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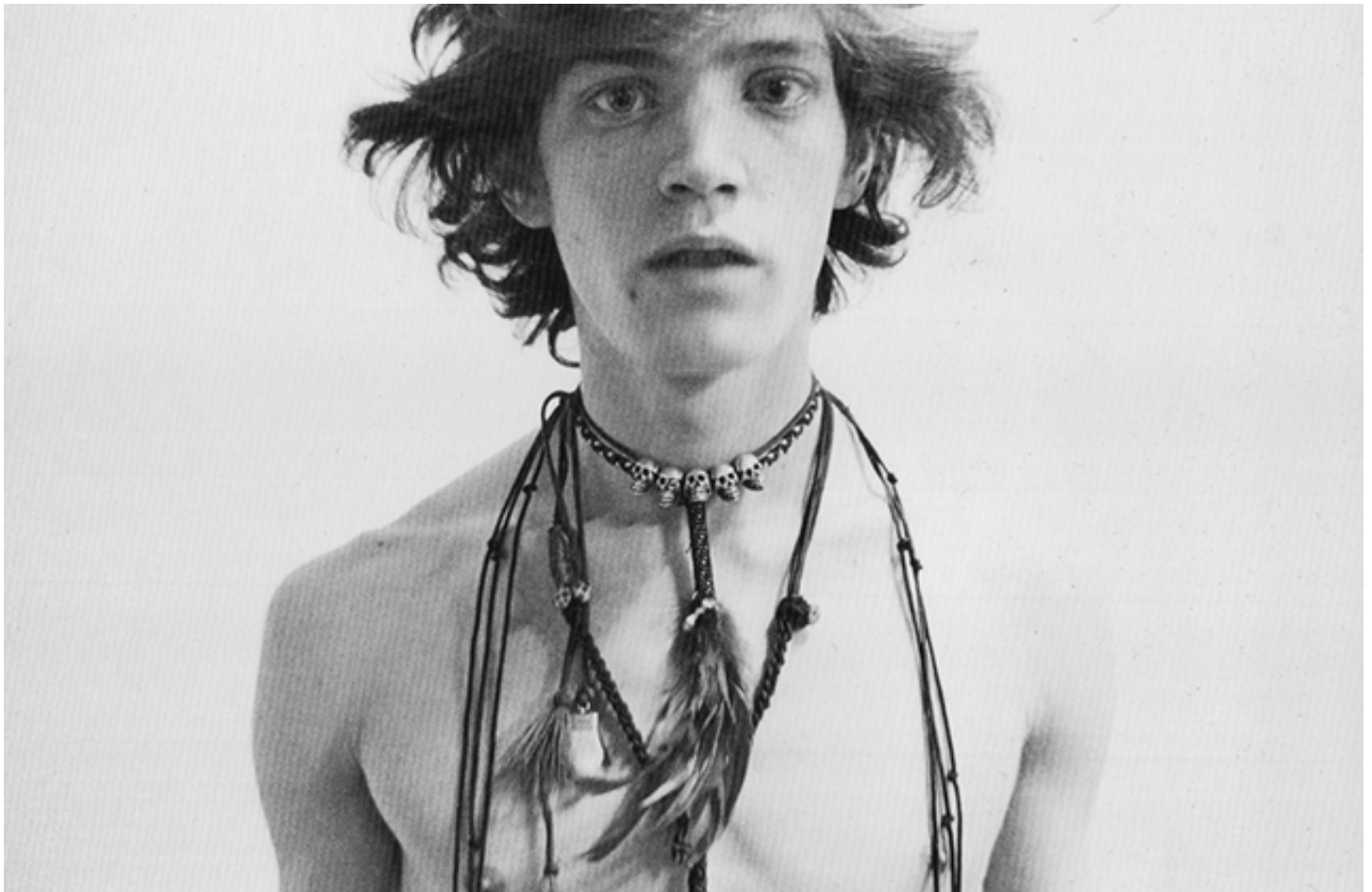
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Documentary Focuses on Controversial Photographer

JW Arnold **Film** 30 March 2016 Hits: 2528



I'll never forget the first time I saw photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial photographs while on a college field trip to Kansas City. In the late 1980s. My professor—one half of the only gay couple in the

tiny Missouri college town—pointed out a large volume tucked on a shelf in the gift shop of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

I'd never discussed my sexual orientation with him but I suspect he knew, as he knew about so many students. As I flipped through the book revealing increasingly risqué photographs of male genitalia and sadomasochistic acts, he asked, "It's all very homoerotic, isn't it?"

Yes, the photographs were homoerotic and I was secretly titillated, but could never make that admission at the time, because the photographer's works were mired in the political discourse of the day, labeled pornographic and lewd.

Watching Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato's new documentary, "Robert Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures" brings back vivid memories of that experience nearly 30 years ago. The film premieres on HBO on Sunday, April 4 at 9 p.m.

Before the title rolls, the viewer is confronted with Mapplethorpe's most confrontational image, "Self Portrait with Whip." What follows is a somewhat conventional documentary, presenting the photographer's life chronologically, but peppered with the images that continue to provoke, seduce and enrage.

Like so many LGBT people, Mapplethorpe grew up in a religious household in the suburbs of Queens. In an interview he says, "Suburbia is a good place to come from and a good place to leave."

The film delves into his years at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where he met his muse, Patti Smith, the first in a line of lovers who would influence his creative process. His art really takes shape after he moves into Manhattan and he begins to explore his homosexuality and dark side in the BDSM scene.

Jack Fritscher, editor of "Drummer" magazine and one of those lovers recalls, "The problem with the '70s was everybody was having sex. Photographers weren't shooting, painters weren't painting, writers weren't writing, but Robert was functioning."

At the onset of his career, photography was still not viewed by society as proper art.

Gallery owner Holly Sullivan notes, "I was convinced he was an artist, convinced he could manipulate people. And I use the word, 'manipulate'."

As Mapplethorpe began to gain fame, he began glamorizing the penis (the infamous "Mr. 10 ½," an extremely large African-American penis protruding from the fly of a pair of polyester slacks) and incorporating more religious symbology into his photographs, drawing the ire of Sen. Jesse Helms and other cultural conservatives.

"Taking pictures of sex is no different than taking a picture of a flower," Mapplethorpe says in another interview, and he took many exquisite pictures of flowers during his career. But it was his evolving self-portraits that were most telling.

The many friends and colleagues interviewed for the film paint a picture of a driven artist, one noting he was only interested in people for one of three reasons: money, models and/or sex. Mapplethorpe relentlessly pursued fame until his death of complications from HIV/AIDS in 1989 at the age of 42.

Ultimately, the outrage his work generated would secure his fame—or infamy. Just as he wanted.

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