

'Mapplethorpe: Look At The Pictures': Sundance Review

BY WENDY IDE | 22 JANUARY 2016

Dir. Fenton Bailey, Randy Barbato. USA. 2016. 108mins.



“Look at the pictures” squawks a furious senator, brandishing a wad of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs in his meaty fist. Eyes popping, outraged to the point of aneurysm, he provides persuasive support for the theory of writer

and *Drummer* magazine editor Jack Fritscher, voiced later in the film, that the penis is the most terrifying thing in the world. And ‘look at the pictures’ is exactly what co-directors Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato encourage us to do, in this confrontational and illuminating film. Look at all of them, from the beauty of the flower still lives to the polished celeb portraiture to the eye-popping hard core S&M images.

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This frank but accessible documentary couldn’t be more timely, coming as it does just before joint retrospective shows co-curated by the J Paul Getty Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Contemporary Art are set to open in March 2016. The resurgence of interest in and reappraisal of Mapplethorpe’s life and work which the shows will likely trigger should ensure both festival exposure

and some theatrical interest. The in-your-face approach to the male appendage characterised by Mapplethorpe's more personal work might limit the film's television sales however.

The documentary uses footage of the two shows' curators reverently appraising the BDSM-heavy X portfolio (they discuss composition, neatly sidestepping the elephants and bullwhips in the room) and footage of auctions for his notable works to establish his current status in the contemporary art market. Then we wind back to his early life, as an ambitious art student and the boyfriend of Patti Smith, to learn more about the self-created phenomenon that was Robert Mapplethorpe.

This is not the first time that the prolific directing duo Bailey and Barbato have explored sexually explicit material: *Inside Deep Throat* looked at the enduring legacy of the seminal adult movie; more recently the pair documented the latest business venture by Hollywood madam Heidi Fleiss. This perhaps explains their deft balance of the more extreme elements of Mapplethorpe's life. They don't shy away, for example, from Mapplethorpe's recreational activities at notorious S&M club The Mine Shaft, where he found his thrills and his models. But the audience is not left shackled in a dark room for too long. For every shot of traumatised male genitals, there's a wryly amusing anecdote from one of the extended circle of colleagues, friends, lovers and models who are only too happy to talk at length about the ferociously driven Mapplethorpe (and in some cases, themselves).

Interviewees include Blondie frontwoman Debbie Harry; writers Fran Lebowitz (who ruefully confesses to binning the photos that Mapplethorpe gifted her), Bob Colacello and Fritscher; models David Croland and Robert Sherman; friend and supporter Sandy Daley, porn actor Peter Berlin and Mapplethorpe's younger brother Edward, also a photographer. Also present is Mapplethorpe's own voice: in archive material from interviews recorded with him at the height of his success, he is enigmatic, softly spoken, charming but unknowable. Fortunately, the input of the eloquent, brilliant, bitchy circle of friends with which he surrounded himself creates a portrait of the man which is every bit as candid as his work.

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Cinematography: Huy Truong, Mario Panagiotopoulos

Editor: Langdon F. Page

Featuring: Jack Fritscher, David Croland, Debbie Harry, Fran Lebowitz, Robert Sherman, Edward Mapplethorpe