



Muffin (1981), silver print, 40.6 x 50.8cm.

## Mapplethorpe Revisited

by Delphine Roche

**Sofia Coppola has curated an extraordinary exhibition of works by the great Robert Mapplethorpe. The film director used her intuitive perspective to make a selection of lesser known images by this immense photographer – less of the clichés and lots more surprises!**

The smell of sulphur might precede Robert Mapplethorpe, but Sofia Coppola has no intention of hurling around the images that scandalised a puritanical 1980s America again. Through the eyes of the Californian director, the photographer delivers a smoother surface, as she reveals a sunny hedonism beneath the New Yorker's rawness. *Robert Mapplethorpe Curated by Sofia Coppola* was commissioned by gallery owner Thaddaeus Ropac and he expected nothing less of her. "When I saw *Lost in*



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Marisa Berenson (1983), silver print, 40.6 x 50.8cm

*Translation*, some of the images and compositions made me think Sofia Coppola would have a radically different viewpoint on Robert Mapplethorpe's body of work, much more contemplative, less direct, more intuitive. That's the whole point of this project; showing his work in a way that is more subjective and less academic." Thaddaeus Ropac, who owns the rights to the deceased photographer's oeuvre, has previously invited creative minds – Hedi Slimane in 2005, followed by Robert Wilson the following year – to

guest curate Mapplethorpe shows (For the record, everyone from David Hockney to Cindy Sherman and even the pop group Scissor Sisters have curated Mapplethorpe in various other settings...). As for Sofia Coppola, having always adored Robert Mapplethorpe's still lifes of flowers and portraits, she particularly enjoyed discovering lesser known images, which have been rarely or never exhibited. "It was such a privilege to delve into his archives with a creative director friend of mine, who had known him personally



*Lisa Lyon* (1982), silver print, 40.6 x 50.8cm.

and who could tell me the context of the shots.” She accepted her first ever curating job enthusiastically. “It’s not that different to my work as a director, I had to make decisions and chose what I like”, she happily resumes. And what she likes is perfectly coherent in her final choice: portraits of pensive women and the very physical nudes of Lisa Lyon, half immersed in the sea or lying languorously by a swimming pool... Palm trees, the ocean, interior details, beautiful still lifes of flowers... Together they create a serene ambiance, suspended in time, an ever so slightly

melancholic introspection and almost by magic appear to compose the beginnings of a script. The mood is eminently feminine... quite the opposite to the full frontality of Mapplethorpe’s best known shots. “We associate him so much with his sexually explicit images that I was naturally drawn to the less known facets of his work,” explains Sofia Coppola, “Some pictures are hard to look at. And seeing as the prints are for sale, I thought about what someone might want to look at on their living room wall, every day.” By unveiling the unexpected aspects of Robert



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*Orchid* (1980), silver print, 40.6 x 50.8cm.

Mapplethorpe’s work, the director – who treats every shot in her films with the utmost attention – reveals her own inner photographer (it’s a well know fact that she takes snapshots on her film sets.) The exhibition orchestrates a meeting of two aesthetes. After having helped with the rediscovery of Bill Owens’ work – a major source of visual inspiration for *The Virgin Suicides* – Sofia Coppola is now assisting the mission of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, which was set up to increase the recognition of photography as fully fledged art. “Thirty years later, the

dream that nourished Mapplethorpe has become a reality. In fact the quality of his work has contributed to the medium’s re-qualification as a major art form”, Thaddaeus Ropac concludes. So for those who have yet to discover the sadly missed master of flattering portraiture, or who might just be reluctant to push open a gallery door, Sofia Coppola’s name could be the ideal starting point.

*Robert Mapplethorpe Curated by Sofia Coppola*, at Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery, 7, rue Debelleyme, Paris, 75003. [www.ropac.net](http://www.ropac.net). From November 25th.