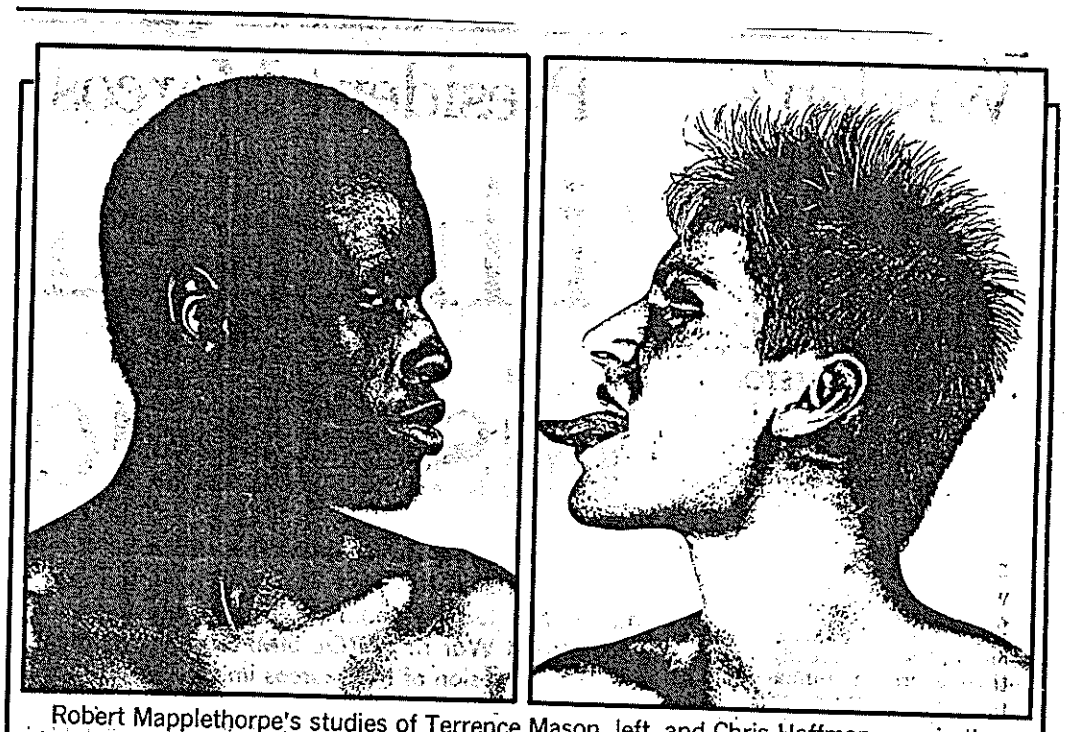
THE AUSTRALIAN - TUESDAY 25th FEBRUARY 1986



Robert Mapplethorpe's studies of Terrence Mason, left, and Chris Hoffman . . . in the tradition of 'art' photography despite their sometimes controversial nature

The unambiguous stare of Mapplethorpe's lens

Art

Robert Mapplethorpe
Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne

ROBERT ROONEY

HAVING made a small, as yet unpublished contribution to the elaborate book (featuring essays by Paul Foss, Stephen Koch and an interview with the artist) which was originally planned to accompany the travelling exhibition *Robert Mapplethorpe: Photographs 1976-1985* — presently at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne — and being well-acquainted with Mapplethorpe's work through reproductions in books, catalogues and magazines, I expected this extensive Australian survey to hold no surprises.

Indeed, a review of Mapplethorpe's recent New York exhibition (in Art News) seemed to uphold my expectations. It suggested that in terms of content, "many of the works on display were perhaps too much in keeping with his previous explorations to be really challenging or satisfying".

The Melbourne display, selected by John Buckley with an Australian audience in mind, presents a reasonable cross-section of the American photographer's best-known themes.

These include his celebrity portraits, flowers, studies of the female bodybuilder Lisa Lyon, black males, self-portraits and fashion photographs. In addition, Buckley has included several 1985 images illustrating Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell*. One of these, *Gun Blast*, features a hand holding a pistol erect.

Anyway, I went to the Mapplethorpe exhibition convinced that I knew every one of these images better than the back of my hand. As I expected, the content of the photographs is, with few exceptions, very familiar.

However, I was not prepared for the shock of seeing them anew in the context of an art gallery.

Perhaps I would have been less surprised at their subtle differences in scale, focus and detail if I had remembered that Mapplethorpe's New York show actually focussed on what John Sturman describes in his review as "a fascinating aspect of the photographic process, the ways in which photographs may be adapted to and reproduced in a variety of media".

Mapplethorpe did this by pairing several series of gelatin silver prints with the same images reproduced by the processes of lithography and photogravure and by exhibiting pages from magazines that featured his fashion photographs.

To Sturman, these pairings also raise among other things "the question, long of concern to artists, about the fidelity of any reproduction to the original work".

However, such pairings are not absolutely essential, because the differences between the actual photographs and printed reproductions are instantly recognisable. Apart from the larger format, the biggest surprise of the exhibition is that images which appear sharply defined in a catalogue are shown to be as soft-focused as those of any misty-eyed pictorialist.

Subjects under complete control in the studio

No wonder, then, that the majority of Mapplethorpe's photos fit snuggly within the tradition of "art" photography, despite their sometimes controversial nature.

Mapplethorpe is a formalist who exposes each of his carefully chosen subjects (whether they be flowers, faces or body parts) to the same unambiguous stare. His is a sensibility which has been nurtured by '60s modernism, though he is not always seen as a modernist.

He is knowingly cool and distant, as he slyly, perhaps mockingly acknowledges his debt to Irving Penn, Edward Weston and the once repressed traditions of George Platt Lynes and Wilhelm van Gloeden.

There is however, nothing archaic about the look of his portrait subjects. Like Tim Scott, they exude style with ease. Lisa Lyon on the other hand assumes several identities — she is a madonna, a fashion model and in one close-up, she adopts "the flexed-biceps attitude", one of the ultimate body-building cliches, while the blurred profile in Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait* (1985) bears an uncanny resemblance to Bertelli's *Head of Mussolini*.

Mapplethorpe seems to prefer to work in the studio where everything can be totally controlled.

The lighting is artificial and the models or their parts are pictured against blank backgrounds, sometimes in conjunction with the barest studio props. His *Black Males*, perhaps the strongest group of body works he has produced, exist in a hermetically sealed environment that seems to deny the existence of the outside world and the social implications of choosing American blacks as subjects.

If we accept that Mapplethorpe is aware of the ironies of representing black nudes in terms of a stereotyped view of black male sexuality, we must also accept that he does so with his subjects' knowing consent.

He has, of course, spoken of having "a kind of personal rapport with the subject. . . . It's just what a person is willing to give me." The bodies of black men are, at least to most whites, somewhat unfamiliar, even exotic. Mapplethorpe from his privileged position, flauntingly removes all barriers, moves in close and mischievously alludes to certain white myths regarding black sexual potency.

***Man in Polyester Suit* is a picture which mockingly exploits this stereotype to the full. However, there is something oddly desexualised about the image of the exposed penis in this notorious photograph.**

Although the centre of attention, it is just one unit in a sum of comparable details. In the private public world of Mapplethorpe, vases and flowers are sexier than naked humans and their naughty bits.