

## ARTS

## ART

GARY CATALANO

## Pictures of sculptural vision

THERE are 60 photographs in the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (Dallas Brooks Drive, The Domain; ends 16 March), all of which were taken between 1976 and 1985.

The two dates which define this 10-year period are important ones. All but unknown in 1976, Mapplethorpe has now come to be looked on as the photographer. In many quarters his images compel the kind of fascinated and avid gaze which those of Diane Arbus did some 15 years ago.

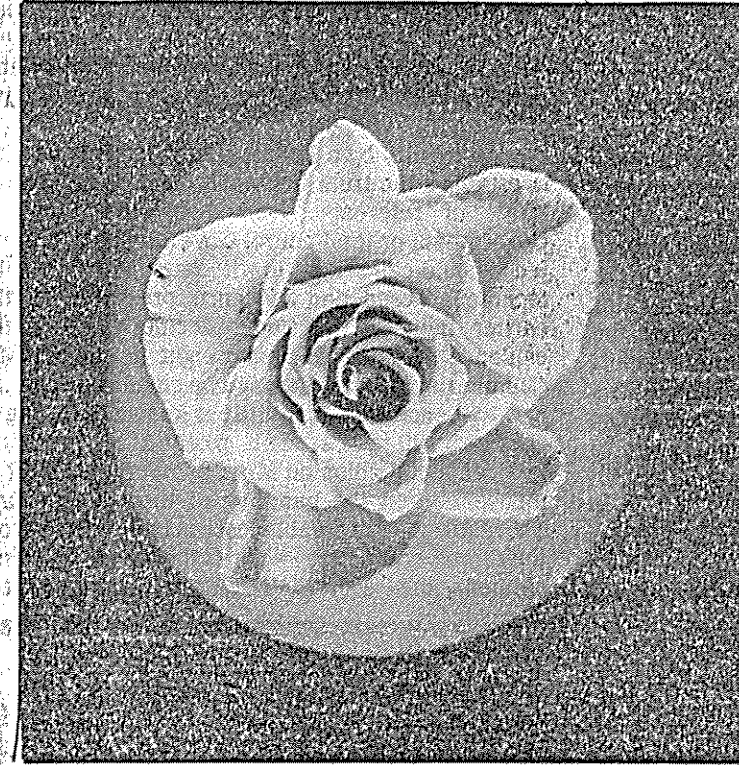
Mapplethorpe's work is dominated by the image of the naked body — especially the young and male body. The presence of this naked body is sensed even in those photographs which show nothing more than a head in profile. Terrence Mason, the young negro who is the subject of a 1982 profile portrait which is reproduced on the invitation to the show, is clearly understood to be naked.

So, too, are Ken Moody and Robert Sherman, the subjects of the dual portrait which Paul Foss discusses in his essay in the exhibition catalogue. Although Foss neglects to mention it, the nakedness of these two men is as evident as the fact that one is black and the other is white.

The naked male obsesses Mapplethorpe so much so that he sees its presence even in images of the Other. Take, for example, No. 22 in the show, a 1981 photograph which shows the breast, shoulder and flexed right arm of Lisa Lyon. Far from being a photograph of a muscular woman flexing her arm, this is really an image of a woman doing something which young men habitually do — especially when they are undressed.

In the presence of this work one could say that an undressed male, flexing his muscles and presenting his body as an object of admiration and desire, is Mapplethorpe's image. It is implicit in all of his photographs, no matter what their literal subjects may happen to be.

It appears that Mapplethorpe, who was born in 1946, began his artistic career as a sculptor. His interest in the sculptural deployment of the human figure is evident throughout this show. One work has its naked subject seated on a cylindrical pedestal, a second shows its figure adopting the pose of an athlete, a third is a straight-



The images of Robert Mapplethorpe: Lisa Lyon in the guise of the Madonna (1982) and Rose, one of his many flower pieces (1985).

forward view of a Neapolitan sculptural ensemble.

This sculptural vision manifests itself in other ways. In all but a few cases Mapplethorpe poses and lights his figures so that their contours are stated with the maximum definition. Only on rare occasions are these shaved and oiled forms left indeterminate or allowed to dwindle into shadows at their extremities.

A third aspect of Mapplethorpe's sculptural vision can be found in his frequent habit of concentrating his lens on selected parts of the body and presenting them as if they were fragments of a statue. This is most apparent in No. 30, where the buttocks and thighs of the subject are likened to the tail-end of a kouros.

Photography is a curious art. Irrespective of the technical and formal control an image may demonstrate, one's response to it is ultimately determined by whether or not one finds the subject interesting in itself. I think this is the case especially in those photographs which have a human being as their subject. Do we find this person interesting? And if not, why not?

For myself I find the majority of these works oppressive in their

effect. In all but a few cases, Mapplethorpe poses or disposes his subjects with a neatness and elegance rarely if ever found in the daily world.

This elegance is at cross-purposes with what is apparently Mapplethorpe's main intention, for it also has the effect of disallowing one to imaginatively possess these all-too-perfect beings. It can be observed that Mapplethorpe's figures and fragmentary torsos and limbs are like sculptures in a further sense, for they also present themselves as things which one dare not touch.

The few works which invite a different response are those in which the subject is flawed (the

faint scar on Lisa Lyon's forehead does wonders for No. 25, a 1982 photograph which shows her in the guise of a Guido Reni Madonna) and Mapplethorpe's many flower-pieces. The latter works, I feel, are his best images. They clearly owe their fascination to the fact that their clustered petals are objects of displaced sexual desire.