "Ajitto," 1981.

Art

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 such photograph was blatantly visible in the show's main galleries:

See ART, D4, Col. 1

ART, From D1

"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 sly 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, so far as the rest of the show is concerned, and make some kind of level-headed appraisal of the work, which is what retrospective exhibitions are for, and museums supposedly 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.

Nudes, Portraits, Flowers

The show—handsomely installed by WPA curator Philip Brookman—begins on the ground floor with large-scale photographs that introduce the three basic subjects that preoccupied Mapplethorpe throughout his relatively short career: nudes, portraits and flowers. There are four imposing images of a single black male nude, seated on a draped pedestal and straightforwardly observed from four different points of view in dramatic light. There is also an incandescent portrait of collector Doris Saatchi, one of Mapplethorpe's greatest (lent by the National Portrait Gallery, London); and a still life with irises, printed in-grave and mounted on silk, reflecting Mapplethorpe's interest in various processes and media.

From the start, Mapplethorpe had also experimented with various framing devices, trying to transform his photographs into what he apparently felt was something more sculptural objects. Occasionally, these diptych, triptych or cruciform formats work, as in the case of a votive portrait of Andy Warhol. Elsewhere, however—as in the 1987 "Thomas in Circle," a male nude figure juxtaposed with a slab of expensive leopard-printed velvet—these elaborately mounted works suggest a photographer overreaching himself, and often landing meaninglessly in the realm of exotic decor. His heart-shaped boxes containing daggers and star-shaped frames containing mirrors are nothing but props.

Upstairs, there is an inadequate attempt to show roots—mostly early Polaroids, made after Mapplethorpe left his churchgoing Catholic home in Floral Park, Long Island, at age 16 to take art training at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. There are also early shots of soon-to-be rock star Patti Smith, with whom he shared digs in the early days in New York.

An odd, early assemblage with a Madonna is baffling, but may suggest early ambiguity about gender—a theme that persists throughout his work. It is most fully expressed in a pair of his own self-portraits (among many), one depicting him as a macho man, the other as a woman with teased hair.

A belief in androgyny, in fact, is obviously what made body-builder Lisa Lyon so fascinating to Mapplethorpe, and he transmits that fascination in some of his strongest work, depicting her sometimes as soft and feminine, sometimes as masculine and muscular.

The show's masterpiece, in fact, is a triptych featuring Lyon's shiny, graphite-covered body tranquilly posed against a backdrop of graphite-covered canvas—a miracle of virtuosic tonal nuance. Here, however—partly by her stance, partly by masterfully manipulating surface texture—he transforms her into an altogether convincing, timeless, monumental bronze statue.

Obversely, in a photograph of a real classical bronze sculpture of a black man, he seems to transform the sculptured head into a man who is altogether alive. Mapplethorpe's genius was clearly in this ability to transform things, to turn subject matter into something other than what it really was—woman to sculpture, man to woman, flower to lover.

The show finally branches out into groups of portraits, still lifes and nudes, and though there are some elegant lilies and other floral still

lives in which one blossom seems to reach longingly for another, none comes close to the lasciviousness of Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers.

There are also several fine portraits of art world luminaries, the most luminous being Laurie Anderson, along with Louise Nevelson, Leo Castelli and photography collector Sam Wagstaff, who helped make Mapplethorpe famous. In the end, the influences of earlier photographers, seen in those collected images, abound in his work, from Edward Weston to high-fashion photographers Irving Penn and Richard Avedon. Mapplethorpe's best portraits, in fact, might best be assessed precisely at the level of Penn (who is underrated) and Avedon (who is overrated). To assert that he is more than either ignores the past.

Andy Warhol also haunts this show, not only as subject but as attitude: Mapplethorpe grew up in Warholian times, and knew full well how to shock, how to make himself famous, how to make the right connections, manipulate the market, etc. Both were part of the drug-besotted subculture in New York, but they differed chiefly in that Warhol was voyeur to an earlier generation; Mapplethorpe was a participant. In

the end, they both made a bundle doing portraits of the rich and famous.

The difference is that Warhol was an innovator, who helped create a new form—pop art. Mapplethorpe was not, though he tried, and surely did excel at combining fire and ice—sensuous male bodies frozen into classical poses. Warhol's pop ideas may well have come from nothing more than innate simple-mindedness, but they had an impact nonetheless. Mapplethorpe's formal impact is doubtful. He was young, of course: only 42 when he died. Who knows what he might have done?

In the end, Mapplethorpe may have said it best himself during an interview with BBC shortly before his death: "I captured a certain feeling about a certain time in a certain place—New York. And now it's gone."

In a way his death—and, symbolically, this exhibition, with all its attendant controversy—have put a period at the end of that era.

Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment, a touring exhibition that originated under an NEA grant at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, will be at the Washington Project for the Arts, 400 Seventh St. NW through Aug. 13. Hours for the show are bookstore have been extended to 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., seven days a week.