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Art in America

Generation X: Catherine Opie on Robert Mapplethorpe



Catherine Opie: *Self Portrait / Pervert*, 1994, chromogenic print, 40 by 30 inches.
Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles and Lehmann Maupin,
New York and Hong Kong. © Catherine Opie.

When the traveling retrospective "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment" arrived at Cincinnati's Contemporary Art Center (CAC) in 1990, it provoked one of the most notorious episodes of that era's culture wars. As Robert Reid-Pharr discusses [in his feature](#) on the celebrated photographer for *Art in America's* March issue, both the CAC and its director, Dennis Barrie, were indicted by local authorities on obscenity charges. Though Barrie and the museum were eventually acquitted, this act of official censorship became a national scandal and shaded Mapplethorpe's legacy.

Last November, FotoFocus organized a conference at the CAC to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the exhibition and to celebrate members of the city's art community who stood up for Mapplethorpe's work. A high point of the conference was artist Catherine Opie's moving exposition of Mapplethorpe's "X Portfolio" (1978), the series of explicit black-and-white images—many depicting extreme S&M practices—that were at the center of the 1989 controversy. Opie, who first saw the images while she was a student at the San Francisco Art Institute, implored her audience to look closely at the photographs and understand them as singular expressions of visceral experience.

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In some ways, Opie was an obvious choice to discuss these images. Among her most well-known photographs, including *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994), are challenging depictions of practices related to the gay leather community. Opie's formal precision and meticulous attention to photography as a medium also rival's Mapplethorpe's legendary technical mastery. But in a more nuanced sense, the range of Opie's work—which includes tender portraits and dreamy landscapes—also underscores how the polarizing rhetoric prevalent in the culture wars, pitting a one-dimensional understanding Mapplethorpe against an equally superficial notion of moral propriety, obscures the real diversity, warmth, and inclusivity of marginalized subcultures.

This month, as the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#) and the [J. Paul Getty Museum](#) mount the retrospective, "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium" (through July 31), *Art in America* has revisited the artist's work, presenting new scholarship and re-publishing [important essays from our archives](#). To conclude this series, I reached out to Opie, who spoke to me by phone from her Los Angeles home about Mapplethorpe's aesthetic legacy, the victories and losses of the culture wars, and the challenges art institutions continue to face in the present.

WILLIAM S. SMITH Tell me about your first encounter with Mapplethorpe's work?

CATHERINE OPIE I came across it by going to the Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco, in the early 1980s. I saw the "X Portfolio," which the gallery had in a back office. They weren't showing this at the San Francisco Art Institute!

SMITH What did you find most productive about these images for your own development as a photographer?

OPIE I was really impressed by Mapplethorpe's ability to be completely formal and yet to be radical in terms of subject matter. I had never seen the leather community represented that way before. You certainly had other artists working with that subject, but it was never "mainstream" art, it was always on the fringes, staying within the gay community. Mapplethorpe broke down some barriers by trying to create these highly aestheticized moments that also represented his own personal desire.

SMITH Do you think the work in the "X Portfolio" retains some of that initial charge you experienced, now that imagery of all kinds is easily available online?

OPIE Absolutely. I think people are still shocked by the formal issue of a finger going up the head of a penis, or the crushed ball image. It's really visceral. It's titillating. Certainly, this is not the only representation of the leather community anymore, but, especially within the fine art context, we really do go back to Mapplethorpe's work. And I think that people are still surprised by it. Britt [Salvesen] organized an exhibition at LACMA [in 2012], "XYZ," that included these works as well as Mapplethorpe's later "Y" and "Z" portfolios. The show was not censored but certainly people reacted strongly to the work. Maybe it's not shock. I think it's really hard to shock people these days. But definitely visitors were experiencing awe, I suppose, on different levels: Awe of their own sexuality being challenged, and awe in terms of how incredibly precise the images are.

SMITH Is something lost when photographs such as these become part of the "mainstream" art world? There's value in boundary breaking, of course, but is it possible to retain a sense of intimacy, unruliness and even danger, within the institutional context?

OPIE I've been able to show in museums such as the Whitney [Museum of American Art] and the Guggenheim. But maybe people wouldn't have thought about work like *Self-Portrait/Pervert* in the same way if they saw it in a different context. In museums, work can be seen as Art with a capital "A."

SMITH What does that status imply?

OPIE Well it doesn't imply anything for me, quite frankly. I think work is work, and it's great for an artist to have the support of institutions. But I certainly made work previously without ever having had exhibitions. Artists make the work they want to make because they want to enact their voice—regardless of the audience.

SMITH We met in Cincinnati at a conference that assessed one of the most intense episodes of the culture wars of the 1980s and '90s. Do you think this is something we've gotten past as a country, is the CAC controversy part of the distant past?

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OPIE We're still going to be confronting it; there's still censorship. Museums aren't under attack in the same direct way, but the culture wars were very successful in defunding art institutions. Unfortunately we have no individual grants from the [National Endowment for the Arts] anymore. The museum shows that the NEA is funding art, for the most part, very safe. During the Obama administration we certainly saw funding go up for the arts, in regards to the NEA, but we're also at a place in which institutions are constantly struggling with philanthropy. I think that because of the culture wars, institutions, possibly, may have more self-censorship as a curatorial practice—and I question that.

SMITH What are you drawing from Mapplethorpe's work today, if anything?

OPIE Even though I looked at Mapplethorpe, I can't say that he was a direct influence. We are both really interested in formal issues. Mapplethorpe and I both really looked at painting—a lot—in terms of composition. So there are certain similarities. But I think the similarities are about how formality exists in the work; and I'm not necessarily having a conversation with Mapplethorpe. I would say my own experiences as part of a radical, queer culture, living in San Francisco, and being part of the leather community was more important. And people like Gail Rubin and Pat Califia and Dorothy Allison—these really amazing radical feminists that were also involved with the leather community—they were my influences. But that doesn't mean that Mapplethorpe didn't allow me to see something important. Mapplethorpe was bold, and I've also been bold at different moments in my life. Encountering the "X Portfolio" back then—it offered a certain kind of permission to make work that was bold.

<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/generation-x-catherine-opie-on-robert-mapplethorpe-1/>