

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Seductive style, chiselled technique...and too beautiful

Paul Taylor summed it neatly when he called Robert Mapplethorpe "Court Photographer of the eighties". This stunning exhibition of 60, square, mainly black and white, Hasselblad-shot photos provides a fine panorama of the master craftsman's concerns over the last 10 years. The black nudes, the erotic flowers, the celebrity portraits, the self portraits, the Lisa Lyons' pictures and even some of the sado-masochistic sexplay pieces are represented.

The exhibition is a scintillating display of the

GALLERY

ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE Photographs 1976-1985. Australian Centre For Contemporary Art, Dallas Brooks Drive, The Domain, South Yarra. Until March 16. Review: JANINA GREEN

sculptural way Mapplethorpe manages two dimensional space. His square formats impose a pacifying, restraining hold on the forms within its territory. Diagonals are overpowered by its dimensions. Dark is always matched by light. The subject never overpowers its background. Curves are balanced by taut lines almost to the

point of abstraction. There is a balance of positive and negative space that you feel you can almost calculate by numbers. The erotic is always cooled down by a formal elegance, that is as cold as ice.

In fact, Mapplethorpe's totally controlling vision turns everything into objects of beauty - otherworldly, ideal, petrified - like classical Greek sculpture. He empties all the forms, objects and sitters alike of their individual frailties. Controversial underworld elements are tamed by this classicising orchestration of composition. Cocks look like flowers and flowers look like cocks.

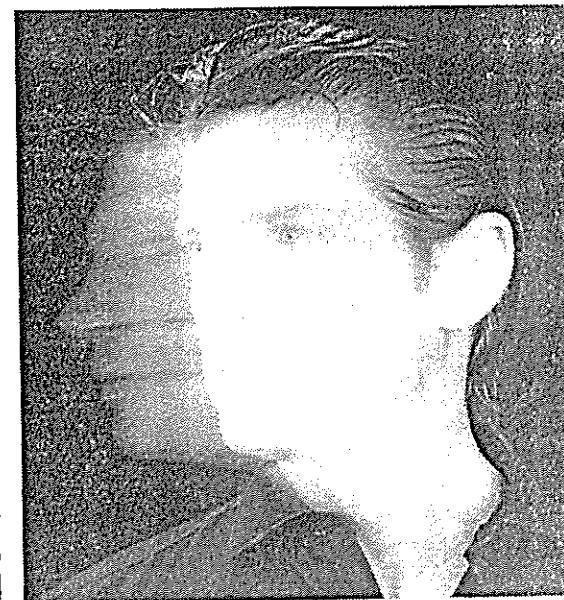
In the three coloured

flower studies you can see the precision of Mapplethorpe's directorship. All three vases are placed in the centre of a tabletop which is exactly one fifth of the dimensions of the format. The orchids are placed in a pivotal central positions. The background, the chief coloured area, has the broad dimensions of the sky in traditional landscape painting, animated only by a strategically placed shadow. The colours in each piece are complementary - burnt orange with emerald, eggshell pink with cream, etc; mellow and matt looking and, oh, so perfect.

What you will remember most likely is the textures

of the surfaces he photographs - even in the portraits. For example in the Alice Neel portrait, snapped with her eyes shut, her crinkly skin is softened by facial hair. Susan Sontag is posed in the stance used by Renaissance Mannerist portrait painters but her face is seen in soft focus, evoking a mood of both superiority and sensitivity. Lisa Lyons is shrouded by a lush velvet madonna veil. And Tim Scott's gelled hair and chiselled profile evokes the grandeur of the archaic fallen warrior.

Mapplethorpe's work is seductive, stylish and technically flawless - too beautiful for its own good.



Robert Mapplethorpe: self-portrait, 1985.