

SEAN KELLY

Furino, Giaco. "Curating Robert Mapplethorpe's Legendary Polaroids," *The Creators Project*, November 18, 2015.

the
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[Photos] Curating Robert Mapplethorpe's Legendary Polaroids



ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE, "Patti Smith and Judy Linn, c. 1974" © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York

Robert Mapplethorpe was an artist whose works often caused such a stir they triggered debates and lawsuits over the nature of art. A new show of his photography, featuring Polaroids taken from 1970 to 1975 of his friends and lovers, just began in NYC to mark what would have been his 69th birthday and the 25th anniversary of the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati's "not guilty" ruling for obscenity charges after showing his work. The Creators Project speaks with Sean Kelly, owner of Sean Kelly Gallery and curator of Robert Mapplethorpe: Unique, about what went into curating the commemorative show.

We've represented Robert Mapplethorpe's estate and foundation for many years now. And a large part of Robert's oeuvre are these early Polaroids," Kelly explains, "We've been at the forefront of re imagining and recreating curation that deals with Robert's work in a frank and different way. And yet we had never, up until this point, actually focused on the Polaroids which, in many respects, are the beginning of the fundament of the work. They map out and establish a lot of the themes and ideas Robert would work out in his work until his untimely death in 1988."

Kelly explains how the Polaroids work in relation to Mapplethorpe's oeuvre: "The obvious way that they function is like drawings, they work for him like drawings in the sense that an artist will make a drawing before they make a painting or sculpture to figure out ideas and to flesh out how they're going to work formally and aesthetically with the idea that they have."

"Perhaps less obvious is the idea that Polaroids, before the era of the cellphone and selfies, really functioned as an intimate way of making images that were very private." Kelly elaborates, "So what Polaroid film allowed Robert to do at a very important and formative moment in his career, was to work in private with his lovers and his friends to make a large body of work that explored his sexuality. And that defined him as a gay man. So in a pre-selfie sense, these Polaroids, which you could take in the privacy of your own home, you could expose within five minutes, and where there was no negative, allowed you to make images which were intimate and private and which could not be traced."

But are these Polaroids, which are often considered a quick medium, antithetical to the careful, meticulous Robert Mapplethorpe we come to know in his later work? "I think you see him being very, very particular. I think the 29 images in the show really go to the heart of all of the formal conversations that would be constructed through Robert's body of work until he died. I think you actually see him, in a very visceral way, working out those ideas very clearly. We can map out, and find precedents for later images that became iconic and very famous."



ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE, "Lucy, Paris, 1973" © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York



ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE, "Untitled (Hand and Mattress), c. 1973" © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York



ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE, "Untitled (Peter Berlin), c. 1974" © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York



ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE. Installation view of Unique at Sean Kelly, New York. November 7 - December 19, 2015. Photography: Jason Wyche, New York. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York



ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE, "Untitled (Tony, London), 1973" © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York