

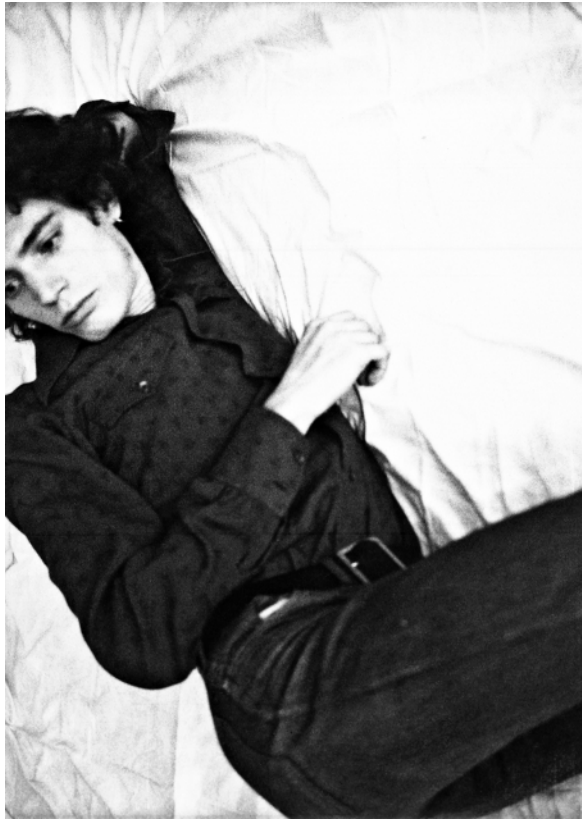
There is a stream of thinking in the West that associates “the beautiful” with, as Kant calls it, a “disinterested pleasure.” “Interested” pleasures like pornography and propaganda were contrasted with more noble pursuits, for example, the nude or classical dramas. This *disinterest* lays the foundations for high modernism, its formalisms, its universalist fallacies, the abstractions that purport to be thin as the canvases they are painted on, the movement vocabularies that pretend to come from the deepest recesses of the human soul, the radical borrowings that see all forms as somehow “neutral.”

Though several generations of artists and thinkers have made clear that there is no such thing as “disinterested pleasure,” for a certain era of makers who lived on the cusp of the transition from high modernism to the hydra of forms that have followed, they discovered in the double-speak of modernist “universalities” a certain liberation. Robert Mapplethorpe was one such artist who photographed bodies, practices, and selves that were considered abject or taboo at the time but was able to do so with the assurance that his interest in these forms was “disinterested.” He said, about the work he showed in his 1986 solo exhibition “Black Males,” “I’m photographing them as form, in the same way I’m reading the flowers.”

Mapplethorpe’s work, its beauty and its controversies, its legal challenges, most notably the obscenity trial in Cincinnati surrounding the exhibit “The Perfect Moment,” all spun on the question of this “disinterested” beauty. Were these photographs pornography or were they nudes?

But what are we to make of the work in our current moment of understanding, that there

are no disinterested pleasures, that the white marble figures that Mapplethorpe referenced so cleanly in his photographs were originally splashed with vibrant color, that the valorization of Greco-Roman bronzes or nearly grainless black and white photography is as culturally specific as saying that the only real music was written by Beethoven. Artists like Glenn



*Self-Portrait, 1988* © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.  
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Ligon, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, and less directly, Catherine Opie, have addressed some of the complications of Mapplethorpe’s oeuvre. Essex Hemphill, Mapplethorpe’s contemporary, who along with Marlon Riggs delineated a set of African-American gay sensibilities, provides an alternative way of viewing some of the same bodies Mapplethorpe depicts, and forms one cornerstone of the present oratorio, *Triptych*

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

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(*Eyes of One on Another*). But still the question lingers: How do we as contemporary viewers acknowledge and embrace all of the ways, all of the vantage points, from which we can see this work?

In *Triptych (Eyes of One on Another)*, Bryce Dessner and korde arrington tuttle, in collab-



Patti Smith, c.1973 © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission.

oration with Kaneza Schaal, Roomful of Teeth, and producer ArKtype, and with texts from Essex Hemphill, Patti Smith, and the Cincinnati obscenity trial, rethink Mapplethorpe's work as not only an intersection of the photographer's interests and multiple positionalities, but also to imagine the work itself as a locus around which various communities find themselves

both included and alienated by the work itself, often at the same time.

The work and its collaborators, who bring to bear performance languages as diverse as Tuvan throat singing techniques, pop, folk, film, and experimental music, 1980's downtown performance, Ailey and classical ballet, inhabit the space between the photographic work and its audiences. Much like the fable of *The Blind Men and the Elephant*, they cobble together a landscape of viewerships. The artists ask questions of the work and of themselves within the work.

Is it possible to imagine these men who are photographed with the impersonal intimacy of flowers, or bronze sculptures, as full human beings, with desires and pleasures of their own? Can we read the desire of the photographer, his conflicts and self-denials, in his steadfast commitment to a classical language that recasts leather daddies and daddy's boys into upper-middle class living room fantasies? Where in this thorny bramble of gazes, objectification, outrage, and intimacy do our own wants and expectations as an audience live?

When Martell Ruffin, the classically trained dancer who functions as a kind of ghost of both Mapplethorpe's subjects and invisible audiences, enters he literalizes the sense of multi-

ple viewerships and makes us aware that as we take in this work and Mapplethorpe's work there are and will be other eyes, other ways of engaging with these bodies, these sounds, these hearts. Beauty is never "disinterested"—it is made of a thousand overlapping interests and wants and cares.

—Christopher Myers