Television Interview Transcription

Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera

"The Bookcase"
Host: Chris Connolly with Jack Fritscher
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Chris Connolly: Welcome to "The Bookcase." My name is Chris Connolly. With us today is the author of a new book entitled *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera*. It's a pop culture memoir and is also subtitled *An Outlaw Reminiscence*. The author: Jack Fritscher. Thanks for being with us, Jack.

Jack Fritscher: Thanks, Chris.

Chris Connolly: Jack, by way of introduction, is a Ph.D., a critic of American literature, art and culture, and was an Associate Professor at Western Michigan University. In 1967, he helped found the American Popular Culture Association and is a former editor of *Drummer* magazine. He is also a founding director of the Film Festival at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts—among your many credits. Welcome to the program.

I, like many other people, I assume, like most of the population, became aware of the name "Mapplethorpe" after his passing and at the time of the controversy that became well known to the general population, Senator Helms and all that. Tell us a little bit about that scandal and then we can start at the beginning.

Jack Fritscher: The background with Senator Helms and the National Endowment for the Arts, Chris, was that Senator Helms needed a campaign issue, so 85 days after Robert died, Senator Helms hit on Robert, no pun intended, so that Robert's exhibit that was being put on at the Corcoran in Cincinnati was canceled in July after Robert died in March.

Chris Connolly: 1989?

Jack Fritscher: 1989, yes. So Robert became kind of a media touchstone at that time. He became more famous dead than alive and it was a notoriety he would have greeted in his own life because it was a kind of notoriety that he sought.

Chris Connolly: And the issue, of course, was that Senator Helms, being extremely right wing in a lot of areas, probably every area of his life, and Robert Mapplethorpe and the subject matter that he dealt with and his lifestyle was probably 180 degrees in the other direction. The issue of sex was a big, big thing here.

Jack Fritscher: If Robert hadn't been a homosexual this would never have erupted. It was because of his homosexual art. Helms felt that there should be no NEA money spent on anything that was gay. Robert was gay. Robert himself believed in the separation of state and art. He did not ever in his life receive any NEA money. He never sought any NEA money.

Chris Connolly: How did the money connect? Was it for putting on the show? It wasn't with the work?

Jack Fritscher: It was to set up the exhibit and help the show travel and tour the country, for hanging the show itself because of the expenses involved in that. There was nothing for the actual shooting of the photographs or to give Mapplethorpe money to live on. It was simply to mount and transport a show from one museum to an other so that it could be shown cross-country. The odd thing about the pictures that Senator Helms hit on was that they were photographs that had been shown in museums for over

twelve years. So people had seen them in museum settings for quite a long time before Helms decided these were pornographic, and that was a personal decision on his part.

Chris Connolly: And these were probably not the most controversial type of photographs that Mapplethorpe had taken.

Jack Fritscher: No, not at all.

Chris Connolly: These were the kind of photos that, people could say that the leather photographs, and others that he took, were over the line. Some people might say that; but on these, you could probably have a larger majority saying, "Well, these could be art." More people willing to acquiesce to that position.

Jack Fritscher: One of the problems that Helms saw referred to two of the photographs that were of children. One must remember that many parents brought their children to Robert to shoot their portraits. He was so good at working with children and got such beautiful clear pictures of these children, that many people, including actresses like Susan Sarandon, brought their children to be photographed "by Robert Mapplethorpe."

The fact is that one of these children, very innocently during a shoot, lifted the hem of her dress exposing herself. It was not for exhibitionist purposes. It was just a child's gesture, and Robert happened to click at that time, and the parents picked that photograph as one that they thought was most endearing. It was similar to a child being photographed, as many of us have been, by our parents on a bearskin rug as infants. Art critics have looked at that photograph and said, "Robert, in that photograph, is referencing the renaissance Cupid." It's not a picture about a little girl exposing herself: a renaissance Cupid is being referenced. So that people should look at this with some kind of art sense and not try to stamp out in this photograph some deep inner fear they have in their own self about child pornography. Robert was not a child pornographer.

Chris Connolly: Let's go back to the beginning. Your association, your friendship with Robert Mapplethorpe. How does it go back? Tell us a little about him. Where did he come from, how did he get going?

Jack Fritscher: Robert was raised in Floral Parks, Queens, and made his way into Manhattan in the early Sixties and the whole pop cultural scene that Warhol reigned over. Robert worshiped Warhol and became his friend and they shot each other—with cameras. That's the trouble with guns and cameras, they use the same verb. I've incorporated the pun into my book title. Robert would go as a very young photographer, making his assault on Manhattan, into studios, and he'd open his portfolio and say, "Hello, I'm Robert Mapplethorpe, the notorious pornographic photographer." He was then a young wannabe. Nobody knew who he was.

At that time, I was editor of *Drummer* magazine which was a international magazine, and still is. Robert came into my office one afternoon in March 1977 and put his portfolio on my desk and said, "Maybe I can have a page or two inside." I said, "These photographs are beautiful, and I'm in need of a cover for an upcoming issue." I said, "I'll give you a sketch, I'll give you the name of the model in Manhattan to shoot. Please go back and do it and I'll try to use it." Well, he did it. and he did it beautifully, and that was his first magazine cover ever. He was grateful. In fact, we hit it off as friends immediately that first night and for about three years we were bi-coastal companions.

Chris Connolly: In the early part of his photographic career, he was probably in, what most people would consider, the most controversial part of his career. The most kinky...

Jack Fritscher: What I call the "Middle Mapplethorpe Period," the leather years, are controversial, and there are many people who wish that the leather years would go away so that the Mapplethorpe of the beautiful calla lilies and of the fragile leaf pictures could be the Mapplethorpe that people could safely relate to. But these flower pictures were considered, at least in New

York, as being questionable as art. "Can I, if I am sophisticated, hang a picture of a flower in my living room? I live in New York! I'm avant garde! Flowers?" But if you knew that the leather-sex pictures existed, then the flowers became endorsed by this carnal underside because Robert was both an angel of Catholicism and a devil of Catholicism.

Chris Connolly: You mean Catholicism with a capital "C"?

Jack Fritscher: Yes. Nearly everybody associated with Robert, myself included, is a Catholic.

Chris Connolly: Do the flower photographs have to be endorsed by the leather photographs?

Jack Fritscher: Not at all. That was just for the "chic" who needed to be convinced at first in order to buy them that this was legitimate art and legitimate photography. Now, of course, their reputation stands on the very photographs themselves, because Robert had an uncanny ability as a photographer to clear a frame of everything extraneous—whether he was shooting a flower, or whether he was shooting a face, or a child at a parent's request. He was a genius at subtracting, of getting everything extraneous out of the frame, and creating truly "The Perfect Moment" that he was famous for. There is a stillness, a repose in his photographs that is truly remarkable in an age of anxiety where everyone is rushing around, but he could, nevertheless, out of the fast-paced life that he lived, make art that was simple, peaceful, and quiet.

Chris Connolly: How would he do that?

Jack Fritscher: He would go into a different consciousness. It's what artists do. One minute we would be breezing around in taxi-cabs. We would walk into the studio. I can speak from example. He would set me down in a chair and say, "I'm going to shoot you now." And very effortlessly the camera would come out, the lights would come on, and he would either—depending upon what he as a director wanted—reveal you or peel you, sort of like an onion,

taking layers and layers off you. I said one time, "Robert, that's not a picture of me, I don't look like that."

Chris Connolly: You mean, by making you change your expression or...?

Jack Fritscher: No, it was just something he did behind the camera. It was something he did as a director, an auteur, the way you can tell Fellini from Antonioni. You can tell by looking at a film which director's consciousness was behind it. So, sometimes, he could put a mask on your face, not literally, but he could make you look like something, or he could peel you away so that he could get at your inner nature. So I said, "But Robert, that's not me." He said, "Jack, that's your 'look.'"

Chris Connolly: A lot of the Mapplethorpe mystique is not just what he took, but pictures that were taken of him.

Jack Fritscher: Yes.

Chris Connolly: How important is the fact that he had that "look"? He had a look that wasn't the same as anyone else, but it was the same kind of thing that some other people had, maybe Jim Morrison had, maybe someone like James Dean, just what you see in their face. He had that to a great extent. How important was that?

Jack Fritscher: Oh, that was very important. In the George Dureau photograph on the cover, some people think it is Mick Jagger.

Chris Connolly: Very much the rock star with great hair.

Jack Fritscher: The leather-clad rock star with great hair.

Chris Connolly: The controversy didn't happen until he had passed away. You said at the beginning that this is something he would probably welcome, this controversy.

Jack Fritscher: He would have. He ran himself like a department store oftentimes. Anything for a sale. When he was young and starting out, he dared to be bold. To be assaultive to clients who might not otherwise buy his work, he would take a photograph and hold it up, and if people blinked when they looked at it, or flinched, he would say, "Well, if you don't like this, maybe you're not as *avant garde* as you think." He would put them on the spot and they would have to shell out money and buy the latest Mapplethorpe photograph.

Chris Connolly: Did he make a lot of money?

Jack Fritscher: He made a lot of money as a photographer himself. He also married very well. At an early show, a man walked up to him named Sam Wagstaff who was a personality in his own right, a very remarkable collector of art and he walked up to Robert at an art exhibit in which Robert was showing and said, "I'm looking for someone to spoil." And Robert, ever quick-witted, said, "You've found him." So Sam funded Robert. He didn't need the NEA. Photography is an expensive art. You need great cameras, a studio, lights. And Robert was known for his printing of photographs as much as for his shooting. So all of that was very carefully cashiered through the coffers of Sam Wagstaff. Sam died about five years before Robert and left him a notable estate. Out of that, Robert bankrolled himself and got into color work which is extraordinarily beautiful.

Chris Connolly: He was a victim of AIDS. At one point in the book, I think you quote him as saying, that everyone in his helix, everyone he has known, has gone.

Jack Fritscher: Yes, I said that in the helix between Robert and me nearly everyone is dead. Robert's early passing is symbolic of so many artists who have died too young. We don't know what he

or they would have been doing were it not for death. Robert accelerated his life as many artists do, increasing their output, once he knew he was HIV positive. Had he lived longer, we would be seeing remarkable work from him. I would like to note his death as being symbolic of so many artists---on Broadway, in theaters, in dance, in all the arts, talents we will never see because of their early passing.

Chris Connolly: A lot of his estate has gone to AIDS research?

Jack Fritscher: $5,000,000 actually came here to Boston to Deaconess Hospital.

Chris Connolly: Where he was when he died.

Jack Fritscher: Yes, because he found he could get the best care here.

Chris Connolly: How do you explain him? I showed your book to a number of people, folks I normally talk to in my normal life, a lot of people. And, from that, I would guess the reaction of mainstream America is going to be much closer to Jesse Helms than to what you would probably hope for. How do you open that door?

Jack Fritscher: There is a scare factor in getting to know even a little something about someone you are afraid of, but sometimes knowing something about them takes the fear away. What I tried to do in this book, what I set out to do, was kind of restore Robert Mapplethorpe as a person. You mentioned the photographs in the book and there are not photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe in the book.

Chris Connolly: That was the other question I was going to ask you.

Jack Fritscher: Yes, the photographs in the book are ones that I took, or other friends took, because in the photographs as well

as in the text, I wanted the diverse images of him to restore a bit of the person who was Robert Mapplethorpe before Jesse Helms took ahold of him like a terrier and shook him out so nobody knew who he was. All most folks know is the controversy complicated by scholarly articles about his wonderful technique. Well, that's wonderful and I'm glad he's gotten both those kinds of attention.

Now with the scandal, there's also a lot of people buying Mapplethorpe books of photographs, but they don't know who the person was who shot them. Ultimately, there rises, of course, curiosity about the artist no matter how scandalous. So sooner or later, there is a book about him that reveals he was a human being. I mean, Robert was lovable. I loved him. He was sweet. He was kind. Sooner or later there will be a movie about Robert Mapplethorpe, just as Ken Russell has many movies about artists who were considered forbidden in their time.

I think that if an artist isn't forbidden, then maybe the artist isn't doing enough art. Art is supposed to be kind of scary, I think. Entertainment isn't scary; but art is. Robert wasn't an entertainer, he was an artist.

Chris Connolly: Was photography his only form of artwork? Did he have other outlets for his art?

Jack Fritscher: He started out as a sculptor, actually. But that was too slow. The camera fit his fast-paced life much better.

Chris Connolly: Tell us the story about he got his first camera.

Jack Fritscher: His first camera was given him by John McKendry who is an art critic and a notable on the Manhattan art scene. They were friends and McKendry thought that perhaps a camera might better fit Robert's persona. Robert, before he had a camera, was an artist. And, later, with the camera he was an artist. That's a point I try to make repeatedly. Robert was not just a photographer; he was an artist who was a photographer. And there is a great difference in that. As George Dureau says in the book, "The camera is a mindless lunatic. It will pick up anything. Anyone can shoot a thousand pictures and end up with two good

ones." Robert brought an artist's sensibility to the camera; and art dealers today say they are inundated by young wannabe Robert Mapplethorpes. Robert is not very scary to the new generation, because they all want to be him. They think if they take pictures of a sideshow, of whatever sideshow is going on currently in America, they can be Robert Mapplethorpe. Robert genuinely was part of the leather culture pictured in his leather photographs.

Chris Connolly: Did he consider that a sideshow?

Jack Fritscher: Yes, I think so. Political correctness, human sensitivity has done away with the sideshow.

Chris Connolly: Some people would think that buying into Mapplethorpe as a artist buys into the sideshow.

Jack Fritscher: Not really. The material is there, yes; but he brings his form, in the marriage of matter and form, and redeems the material that he is shooting. The leather photographs that he takes, for instance, are far different from real snapshots of the late night leather world. Robert has so sanitized that world that there is nothing any longer left in his leather photographs that people in the leather scene really identify with erotically.

But they are glad that Robert was there as a witness because Robert was almost an anthropological photographer who was taking pictures of a civilization which five years later was lost under a tidal wave of HIV.

Chris Connolly: How do you think the AIDS epidemic affected the end of the party from the 1970s to the 1980s. How do you think that affected Mapplethorpe's work?

Jack Fritscher: It made people afraid of his work. It added another level of fear about it.

Chris Connolly: At one point you mentioned in the book, he was criticized by the gay community. I believe it was in San Francisco.

And I think you said that five years earlier that would not have happened. It was because of AIDS that he became a target?

Jack Fritscher: Yes, because many people in the 1980s, as well as people now in the Nineties, do not remember the Seventies with fondness. They were not part of that wonderful past. They think the Seventies caused AIDS. For that first decade after Stonewall, they are not nostalgic.

Chris Connolly: We're like the Sixties now; and when we get to the new century, we'll be like the Seventies.

Jack Fritscher: We'll work ourselves back to the Seventies? I think what happened was the Seventies became equated with the virus. The Seventies and Seventies behavior did not cause AIDS. A virus caused AIDS and Robert was one of the many victims caught by that virus. It wasn't what he did. It was the fact that a virus got involved with what he did. AIDS is not the retribution some people say it is for sexual behavior. It is not that at all. It is just that AIDS was a disease that happened to him just as it happened to other people. His art is divorced from that. Some people find the leather photographs scary because in their heads they overlay AIDS on it. His pictures are not about AIDS.

As happened, they are about a civilization before it was destroyed. His photographs are so sanitized. I doubt if any of us has ever seen a calla lily so perfectly set as if in one perfect moment of its perfect beauty. Robert caught that beauty. So he caught the beauty of people who were involved in the subculture of leather, the subculture of women's bodybuilding, and even in the culture of black men which Robert brought to the fore. That kind of race material was pretty much forbidden material until Robert brought the black face of black men to his camera.

Chris Connolly: The black photographs are quite widely exhibited. They are very closely associated with his work. Tell me about that.

Jack Fritscher: From the start, when Robert shot black men...

Chris Connolly: And he did it on black and white as well, didn't he?

Jack Fritscher: Yes he did. There was cry of racism. Here was a white photographer exploiting black men. Not necessarily so. Black people feel that Robert helped bring the black face of men, black men, to photography, a place it had not been seen before, because there it had always been felt in American pop culture at least, maybe deeper, a forbidden white attraction to blackness and a fear of blackness. Two things operating at the same time. Attraction and repulsion. Robert worked with these two things of attraction and fear. That's in the leather work and the female bodybuilder work. Because female bodybuilders came about after women's lib started and women got more powerful and Robert took pictures of women getting more powerful, just as black people were getting more powerful. Robert brought those images to the fore where people could look at them. So he was saying, "All these people are beautiful: the leather people, the women, the black men." But there is also an element of fear and he sort of wanted to scare with that.

Chris Connolly: Why aren't there any shots by Mapplethorpe in your book? Too expensive? That's one thing I wanted to see. It made me want to look at his work. Somehow I got the feeling that this "live your life as an artist"—all that "live fast, die young, leave a good-looking corpse" was not so good. I thought even though he was an artist who has affected so many, his "artist's life" left me at first with the feeling that the guy led a certain life, and he died as a result of his lifestyle.

Jack Fritscher: He died as a result of a virus.

Chris Connolly: Yes, but the lifestyle was not something that I found attractive or that I thought highly of.

Jack Fritscher: The leather?

Chris Connolly: Yes, the "life as an artist." And not just because of the gay aspect of it. I could say the same thing of John Belushi or Elvis, who pushed themselves right over the edge.

Jack Fritscher: I couldn't agree with you more, that's why I'm alive today. I'm edgy, but I stepped back from the edge.

Chris Connolly: So the question I have then, as I read your book is, "Well alright! Stop with this. Let me look at his work." Why aren't there photographs of his work in the book?

Jack Fritscher: Because there are only 36 pages of photographs in this book, and I wanted to get Robert's personal face in this book, and not "Robert" as shot by Robert.

The obvious thing would have been to include his autobiographical shots of himself, but that's the "fictional Robert" and what my book is about is the real Robert. I wanted to get Robert between the covers, and so I planned the photos to be of him as shot by friends, as we saw him, to reveal the Robert we loved, who was not the Robert with the bullwhip suppository. That's not the Robert I loved. That was Robert being silly and being assaultive.

Chris Connolly: Just before we started talking a book fell off the shelf and nearly hit me in the head, and you mentioned that was the "Mapplethorpe curse" which you write about in the book. Tell us about the Mapplethorpe curse.

Jack Fritscher: Ah, the Mapplethorpe curse is maybe some sort of metaphor of the kind of, well, the lifestyle that you are talking about that Robert led; and not the gay lifestyle, but just the very fast, drug-driven lifestyle. Wherever he would go, as I describe in the book, fires would break out, people would get shot. It wasn't cause and effect. It was just coincidental that Robert was such a vortex of this kind of wild, creative energy. He was a top spinning so fast that things around him would fly off tables.

Chris Connolly: Literally?

Jack Fritscher: Yes, literally. I was sitting with him one time at his Bond Street studio which was his apartment at the time. The BBC interview by the way, with Robert sitting among all his beautiful stuff, is not really Robert.

Chris Connolly: I haven't seen that.

Jack Fritscher: The real Robert is Robert with a mattress on the floor and one roommate in a studio.

Chris Connolly: And $5,000,000 in the bank?

Jack Fritscher: This was before he had the money. He didn't have anything at that time. We were sitting in his living room. In fact, there are a dozen pictures he shot of the two of us sitting on his couch in that very living room, and I smelled something burning, and we ran into his kitchen, and his kitchen table was on fire, burning his utility bills and everything, because he was a terrible housekeeper. I mean we all are, but he had this intellectual mess, this artistic mess strewn about because he was into his work.

I have some of the few letters that Robert Mapplethorpe ever wrote. I save everything from everyone. I would have saved more if I knew all this plague was going to happen. There was indeed this curse in the sense that a lot of models who sat for him came to untimely ends, not just by AIDS, but through death by strange circumstances, like Larry Hunt who was murdered. People might remember Robert Opel who streaked the Academy Awards in 1974 and soon after fell under the Mapplethorpe curse.

Chris Connolly: Yes, David Niven was speaking at the time.

Jack Fritscher: Yes, David Niven and Elizabeth Taylor were on stage at the time and David Niven was very quick-witted. Robert Opel and Robert Mapplethorpe had both heard of each other. It is worth noting that the Robert Mapplethorpe I write about is basically an unknown Mapplethorpe, a West Coast Mapplethorpe. The Manhattan Mapplethorpe is in my book, yes, but the life he lived on the West Coast is rather much the unknown adventures

of the Robert people think they knew. Robert Mapplethorpe wanted to meet Robert Opel because he had heard about a third Robert, "Robert Opelthorpe," and the two Roberts were upset that someone else, someone mythical, was getting the credit for their work. In San Francisco, Opel had a gallery called Fey-Way Studio where he exhibited Mapplethorpe, and it was there where he was murdered in 1979. But, yes, I introduced the Roberts to each other in my kitchen. We sat around and talked and they hit it off very nicely. As soon as Robert Opel hung a show by Robert Mapplethorpe, "Robert Opelthorpe" was finally laid to rest.

Chris Connolly: Well, we've shot our half hour here. Thanks for being with us. Our guest has been Jack Fritscher, the author of a new book called *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera, A Pop-Culture Memoir and an Outlaw Reminiscence*. Thanks for being with us, Jack.

Jack Fritscher: Thank you.

Chris Connolly: I'll see you again next time on "The Bookcase." I'm Chris Connolly.