

FLESH AND SPIRIT

Robert Mapplethorpe, Sam Wagstaff, and the Gay Sensibility

Philip Geffer

COMING OF AGE

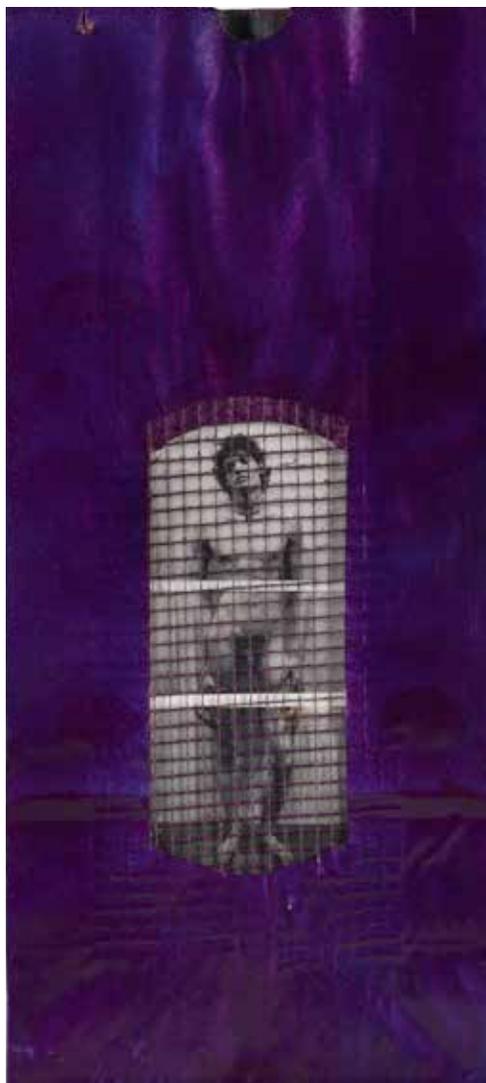
In the early 1970s the medium of photography gained new stature among the fine arts. Museums and art schools in the United States began to establish autonomous photography departments; several commercial galleries now showed photography exclusively; and an unforeseen market for photography was emerging in the art world. This newly expanded regard for photography as a fine art occurred simultaneously with the growing visibility of the gay-rights movement. Although it is worth noting that photography and homosexuality surfaced, respectively, from the margins of artistic legitimacy and mainstream society, this concurrence was nothing more than a coincidence of timing. And yet by the end of that decade the influence of what has come to be identified as a “gay sensibility”—manifest in the relationship of Robert Mapplethorpe and Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr. (plate 7)—would become an indelible ingredient in photography’s coming of age.

Sam Wagstaff and Robert Mapplethorpe met in 1972; Wagstaff was fifty years old, Mapplethorpe was half his age. They were to become one of the celebrated couples of the twentieth century—not only because they were glamorous, and not only because they were gay. As lovers, they did not adhere to monogamy; as committed partners, their deep emotional bond by no means conformed to the conventions of heterosexual marriage; but, as patron and artist, they brought co-conspiratorial fervor to securing respect for photography in the art world and also to establishing Mapplethorpe’s career as an artist.

As a respected curator of painting and sculpture throughout the 1960s, first at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford and then at the Detroit Institute of Arts, Wagstaff had a more influential role in shaping art history in the last half of the twentieth century than is widely understood. He organized, for example, *Black, White, and Gray*, the first museum show of Minimalist art, at the Wadsworth in 1964, and lent steady curatorial support—and friendship—to a roster of artists who were just emerging in that decade, among them Walter De Maria, Michael Heizer, Ray Johnson, Agnes Martin, Tony Smith, Mark di Suvero, Richard Tuttle, and Andy Warhol.

Mapplethorpe had studied formally at New York’s Pratt Institute, a preeminent art school, and by the time he met Wagstaff he had also received a unique extracurricular education at some of the city’s more notorious art-world haunts. Among these were the Chelsea Hotel, a bohemian residence for a pantheon of artists, writers, and musicians of the era (among them William Burroughs, Bob Dylan, Allen Ginsberg, and Larry Rivers), and Max’s Kansas City, a restaurant and nightclub made famous by Andy Warhol and his coterie of “superstars” (including Candy Darling and Holly Woodlawn) and other regulars in the club’s legendary back room. The flamboyance of the Warhol retinue attracted media attention and quite possibly paved the way for what eventually became known as the LGBTQ community—lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and (much later) transgendered and queer (or questioning) people. The seductive, sexually frank tone of the song “Walk on the Wild Side,” written by Lou Reed about this group in the back room at Max’s, aptly sums up the persona Mapplethorpe was cultivating there. “Sam really respected the way I was honest about being gay,” Robert would later tell his biographer, Patricia Morrisroe. “I helped Sam to be more open about his sexuality.”

Figure 10
Robert Mapplethorpe
(American, 1946–1989),
Untitled (Self-portrait),
1971. Collage of dye
diffusion prints with spray
paint on paper potato
sack in wood frame, 64.5 ×
41.3 cm (25 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 16 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.).
Collection Charles Cowles



Born into an established New York family, Wagstaff benefited from his good looks and a sterling education. He would spend the 1950s and '60s living a double life in the roomy art-world closet of Manhattan, where he encountered many artists—among them John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Warhol—who were, like himself, gay. In general, this group could be honest about their sexuality only among themselves, free to roam openly within the confines of their community. Wagstaff was among the fortunate compared to the majority of gay men and lesbians throughout the country who lived in painful isolation, constantly fearful of being found out, obsessively protective of their secret—the revelation of which was certain to destroy their lives. (As late as 1963, the *New York Times* commonly used the word “pervert” for “homosexual.”)² In this context, Wagstaff maintained a strict heterosexual persona in both of his official curatorial positions.

Photography, as something of an outlier in the world of art, had suffered its own form of prejudice. Well into the 1970s, it was still viewed by many in the realm of the fine arts as nothing more than a utilitarian medium, an “applied art.” Photographic imagery appeared everywhere in daily life—in newspapers, magazines, and advertisements, on billboards, driver’s licenses, and passports—and its ubiquity conspired against its acceptance as a medium of art making. Wagstaff himself had, for much of his early career, been unconvinced of photography’s worth. “Painting is art and photography is not art 99 percent of the time,” he said dismissively to the *Hartford Times* in 1961, echoing an attitude that was widely held among curators, critics, and scholars of the day.³ His enthusiastic embrace of photography in the 1970s, then, would come as a surprise to many of his colleagues, and in turn his reputation as an esteemed curator of painting and sculpture would exert a persuasive influence on the perception of the photograph as a viable object of aesthetic value.

Mapplethorpe did not claim photography as his defining medium until 1973. Up to that point, he had been incorporating photographs cut from the pages of physique magazines into collages and assemblages, often with found objects laid over them and elaborately constructed frames. When he began to experiment informally with the Polaroid camera, he realized greater control over the images and started including his own photographs in the work.

Mapplethorpe’s assemblages were in keeping with the art-making practices of the period; what set his work apart was its frequent homoerotic treatment of the male nude figure. At the same time, symbolic references to Catholicism (the religion of his upbringing) and Catholic ritual were juxtaposed in the overlay of imagery, fabrics, and other materials. Mapplethorpe was equating the (homo-)erotic with the spiritual and the sacred. In *Untitled (Self-Portrait)* (1971; fig. 10), Mapplethorpe stacked three small Polaroid images into a vertical triptych—each element showing a section of his own naked body—to compose a full-length self-portrait. Over the Polaroids lies a square window of wire mesh, part of a brown-paper potato sack that serves as the mat border, and which he spray-painted purple. The viewer peers through the mesh to see Mapplethorpe’s naked body, as if he is standing behind the scrim of a confessional, or perhaps the grate of a prison door. The spectacle of his bare flesh, his nipples and navel, his pubic hair and penis, and the defiant but seductive expression on his face, all amount to a provocation that is at once erotic and seemingly sacramental.

A GAY SENSIBILITY

Mapplethorpe was not, of course, the first artist to photograph the male nude in homoerotic terms. Among his many antecedents were Thomas Eakins, Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden, F. Holland Day, and George Platt Lynes. Yet the strict cultural taboo that led to severe laws against homosexuality made it virtually impossible for these artists to exhibit such imagery in a public context. With the help of Wagstaff, Mapplethorpe would be the first to bring a consistent representation of the homoerotic in photographic imagery to the museum and gallery wall.

One of Mapplethorpe’s early collages, *Bull’s Eye* (1970; see fig. 4) appeared in a publication called *Gay Power*, which billed itself as “New York’s first homosexual newspaper.” It consists of a found image of a nude man, over whose eyes Mapplethorpe has placed a black censor-bar; a

red John Baldessari-esque circle covers his genitalia. In a description of *Bull's Eye*, Richard Meyer identifies the tightrope between oppression and desire that so many homosexuals walked before the early years of the gay-rights movement in America: "Mapplethorpe presents the naked male body as both a target of prohibition and a source of pleasure, as both an example of censorship and a defiance of it."⁴

These dualities are at the core of the *gay sensibility*, which evolved from the homosexual experience of alienation in society. Until the advent of gay liberation in the 1970s, the carefully protected secret of forbidden desire required the homosexual to lead a double life, not only for social acceptance but for purposes of safety. Out of this partitioned existence emerged a number of survival mechanisms: irony became a *lingua franca*; paradoxical wit, a salve for pain and longing; and aesthetic idealization, a surrogate for sexual pleasure. These are central components of the *gay sensibility*, and underscore a strain of creative expression throughout the twentieth century that aimed high in formal artistic realization, while taking recourse in paradox and counterpoint—as seen, for example, in the fin-de-siècle plays of Oscar Wilde, and in the photographs of George Platt Lynes. As the gay-rights movement became increasingly visible, this *gay sensibility* was more directly manifest in the work of Mapplethorpe, as well as in that of contemporaries such as George Dureau, Peter Hujar, Arthur Tress, and David Wojnarowicz.

In December 1973 the American Psychiatric Association removed *homosexuality* from its list of psychiatric disorders. This made front-page headlines across the country. It was four years after Stonewall—the 1969 uprisings prompted by police raids at New York's Stonewall Inn—the symbolic starting point of gay liberation in America. No longer was homosexuality considered a mental disorder, and for many gay people, the veil of fear about being discovered and persecuted was beginning to lift.

Duane Michals, then forty-one, had lived through his youth under the tyranny of "the love that dare not speak its name," and made it a theme in some of his work. In one text-image piece, *The Unfortunate Man* (1976; fig. 11), a male nude figure is seen from above, his hands inside a pair of shoes on the floor; Michals's text lucidly renders the effect of cultural taboo on the homosexual: "The unfortunate man could not touch the one he loved. It had been declared illegal by the law. Slowly his fingers became toes and his hands gradually became feet. He began to wear shoes on his hands to disguise his pain. It never occurred to him to break the law."

Mapplethorpe, fourteen years younger than Michals, had come of age at a pivotal moment in history. Certainly homosexuality was still a topic with which the art world (like much of the world at large) had not fully come to terms, but it was an exhilarating moment of increased visibility and destigmatization for gay people in New York. And it was at this moment that Mapplethorpe made his transition from collage and assemblage to a purely photographic process.

WAGSTAFF AND PHOTOGRAPHY

It was at this time, too, that Wagstaff turned his sharp eye and art-historical expertise to the collection of photographs. With his respected curatorial background in painting and sculpture and his social connections, Wagstaff played an important role in changing the art world's perceptions about the medium. Indeed, he became a tireless advocate for photography: "Gustave Le Gray made pictures in the 1850s. He's the greatest photographer of all, the best that there has been, and the textbooks hardly mention him," Wagstaff said in the *Washington Post* in 1978. "It's like leaving Rembrandt out of a history of Western art."⁵ Certainly Mapplethorpe was instrumental in Wagstaff's recognition of photography as an art form. Wagstaff would later observe: "Robert got me into photography"—but not before Mapplethorpe asked his ex-girlfriend, Patti Smith, to do a tarot-card reading to see if collecting photographs was an auspicious venture for Sam. "I began to collect photographs with Patti Smith's approval," Wagstaff wryly told a Spanish television interviewer some years later.⁶

In turn, it was partly due to Wagstaff's influence that photography would soon be finding new purchase in the market. The medium had faced the challenge to find acceptance in the realm of serious art since its inception in the 1830s: the battle had been waged over the years by such avid

Figure 11
Duane Michals
(American, born 1932),
The Unfortunate Man, 1976.
Gelatin silver print,
sheet: 20.5 x 25.2 cm
(8¹/₁₆ x 9¹⁵/₁₆ in.);
image: 12.1 x 17.9 cm
(4³/₄ x 7¹/₁₆ in.). New York,
Metropolitan Museum
of Art, 2013.159.41



Figure 12
Baron Wilhelm von
Gloeden (German,
1856–1931), *Reclining Nude
Young Man*, 1899–1920.
Gelatin silver print,
17.1 × 22.5 cm (6¾ ×
8⅞ in.). Los Angeles,
J. Paul Getty Museum,
84.XO.891.4.76



champions as William Henry Fox Talbot, Roger Fenton, Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, and Beaumont Newhall. Although headway had been made by such advocates, it was not until the 1970s that the art market—never mind curators, critics and scholars—would begin to embrace photography in earnest. However, throughout the 1960s the photographic image had in fact been creeping toward greater legitimacy, hiding in plain sight in canvases on the walls of museums and galleries, in works by such well-established artists as Baldessari, Rauschenberg, Ed Ruscha, and Warhol, who utilized photography in service of their larger conceptual ideas.

Among countless examples of the use of photography in Warhol's oeuvre is his 1964 *Race Riot*. For this series, the artist created ten screen-printed canvases of a photograph borrowed from a 1963 *Life* magazine spread about the civil-rights protests in Montgomery, Alabama. Warhol gave his friend Wagstaff two of these canvases in red; later, Wagstaff purchased two more, one white and one blue, from Leo Castelli, Warhol's dealer, for \$548. Wagstaff assembled *Race Riot* as a grid of four images and kept it his entire life. (After his death in 1987, the work changed hands, eventually selling at Christie's in 2014 for \$62.8 million.)⁷ Although *Race Riot* is indisputably photo-based, its visual language representational, and the articulation of figures purely photographic, at the time of its creation no one deemed it "photography." *Race Riot* exemplifies the kind of concept-driven work made throughout the 1960s that conditioned a museum-going public—without their being entirely aware of it—to the language of the photograph.

In the early 1970s, Mapplethorpe accompanied Wagstaff on some of his virgin shopping expeditions, to private dealers and flea markets alike, hunting for photographs. Their first excursion would yield the acquisition of several photographs by Wilhelm von Gloeden (an unexpected find from a pornography dealer in Staten Island). *Reclining Nude Young Man* (1899–1920; fig. 12) is from Wagstaff's trove of pictures by this German photographer—known for his highly stylized images of naked Sicilian boys—whose work would be an early influence on Mapplethorpe.

With a new studio at 24 Bond Street and a Hasselblad, both provided by Wagstaff, Mapplethorpe began to photograph the male nude with greater formal resolution. He concentrated on the lines of the body in sheer sculptural terms, and relied on his own attraction to his male nude subjects to coax a sexual provocation into his images. These remained signature elements throughout his body of work—but his visual engagement with sexuality would soon take a far more explicit turn. He often described s/m not in terms of the roles of sadist and masochist; rather, for him, s and m stood for sex and magic, and his representation of the gestures and paraphernalia of s/m derived from this association.

BEYOND THE MALE NUDE

The male nude was, in the 1970s, still a relatively scandalous subject, particularly in photography. (The publication of photographs of full-frontal male nudes had been legalized in the United States only in the mid-1960s.) And it seemed that for many viewers, the depiction of the male nude was in itself tantamount to gay longing.

In 1978 the Marcuse Pfeifer Gallery in New York presented *The Male Nude: A Survey in Photography*, a study of the subject through the medium's history. Interestingly, critics cited the homosexual theme above other characteristics of the show (although most of the photographs were made by heterosexual men and women). "There is something disconcerting about the sight of a man's naked body being presented primarily as a sexual object," wrote Gene Thornton in his review in the *New York Times*.⁸ However, many of the nudes were presented not as sexual objects, but rather as classical figure studies, or as individuals in the ordinary circumstances of their lives. For some (presumably heterosexual male) reviewers, the male nude shown in *any* state, presented on *any* terms, was de facto an expression of homosexual desire.

In such a context, the subject matter of Mapplethorpe's photographs of the late 1970s was nothing less than explosive; his work showed not only male genitalia and the most candid homoeroticism, but also sadomasochistic sexual activities in almost forensic photographic detail. And the work broke other cultural taboos as well: the unabashed homoerotic imagery itself was seen by many as pornographic, but associating it with religious iconography was downright blasphemous. Mapplethorpe understood that his work was provocative, which made the public reaction that much more thrilling to him. In fact, the controversies surrounding his photographs propelled his reputation; but the quality, substance, originality—and timing—of his photographs were the factors that eventually secured his place in art history.

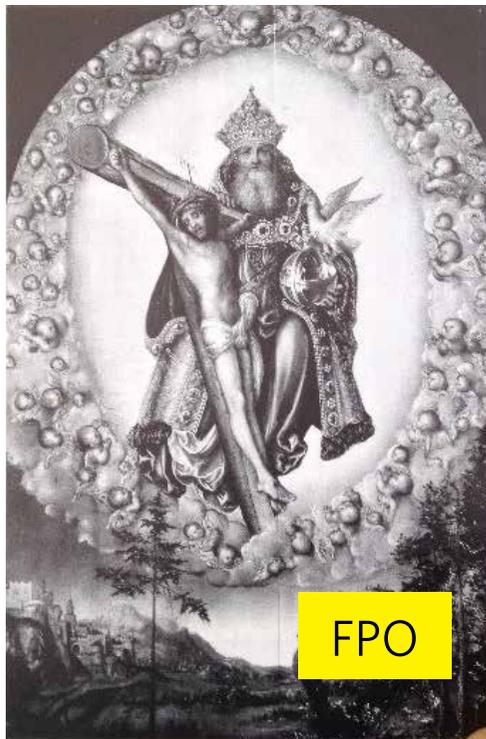
In 1977, when Mapplethorpe was given his first serious exhibition, at the Holly Solomon Gallery in SoHo—then the geographic hub of the contemporary art world in New York—only his portraits were featured. A concurrent Mapplethorpe exhibition was mounted not far away at the Kitchen, an alternative performance space, in which his homoerotic and s/m imagery was shown. Holly Solomon had been willing to represent Mapplethorpe on condition that his more inflammatory sexual work would not be shown at her gallery. "Sam Wagstaff was considered a great photography collector. I wouldn't have touched Robert without Sam," Solomon later recalled. "And there were others like me who felt the same way."⁹ While disinclined to represent Mapplethorpe at first—or indeed, even to show photography in her gallery—in the space of only a few years Solomon would come to see the wisdom of having taken on this young provocateur. (It is worth acknowledging that, while Mapplethorpe's work projected a defiant posture of transgression from mainstream propriety, he himself was not entirely immune to some residual discomfiture, perhaps deriving from his Catholic upbringing: when his parents, who lived across the river in Queens, came to see his work hanging in a Manhattan art gallery, the artist ushered them around the Solomon show, but kept them away from his more controversial images farther downtown.)

Germano Celant, a curator at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, saw the two concurrent 1977 Mapplethorpe shows and understood what a powerful gesture it was at the time for Mapplethorpe to "come out" in his erotic photographs, not only as a person but as an artist. "These images were a completely different input in the art world, as works of art," Celant noted. "And that is what makes his work so radical."¹⁰

FLESH AND SPIRIT

Mapplethorpe's Catholic upbringing would inform many aspects of his work—beginning with his earliest artistic endeavors—not least of them his formal understanding of compositional balance. In the 1980s Mapplethorpe told Ingrid Sischy (editor at the time of *Artforum* magazine): "A church has a certain magic and mystery for a child. It still shows in how I arrange things. It's always little altars. It's always been this way—whenever I'd put something together I'd notice it was symmetrical."¹¹

Figure 13
 Lucas Cranach the Elder
 (German, 1472–1553), *Holy
 Trinity in a Glory of Angels*,
 ca. 1515–18. Paint on wood
 panel, 42.2 × 28.5 cm
 (16⅞ × 11¼ in.) Bremen,
 Germany, Kunsthalle
 Bremen



On the level of content, as critic Arthur C. Danto has noted, Catholicism certainly contributed to Mapplethorpe's intention to convey sex and sexuality in terms of transcendence. "What is finally Catholic is the abiding mystery of spirit and flesh, which has its analogies in the philosophical structure of art," Danto writes.¹² Mapplethorpe, who was himself philosophical about sexuality and spirituality, said: "People get blocked about what pleasure is. It can be incredibly sensual to, say, piss into someone's mouth. It can be incredibly sensual to receive it. It's all about reaching a certain mental place that's very sophisticated. It's almost impossible to talk about in clear terms." And he observed, profoundly: "I don't think anyone understands sexuality. What's it about? It's about an unknown, which is why it's so exciting."¹³

The history of Western art is much populated with images of Christ nailed to the cross—usually wearing a loincloth, sometimes entirely naked. Wagstaff, who specialized in early Renaissance Italian painting during his graduate studies at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, would surely have shown Mapplethorpe renderings of Christ from that period, some of which have decidedly erotic overtones.

The sexual symbolism and religious attitudes surrounding the body of Christ are the subjects of art-historian Leo Steinberg's controversial 1983 essay, "The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion." As Steinberg writes:

[Christ's] manhood differs from that of all humankind in one crucial respect, which once again involves the pudenda; he was without sin—not only without sins, but exempt from the genetically transmitted stain of Original Sin. . . . How then could he who restores human nature to sinlessness be shamed by the sexual factor in his humanity? And is not this reason enough to render Christ's sexual member, even like the stigmata, an object of *ostentatio*?¹⁴

Steinberg makes his case with examples of the Christ figure painted at times with an erection, under drapery but very apparent. "Is it conceivable that Christian artists would assign the erection motif to the figure of the dead Christ?" Steinberg muses. "Are these works sacrilege or still affirmative Christian art? It is no far cry . . . no straining leap of imagination to equate penile erection, reciprocally, with flesh vivified."¹⁵

The sixteenth-century German master Lucas Cranach the Elder offers us an example of this motif in his *Holy Trinity in a Glory of Angels* (1515–18; fig. 13). While it may seem implausible to draw an association between Cranach and Mapplethorpe, there is without doubt a point of connection in this theme of "flesh vivified." Cranach's painting presents Christ's (covered) erection in the context of divinity. For Cranach, divinity was embodied in Christ; for Mapplethorpe, divinity took form in the ultimate aestheticization of man.

While we have no way of knowing whether Mapplethorpe was familiar with Cranach's painting, his approach to the sexuality of his subjects aims for the sublime—a marriage, perhaps, of aesthetic perfection and a state of (spiritual) grace. It seems clear, at any rate, that both the iconography and the formal precepts of such Renaissance works—obviously very familiar to Wagstaff—provided for Mapplethorpe an art-historical precedent for his obdurate formalism, and a model in Catholic imagery for his belief in the spirituality of the flesh.

VITRUVIAN MEN

While Wagstaff provided loyal encouragement for Mapplethorpe's homoerotic work and championed the young artist in the upper precincts of the art world in New York and London, he was privately experimenting with photography himself. Wagstaff never made formal prints of his work, which spans a period of only a few years, beginning in the early 1970s, around the time he started to collect photographs. He had his film processed at a neighborhood commercial photo-lab, which produced 3-by-5-inch prints with white borders. There is clear evidence in these images of an eye informed by art history: Wagstaff's figure studies are deliberately, at times mischievously, imbued with eroticism, yet it appears that he aspired to represent

the male nude with the formal characteristics of the “universal” in art.

Although he never made exhibition prints of this work, Wagstaff’s pictures manifest serious visual curiosity, and are plainly expressive of his newly unharnessed homosexual identity. They were never shown in galleries or published in his lifetime, perhaps because he was simply exploring the medium in order to understand it; moreover, the tension it created in his relationship with Mapplethorpe might well have inhibited Wagstaff’s ambitions as a photographer. Mapplethorpe was emphatic about the boundaries between their roles (which of course served his own ambitions): “You’re the collector,” he would say to Wagstaff. “I’m the artist.”¹⁶ And yet the connection between Wagstaff’s “sketches” with the camera and Mapplethorpe’s finished work is irrefutable.

In more than a few series of images, Wagstaff photographed the human figure in a frame within a frame. In *Figure with Sheet* (ca. 1973; fig. 14), for example, a male nude stands in front of a blue sheet, holding it taut behind him at all four corners with outstretched hands and feet. While the photograph simulates—in vertical terms—a man lying on a bed, the sheet serves as an improvisational device to establish a frame within a frame. The figure, abstracted against and framed within a solid color, takes on pictographic, or even calligraphic form. The body and the pose also allude to depictions of Christ on the cross.

Mapplethorpe, too, often used the frame within a frame to situate the male nude. In *Thomas* (1986; fig. 15), an African-American male nude is framed in a white square box, his hands and feet firmly planted at all four corners (the same model, Thomas Williams, appears in circular frames in plates 136 and 153). The visual similarities between Mapplethorpe’s and Wagstaff’s photographs are obvious, although they were made more than a decade apart. Of course, meaning, intention, and resolution distinguish one from the other: Wagstaff’s framed nude is a playful color photograph, made outdoors in a casual setting. His Caucasian subject, looking directly into the camera, seems to be in control of his own fate in the image; his hands and feet support the blue fabric in which he is framed, and he is free to step out of it at any moment. The highly formalized perfection of Mapplethorpe’s studio-made black-and-white photograph, by contrast, asserts his signature immediately. The African-American figure’s gesture of determination suggests that he is pushing against the walls of the white box, as if he might be trapped. The geometry of the man-made square enclosure is in counterpoint with the organic architecture of the male body, while the subject’s hanging genitalia—or “object of *ostentatio*”—at the very center of the photograph anchors the composition.¹⁷ This, again, is a Christ-like figure. In both images one can also see a variation of Leonardo’s *Vitruvian Man*, a study of proportion and form that likewise universalizes the male figure.

There is no question that Wagstaff’s well-honed art-historical sensibilities had a vital impact on his younger companion. What Mapplethorpe managed to achieve in his art, in turn, was a synthesis of the universal and the transgressive. His work is a marriage of the spiritual and the sexual, absent the dogma of his Catholic past, but infused with its reach for transcendence.

THE EDGE

In 1978 Mapplethorpe made what would become one of his most iconic images: *Self-Portrait* (plate 43), in which he poses with the handle of a whip in his anus—a more defiant response to the kind of prejudice that had led Michals to make *The Unfortunate Man* (see fig. 11). Maybe he was presenting himself as the devil in the eyes of a homophobic society; tauntingly, menacingly, he might have been highlighting the anus as an erotic focal point. One thing is certain: in this succinct and unapologetic visual confrontation, he puts himself forth as the very target of cultural disdain, an *enfant terrible* flaunting a kiss-my-ass gesture as sexual provocation—in gleeful defiance of bourgeois convention.

Such conventions were toppling all around. Mapplethorpe and several of his contemporaries—George Dureau, Peter Hujar, and Arthur Tress among them—foregrounded the penis in their photographs as an object of contemplation and desire. Hujar’s *Bruce de Saint Croix* (1976; fig. 16) was shocking at the time for many people; an erect penis had never before been photo-

Figure 14
Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr.
(American, 1921–1987),
Figure with Sheet,
ca. 1973. Kodacolor print,
12.7 × 7.6 cm (5 × 3 in.).
Los Angeles, Getty
Research Institute,
Samuel J. Wagstaff Papers,
2005.M.46, box 20





graphed with such formal regard. Dureau—a direct influence on Mapplethorpe—photographed dwarves, as in *Roosevelt Singleton* (1978; fig. 17), as well as men with disabilities, in the nude with both tenderness and desire. Tress made visual puns out of the homoerotic: in *Superman Fantasy, New York* (1977) he depicts with some irony the symbolic power of the phallus, his nude subject brandishing his own semi-erect penis through a cardboard cut-out of Superman—as if the erection turns all men into Superman in their own minds.

In his 1992 essay “Playing with the Edge: The Photographic Achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe,” Arthur Danto explores the characteristics of “transgression” in the artist’s work. The “edge” of Danto’s title might refer to the societal boundaries Mapplethorpe courageously violated; or it might allude to the razor-sharp “edginess” of Mapplethorpe’s persona; in purely visual terms, the “edge” also might be a reference to the optical precision with which the pho-

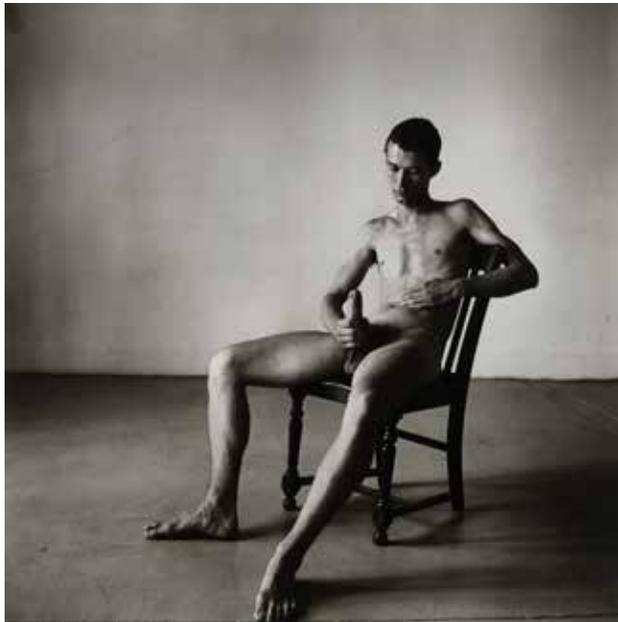


Figure 15
Robert Mapplethorpe (American, 1946–1989), *Thomas*, 1986. Gelatin silver print, 61 × 50.8 cm (24 × 20 in.). Promised gift of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation to the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Figure 16
Peter Hujar (American, 1934–1987), *Bruce de Saint Croix*, 1976. Gelatin silver print, 50.8 × 40.6 cm (20 × 16 in.). New York, Peter Hujar Archive

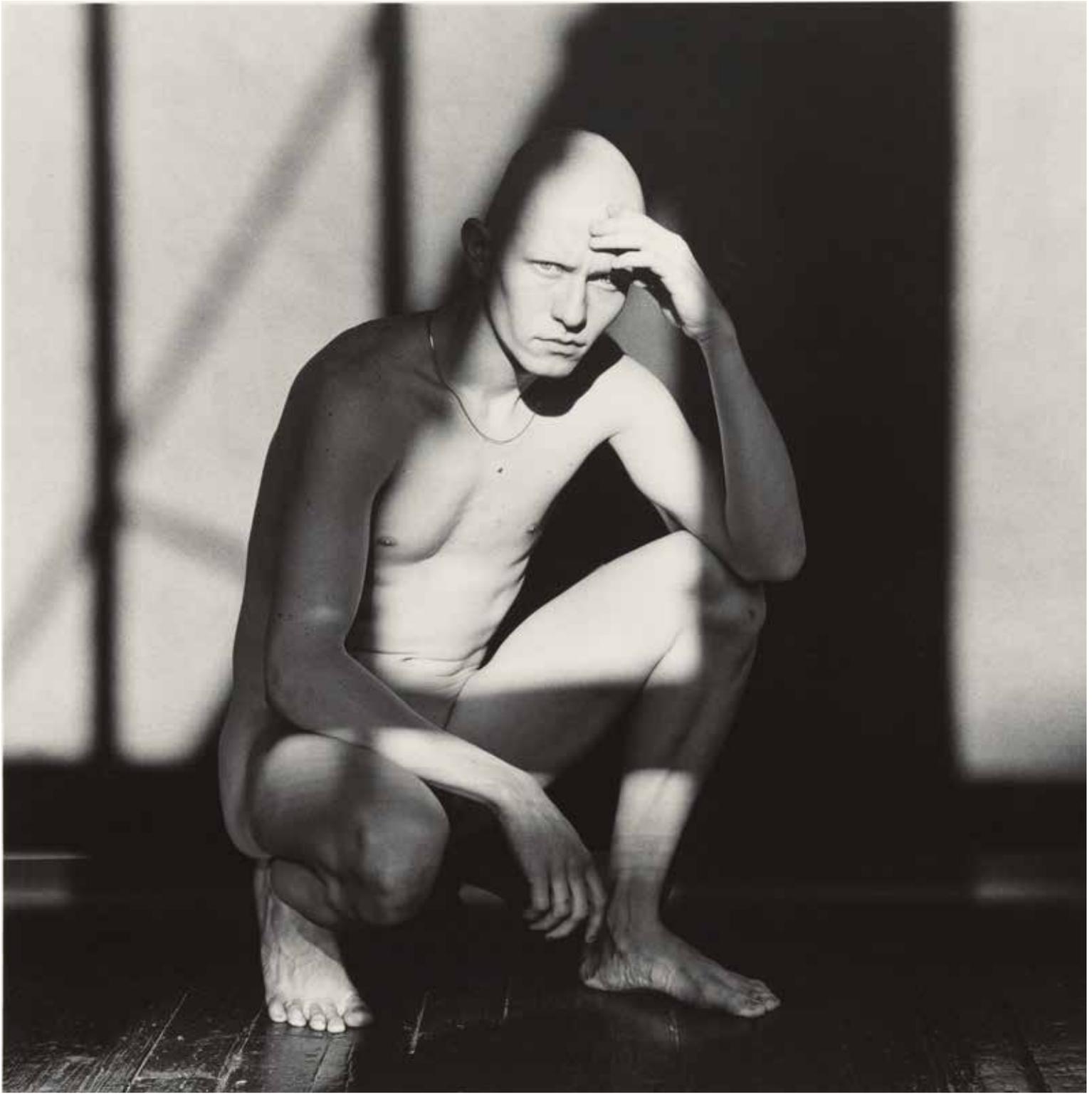
Figure 17
George Dureau (American, 1930–2014), *Roosevelt Singleton*, 1978. Gelatin silver print, 50.8 × 40.6 cm (20 × 16 in.). New Orleans, Arthur Rodger Gallery

tographer rendered the lines of his nude figures, with classical—sometimes even minimalist—elegance. Famously, Mapplethorpe’s ambition was to create fully artistic images that would be as arousing as those in porn magazines: to achieve “smut that is also art,” as Danto puts it. “In a perfectly analogous way, he played with the edge that separates art and mere pornography mainly because he cherished the feeling the latter induced in him in those first powerful experiences with crude images.”¹⁸

Robert Sherman (1979; fig. 18) is one of three Mapplethorpe photographs that appear in the catalogue for *The Male Nude*, published a year after the Marcuse Pfeifer show.¹⁹ The circumstances that led to this image reveal the extent to which Mapplethorpe relied on the gay community—itsself still very much on the “edge” of mainstream society—when seeking models for his photographs.

In the 1970s, the heart of gay life in New York City was downtown, out of sight and after hours. Like many other urban gay men—partitioning their social lives from their sexual escapades—Mapplethorpe arranged two-tiered evenings, first going to concerts, openings, or dinner with friends, and later cruising the West Village gay bars along the waterfront. This nightly ritual served dual purposes for Mapplethorpe. He was in pursuit of sexual pleasure while at the same time prowling for models to photograph.

One night at the Mineshaft, one of the city’s most serious s/m clubs, Mapplethorpe noticed an unusual-looking young man with alopecia, an autoimmune disease that causes the loss of all body hair. Mapplethorpe introduced himself and expressed an interest in photographing him. Sherman, who was barely twenty-three and newly arrived from the suburbs of Connecticut, recalls that he initially found Mapplethorpe intimidating, but finally agreed. They met at a later point at the Mineshaft; Mapplethorpe then brought the young man back to his loft, where



they had sex and spent the night together. As the sun was coming up, Mapplethorpe roused the sleeping Sherman to photograph him in the early-morning light. The resulting picture shows the young man crouched naked in a geometric pattern of light and shadows cast from the outside fire escape on the studio wall behind him.²⁰

The anecdote sheds some light on Mapplethorpe's approach to his subjects. "I prefer people I know, or at least people I have had conversations with, because it is about a relationship, between photographer and subject," Mapplethorpe told Danto. "I'd like to think ideally I could hang out with the person and ideally maybe have a better experience photographing them."²¹

Mapplethorpe was at this point, according to Danto, "perhaps the artist of his own time."²² However, in the 1970s, museum photography departments—many of them relatively newly established—were largely engaged with classic street photography, the vogue for the "snapshot" aesthetic, or new color photography by the likes of Stephen Shore and William Eggleston. Most museums did not yet acknowledge homoerotically infused imagery, despite the fact that it represented an increasingly influential subculture, in society as well as in the world of fine-art photography.

As Mapplethorpe was cruising the gay world for sex and models, Wagstaff was playing an instrumental role in establishing the art market for photography, and within that market introducing his appreciation for the work of Mapplethorpe. Wagstaff's activities in the auction houses attracted a small cabal of new photography collectors who were buying photographs along-side him; many of them were gay men (George R. Rinhart, Paul F. Walter, John C. Waddell, Pierre Apraxine, for example), who went on to amass significant collections of their own. Indeed, the importance of the gay sensibility in shaping or confirming the canon of photographic history is indisputable. These collections are today among the photography holdings of some of the world's major museums and institutions: the J. Paul Getty Museum (Wagstaff); the Museum of Modern Art (Walter); and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Waddell, as well as the Howard Gilman collection, of which Apraxine was curator).

Mapplethorpe's work maintains a balance on the edge between the classical and the (homo-)erotic that no other artist has quite achieved. While he was influenced by the pornographic imagery of his youth, and the newly liberated gay culture of New York, his work transcends the intent of arousing sexual desire: Mapplethorpe's subject matter—whether a nude or a flower or the leather paraphernalia of sadomasochism—is always sexualized, though it is not always sexual. His originality is characterized in the manifestation of his own desire and his aspiration toward a transcendent visual perfection. For Mapplethorpe, such visual perfection was close to spiritual transformation. This transcendence was always his goal, whether in hot sexual pursuit, or in the arctic elegance he sought in his photography.

Figure 18
Robert Mapplethorpe
(American, 1946–1989),
Robert Sherman, 1979.
Gelatin silver print,
35.1 × 35 cm (13³/₁₆ ×
13³/₄ in.). Promised
gift of the Robert
Mapplethorpe Foundation
to the J. Paul Getty Trust
and the Los Angeles
County Museum of Art

NOTES

- 1 Mapplethorpe, quoted in Patricia Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe: A Biography* (New York: Random House: 1995), 113.
- 2 See Rodger Streitmatter, *From Perverts to Fab Five: The Media's Changing Depiction of Gay Men and Lesbians* (New York: Taylor and Francis, Routledge, 2009), 9.
- 3 Florence Berkman, "Atheneum Curator Explains Modern Art: A Visual Language," *Hartford Times*, November 25, 1961.
- 4 Richard Meyer, *Art and Queer Culture* (New York: Phaidon, 2013), 131.
- 5 Sam Wagstaff, quoted in Paul Richard, "The Collector the Establishment Trusts," *Washington Post*, February 3, 1978.
- 6 Sam Wagstaff, videotaped television interview (n.d.). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, Robert Mapplethorpe papers, Box 196 (2011.M.20).
- 7 Christie's New York, Sale 2847, May 13, 2014, Lot 23.
- 8 See Gene Thornton, "From the Ideal to the Erotic," *New York Times*, June 18, 1978.
- 9 Holly Solomon, interviewed in the documentary film *Robert Mapplethorpe* (2006), Paul Tschinkel, dir., produced in association with Art/New York.
- 10 Germano Celant, in Harald Fricke and Oliver Koerner von Gustorf, "A Beautiful Angel with Something Devilish About Him: An Interview with Germano Celant," *DB [Deutsche Bank] ArtMag*, no. 21, July–September 2004, 2; <http://www.db-artmag.com/archiv/2004/e/6/1/254.html> (accessed April 15, 2015).
- 11 Mapplethorpe, quoted in Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe*, 17–18.
- 12 Arthur C. Danto, "Playing with the Edge: The Photographic Achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe" (1992), in *Mapplethorpe*, (2nd ed., New York: teNeues, 2007), 330. Danto's text was also published as an autonomous book of the same title (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).
- 13 Mapplethorpe, quoted in Danto, "Playing with the Edge," 325–26.
- 14 Leo Steinberg, "The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion," *October* 25 (Summer 1983): 17.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 16 Mapplethorpe, quoted in Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe*, 135.
- 17 Philip Gefter, "Sam Wagstaff: The Photographer," *Getty Research Journal*, no. 2 (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Trust, 2010), 201.
- 18 Danto, "Playing with the Edge," 325–26.
- 19 *The Male Nude: A Survey in Photography*, essay by Shelley Rice (New York: Marcuse Pfeifer Gallery, 1979).
- 20 Robert Sherman described being photographed in "Working with Mapplethorpe," a panel discussion at the Getty Center, Los Angeles, January 9, 2013. Along with Sherman, the panel included Brian English and Judy Linn; it was moderated by the author.
- 21 Mapplethorpe, quoted in Danto, "Playing with the Edge," 45.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 325–26.