

Robert Mapplethorpe, Portraits

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Eve Sarandon/ Amurri by Robert Mapplethorpe

Artist Rooms, a new collection of international contemporary art owned and managed by the National Galleries of Scotland and the Tate, consists of 725 works displayed in 50 individual rooms by 25 artists.

Gifted to the nation by Anthony d'Offay with assistance from the National Heritage Memorial Fund, The Art Fund, and the Scottish and UK Governments, the collection is intended to provide access to work by significant artists of the post war period, including Joseph Beuys, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Robert Mapplethorpe, Gilbert & George, Anselm Kiefer, Jeff Koons, Richard Long, Gerhard Richter, Ed Ruscha and Diane Arbus, with selected rooms touring to regional centres throughout the UK.

The current display of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe at IMAG illustrates one of the collection's four thematic strands, the portrait. It presents a selection of work drawn from the d'Offay donation of 64 black and white photographs. This is a fascinating exhibition on many levels with some superb examples of the art of portraiture and photography from an extraordinary and challenging artist.

Originally trained in painting and sculpture, Mapplethorpe's depiction of the human body owes much to his understanding of Classical sculpture, form and tone. The high-contrast tonality of his images and superb use of light illuminate human subject matter in a way that is both incredibly beautiful and disturbing.

Mapplethorpe was equally capable of depicting the captivating innocence and unselfconsciousness of childhood in an image such as *Lindsay Key* (1985) or exploring an adult world of experience with a characteristically uncompromising gaze. His portrait of *Nick* (1977), for example, is an intensely dark image, the piercing stare of

the leather clad sitter matched by the menace of his lengthening shadow. Mapplethorpe's photography reveals an understanding of light and darkness on every level in a union of technique and ideas.

This is exemplified by two of the most beautiful and affecting images in the show; Mapplethorpe's portrait of *Eve Sarandon/ Amurri* and his *Self Portrait* (1988), both taken a year before the artist's death. Hung facing each other at opposite ends of the exhibition space, both images are extremely poignant in their own right and create an interesting dialogue in relation to each other.

Mapplethorpe's image of Eve the child emerges from a pure dark ground, her pale face and eyes radiant with light and hope. She faces the viewer and camera openly, relaxed and cheerful, a toy rabbit in her arms, hair in braids, the white delicacy of a lace collar framing her exuberant face. It is a moment in time that we know will pass in the life of the child and it is impossible even in the joy of this image not to also feel a profound sense of loss.

Though Mapplethorpe's more controversial images may be difficult to relate to, there is no doubt as to the universality or power of his depiction of humanity in the face of *Eve Sarandon* or in his *Self Portrait* (1988). This image of Mapplethorpe, his head disengaged from the body and slightly out of focus emerges from the dark, while in the foreground the artist's hand is thrust forward clutching a staff adorned with a skull.

The artist positions the object and himself as a *memento mori* for the viewer, his eyes weary, the grasp of his hand steadfast and determined. The theatricality of the image is equalled by its human vulnerability; it is an image of final confrontation in death for both the artist and audience.

A frustration in viewing this exhibition is that the only accompanying information about the work, the labelling, focuses on the celebrity of his subjects, providing little information about the craft of Mapplethorpe's images or his technique.

The status of figures such as Marianne Faithfull, Patti Smith, Truman Capote, William Burroughs, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Willem de Kooning or Roy Lichtenstein is the main focus of the explanatory wall text. The way in which Mapplethorpe pushed the boundaries of his medium and of subject matter is not really part of the display in this single artist room.

I did not feel that this snapshot of his work would actually provide the opportunity for greater understanding of it. The main draw of this exhibition in its current form is public fascination with the human face, fame and infamy.

The irony of IMAG having access to national collections is displaying them in a building completely unsuitable as a gallery, with no regular programme of educational events to accompany its exhibitions. The constraints of the actual space and access mean that the parameters of what can actually be displayed in terms of scale and quantity of work will always be minimal and tokenistic.

In effect local audience has potential access to one Mapplethorpe room instead of three. The exhibition gives a taste of the artist's work, but does not provide context in terms of his oeuvre or facilitate in depth consideration of the images by the general public. While touring a show from a major collection enables politicians to tick an

access box, real access to art is a more complicated issue, especially in a region lacking a basic facility to see work, a track record of adequate publicity for public exhibitions or consistent provision for visual art education.

At the time of writing there was no additional information on the show, the artist, *Artist Rooms* as a wider project or links to the Tate's web pages on the IMAG website that might actually facilitate further engagement with the work. Whilst it is wonderful to be granted access to part of this collection the act of the loan by itself simply doesn't go far enough.

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