



ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE (1946-1989)

Orchids

dye-transfer print

22 1/2 x 21 1/2 in. (35 3/4 x 34 z 1 1/8 in.)

1/5

1989

28794

PROVENANCE:

with Miller Gallery, New York, NY

Private Collection

Christie's, New York, 10 October 2005, lot 229

Private Collection, Santa Barbara, California, acquired from above

Robert Mapplethorpe was an American photographer who was noted for austere photographs of flowers, celebrities, and male nudes; among the latter were some that proved controversial because of their explicitly homoerotic and sadomasochistic themes.

Mapplethorpe attended the Pratt Institute in New York City (1963–70). After experimenting with underground filmmaking in the late 1960s, by 1970 he was creating photographs using a Polaroid camera, often arranging them into collages or showing them as series. By the mid-1970s he received critical attention for his elegant black-and-white photographs. He experimented with different techniques, including using a large-format press camera, combining photographic images printed on linen, and designing his own wooden frames.

During this period he pursued what were to remain his favourite subjects throughout his career: still lifes, flowers, portraits of friends and celebrities (such as poet and singer Patti Smith), and homoerotic explorations of the male body. His compositions were generally stark, his combination of cold studio light and precise focus creating dramatic tonal contrasts. While these effects rendered still lifes with an almost Vermeer-like coolness, these same techniques rendered homosexual imagery in a manner that some found shocking. His muscular male models were generally framed against plain backdrops, sometimes engaged in sexual activity or posed with sadomasochistic props such as leather and chains. His clear, unflinching style challenged viewers to confront this imagery. Moreover, the combination of his choice of subject matter with the photographs' formal beauty and grounding in art-historical traditions created what many saw as a tension between pornography and art.

Mapplethorpe's reputation grew in the 1980s, and he began to focus more on flowers and celebrity portraits than on the overtly sexual subject matter of his earlier output. Still, Mapplethorpe managed to impart a sensual energy to the folds of one of his favourite subjects, the calla lily, that many would argue equalled the impact of his nudes. Mapplethorpe extended his interest in form in a series of portraits of female bodybuilder Lisa Lyon. His work was exhibited internationally, with major shows at the

Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City and the National Portrait Gallery in London (both 1988), and his photographs were featured in such books as Robert Mapplethorpe Photographs (1978), Lady: Lisa Lyon (1983), Robert Mapplethorpe: Certain People (1985), The Black Book (1988), and Flowers (1990), with an introduction by Patti Smith. When he contracted the AIDS virus, Mapplethorpe chronicled his illness in a harrowing series of self-portraits.

A posthumous retrospective exhibition, "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment," was planned for the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., but stirred a political debate in 1990 that caused the museum to cancel the show. Because the exhibition—which featured Mapplethorpe's still lifes as well as his nudes—was partly funded by a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA), the exhibit sparked a debate about government subsidies of "obscene" art and provoked Congress to enact restrictions on future NEA grants. Also in 1990, Dennis Barrie, the director of the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, was arrested but later acquitted of obscenity charges for displaying the same Mapplethorpe exhibition. The exhibition was shown with little to no controversy in other cities, including Chicago, Berkeley (California), and Boston.

Mapplethorpe's reputation as one of his era's most talented—and most provocative—photographers continued to rise at the turn of the 21st century. Important monographs of his work were published posthumously, including *Some Women* (1995), with an introduction by Joan Didion, and *Robert Mapplethorpe: Pictures* (1999), with an introduction by Ingrid Sischy.

(Britannica)

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