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Picture Imperfect

Race, sexuality and patriarchy

EVAN MOFFITT IN OPINION | 12 MAY 24

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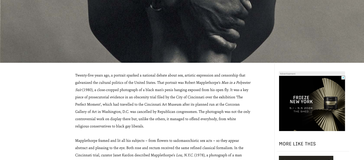


Twenty-five years ago, a portrait sparked a national debate about sex, artistic expression and censorship that galvanized the cultural politics of the United States. That portrait was Robert Mapplethorpe's *Man in Polyester Suit* (1981), a close-cropped photograph of a black man's pants hanging exposed from his open fly. It was a key piece of prosecutorial evidence in an obscenity trial that ensued after the Cincinnati museum that exhibited The Perfect Moment, which had travelled to the Cincinnati Art Museum after its planned run at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. was cancelled by Mapplethorpe's concerns. The photograph was the only controversial work on display that day, unlike the others, it managed to offend everybody, from white religious conservatives to black gay liberals.

Mapplethorpe fanned and lit all his subjects – from flowers to sadomasochistic sex acts – so they appear abstract and glowing in the eye. Both race and sexual transgression were the scenes refined classical formalism. In Cincinnati, the prosecution's lawyer therefore described Mapplethorpe's (an black, W.H.C.) 1976 as photograph of a man sticking a finger into his urethra, as a work of artistic value because 'It's a central image, very symmetrical, a very ordered, classical composition.' The controversy of this approach also constituted its radicalism, at a time when alternative sensations were less accepted and, in some states, homosexuality was still censored and criminalized.

Robert Mapplethorpe, *Man in Polyester Suit*, 1981, gelatin silver print, 50 x 40 cm. Courtesy the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Cincinnati trial and the 'culture wars' that followed, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Getty Museum have jointly acquired a lot of the photographer's archive from the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Its arrival in Los Angeles was celebrated by The Perfect Medium', a sweeping dual museum retrospective that opened in March. But, 25 years later, it isn't the photographs' sexual change that unsettles most. Many critics and historians who failed then to see their problematic racial dynamics now clearly identify them now. So, what has changed?

In the early 1990s, homophobic anti-sodomy statutes and brutal 'broken windows' policing ravaged the gay black body. Black people mostly appeared in the media as perpetrators of drug violence or victims of AIDS. Now, white gays enjoy enticing presence in film and television, which feels more – gay and straight – consistently oppose on the nightly news as victims of police brutality and according to figures released this year by the Centers for Disease Control, 44 percent of all new HIV diagnoses in the US are among African Americans, though they comprise only 14 percent of the population. Not much, it seems, has changed. The principal aim of the Black Lives Matter movement has been to restore equanimity to these tragedies that, as Judith Butler put it, black bodies are bodies that matter, dreaming of the same legal protections and access to healthcare that whites enjoy. But the lifeless bodies of Michael Brown, Laquan MacDonald and nearly a dozen others, seen in the photographs and video footage of their deaths used as court evidence, mentioned little to the jurors who acquitted the cops that killed them. The question of representation has nearly been as urgent as it is today.

Robert Mapplethorpe, *Man in Polyester Suit*, 1981, gelatin silver print, 50 x 40 cm. Courtesy the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

The Republican politician who denounced Man in a Polyester Suit believed the openly gay photographer's emphasis on male sex, if not sensuality, justified the picture as homosexual and therefore, in contrast to Christian values. Black gay artists and critics were more conflicted. Fahima Metzar recognized an object (in dense), but into refuse stereotypic capacity to stand as for an entire body perpetuated a racial stereotype. He quoted Essex Hemon. One is no longer aware of the Negro, but only of a penis; the Negro [...] is a penis'. The sharpness of polyester suggests that even when wearing a suit, the emblem of homogenous Western ethics, the black man doesn't fit in. Glenn Ligon responded to this sexual objectification with his photographic installation Notes on the Margin of the Black Book (1991-93), a display of Mapplethorpe's anthologized black male portraits annotated with quotes from figures such as Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison.

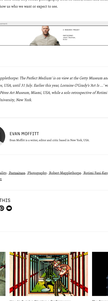
If *Man in a Polyester Suit* is a failed attempt to make part stand for whole – a penis for a man – then Mapplethorpe's other portraits of black men are successful attempts to make whole stand for part: to them, the entire figure becomes a phallus. Take *Jimmy Freeman* (1978), for example: the subject's folded pose turns his body into a pinwheel that spins on a general axis. The outside, athletic body of Freeman, who worked as a Victorian circle, seems tipped straight from a Greek amphora; his muscles are as defiantly as stone. The close cropped buttocks of *Derrick Cross* (1983) are as voluptuously abstract as Brancusi's sculpture bronze. By rolling on a convex hemisphere to white, museum-going audiences Mapplethorpe photographs suggest they deserve the discrimination of 'not' in spine, and not because, of their non-phallic, non-erotic nature. Yet, this aestheticization of racial difference censors the historic violence inflicted upon black skin.

Framing matters, especially in portraiture, where human bodies are at stake.

Rotimi Fani-Kayode, a Nigerian British photographer and contemporary of Mapplethorpe's, produced a dazzling but little-known body of work just a few years before his death from AIDS-related complications in 1989, some of which were shown in New York earlier this year in a compact exhibition at Syracuse University's Palitz Gallery. Fani-Kayode's studio portraits of nude black men elegantly meld Western Europe and West Africa, black and gay culture – a revisionism that highlights the challenge of marginalization on multiple fronts (sexuality, race, nationality). Unlike Mapplethorpe's classical black and white, the colour photographs in Fani-Kayode's last series, 'Nothing to Lose' (1987–89), are sumptuously baroque: chiaroscuro shades of umber and scarlet, dragery, flowers and fruit all recall the paintings of Caravaggio. In the late 1980s, at the height of the AIDS epidemic and a resurgence of political conservatism on both sides of the Atlantic, Fani-Kayode and others – from Andrea Sawyer to Derek Jarman and Madonna – incorporated baroque aesthetics into their work as a way to uncover the perverse, queer desire hidden not just within the canon of art history, but the dominant social, political and cultural institutions that shape it. If Mapplethorpe's quotations are ironiquely, Fani-Kayode's are subversive.

In the arresting photograph *Gold Phallus* (1989), a crouched figure wears a Venetian plague doctor mask, a 16th-century emblem of the magnet. His penis, painted gold, mirrors the mask's gilteyed proboscis, while a strong total assumed in shall senses to leg in two directions. By focusing one gaze on the golden phallus of his title, the photograph recalls *Man in a Polyester Suit*, but unlike that violently class-cropped image, Fani-Kayode replaces the crime of objectification by including the figure's full body in the frame. *Gold Phallus* depicts a man enslaved by white desire, which the mask suggests is a lice of death.

Lyle Ashton Harris, 'Whanki LG OLED', 2024, inkjet on Hahnemühle 100 g. Courtesy the artist and New York Conflict Gallery, Paris



In Fani-Kayode's earlier black and white *Untitled* (1987), the male model's muscular thighs to contrapuntal could belong to Derrick Cross, were it not for the fanying British flag that hangs from his left hand, like the ornamental drapery that lends structural support to marble sculptures. In turn, fanying our gaze on the golden phallus of his title, the photograph recalls *Man in a Polyester Suit*, but, unlike that violently class-cropped image, Fani-Kayode replaces the crime of objectification by including the figure's full body in the frame. *Gold Phallus* depicts a man enslaved by white desire, which the mask suggests is a lice of death.

Such ambiguous symbolism reflects an ambiguous relationship to photography. As a gay black man, Fani-Kayode was doubly invisible: subject to white gay men's racism and black Africans' homophobia. In the 19th century, European employed photography as an extension of phrenology to justify colonial subjugation. Photography has long been used to marginalize and to solidify binary ways of thinking. Fani-Kayode's work acknowledges that photography can never fully capture black gay diasporic experience, since nothing truly can. The photography has no claim to truth but, instead, fashion a self-aware fantasy.

Fani-Kayode's work acknowledges that photography can never fully capture black gay diasporic experience. The photographs lay no claim to truth but, instead, fashion a self-aware fantasy.

Like 'Nothing to Lose', Lyle Ashton Harris's series The Good Life' toys with racial and sexual fantasy. In it, intersectional subjects parody tropes of black and queer identity. For Venus Hottentot 2000 (1994), fellow photographer Renee Cox posed with prosthetic breasts and butt as a millennial Saartjie Baartman, the 19th-century Khoi woman paraded around Europe as the 'Hottentot Venus'. Cox's dark body pads could not against her lighter skin, but the pears with pink, as if to say that no stereotype can defeat her. In another photograph, Saint Michael Hottentot (1994), Harris himself dons a cop uniform and red lipstick, parodying historically discriminatory, nasty police forces while caressing Hewer, an unarmed black graffiti artist who died mysteriously in New York Police Department custody in 1983. Hewer's accusing officers were all acquitted, a poignant fact in light of black activist Sandra Bland's unexplained death in a Texas jail cell last year, and the subsequent lack of indictments.)

At the 1983 African-American Day Parade in Harlem, Lorraine O'Grady helmed a parade float honoring a massive gilded picture frame and a slave emblazoned with the performance title *Art is ...* (Lowe New York's Jeweler). Avenue. At various points along the parade route, O'Grady and fellow performers hoisted the picture frames jumped off the float and invited members of the crowd to pose inside frame. Photographic documenting the event show joyful people eager to become works of art. O'Grady's performance acknowledges the historic ability to restore the power of self-representation to those historically deprived of it.

Lorraine O'Grady, *Art is ...* (Art Parade Commemorating Crispus Attucks), 1983, gelatin silver print, 50 x 40 cm. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York and Stella Lemonade, Cambridge, MA, © 2024 Lorraine O'Grady

Portrait photography exemplifies a principle contradiction of its medium: it claims to capture the essential qualities of its subjects more accurately than painting or sculpture, while also being highly contingent on the styles and technique of its practitioners. But is a portrait ever not a fiction? *Man in a Polyester Suit* makes this fiction plain, though that does not make it a hoax. Perhaps it's surface is immoral. But Mapplethorpe's portraits honestly and accurately portray their sitters, photography is not a 'perfect medium', as the LACMA and Getty show's title suggests. But that's why framing matters, especially in portraiture, where human bodies are at stake. Mapplethorpe's framing reduces subjects with complex humanity to centered metric objects. The portraits by Fani-Kayode, Harris and O'Grady, on the other hand, contribute to a different form of photography, one in which posters too not behind the camera but in front of it. By giving their models the agency to perform freely before their lens, they rescue photography from its secret, sexist and homophobic past. Their portraits refuse to chose us who we want or expect to see.

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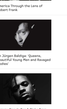

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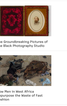

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