

## Edward Enniful on Robert Mapplethorpe

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### **The former British Vogue editor is curating a major exhibition of Mapplethorpe's portraits. What drew him to this controversial photographer's world?**

I was first introduced to Robert Mapplethorpe's work by the stylist Simon Fox, who spotted me on the train, and I went on to model for him. I came from a very sheltered childhood, a Christian background. So I saw these pictures of black men I'd never seen before. It was all new to me. It sparked my imagination and opened up a whole world, a gay world, that I didn't know existed. So Mapplethorpe's work became quite personal to me. I could see myself reflected in some of the subjects he chose to photograph. That really began a process of my relationship with myself as a gay man.

I've been working in magazines since I was 16 years old so I always see things in twos, like a double-page spread, whether it's to find harmony or to find contrast. That's how I see the world. When we went to Thaddaeus Ropac gallery in Paris to work on this show, we had all of Mapplethorpe's images spread out, and I looked around the space and all of a sudden it just felt like they needed to be presented as pairings. There are some images that flow together, some that fight against each other. I think that's something that runs through the exhibition. Serenity and chaos, yin and yang, quiet and loud. I love contrasts. I love things that make you think we don't live in a perfect world. What I love about his work is that it expands our definitions of beauty, of what we see as beautiful. Mapplethorpe was able to capture life in all its different, beautiful, complex shades, from fragile to strong to easy to unnerving. It's not one character. It's not one emotion. It's life in all its varied, crazy, beautiful iterations.



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### **Lisa Lyon, 1982 | Arnold Schwarzenegger, 1976**

I love the curtain reflecting the pleats of the dress. I like the idea of musculature and all of the lines on Schwarzenegger, and then this incredible dress that seems to echo the lines of his body. One is essentially such a feminine picture, but next to the picture of Arnold Schwarzenegger it takes on a whole different meaning: it's about power and the strength of the body. I think it's got a sense of humour to it, too.

I have been a fashion editor for 30 years, and it was very important for me in this exhibition that there were fashion elements. There's culture and society and flora and nudes, but fashion needed to be present. I love his fashion images because they're not the norm. He still treats his fashion subjects like portrait subjects. You know, sometimes it's as simple as the curtain that Arnold is standing beside, next to this incredible picture of Lisa Lyon. I liked the contrasting images of strength: through the body itself or using clothing as armour.



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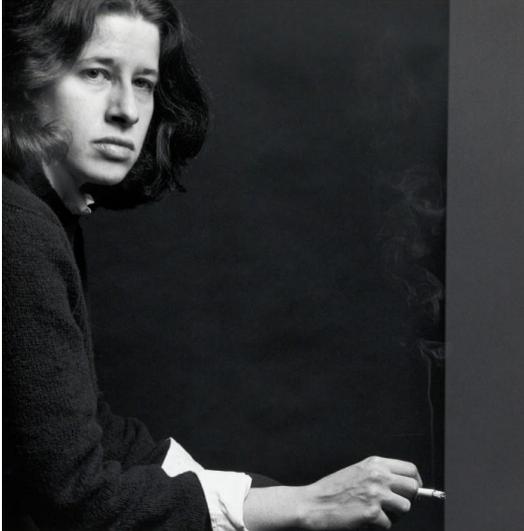
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## Self portraits, 1980

For me, this self-portrait series is about what can be defined as masculinity. Is it leathers and cigarettes and the quiff, or is it the vulnerability of a man who's able to face the world — like the image on the right — as they are? What really interests me about this is that there was a time when the tropes of what was masculine were so rigid: the leather, the cigarette, the quiff. And now we live in non-binary times, where the idea of masculine and feminine is eroding every day.

I love these two images together. It's almost like yin and yang; it's the same man but it's also two different faces, two ways the same man can be. You step out of the house, you're supposed to be strong and boisterous and face the world, but most men are the picture on the right. You start off with a man in his leathers, the archetype of the 1970s, a macho man, and it ends up with almost a new romantic idea of what masculine beauty is.

**Fran Lebowitz, 1980 | Isabella Rossellini, 1988**



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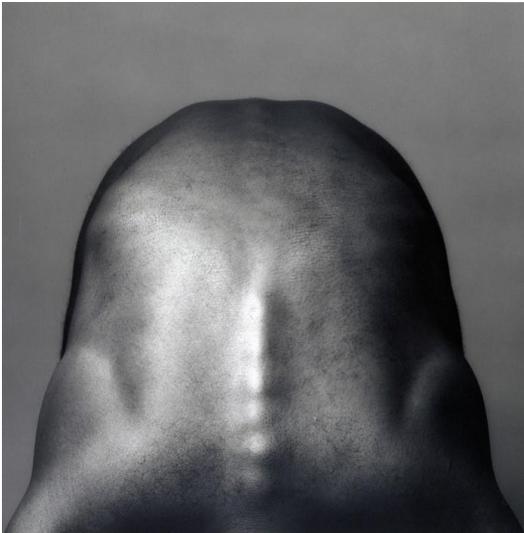


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This is the artist and the muse: Fran is the ultimate intellectual and a great writer, and Isabella Rossellini is the ultimate muse. I love the idea that they were both photographed against black and they're both staring at the camera in this intense way, but they're totally different personalities. Isabella is luminous; the muse is so luminous. And Fran is quite dark. The idea of what we think of as an artist is all there: the cigarette, the look on her face.

I think that a common misconception people make about Mapplethorpe is that he was one thing: people just think about the Black Book, his 1986 photographic study of black men. But the work is so diverse. Look at the sensitivity of Isabella Rossellini's portrait: so delicate. There's so much humanity in his portraits. That's what I really like.

**Alistair Butler, 1980**



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A lot of Mapplethorpe's work is about that idea of what's conventionally beautiful versus what is seen as not beautiful. The curve of a spine is not usually classified as beautiful but it is here. When I think of the curve of a spine, I associate it with illness, with spinal problems. You put it next to an athletic man, who typically represents power and strength, and together you can see that there's beauty in both. There's beauty in the curve of a spine and the curve of this incredible athletic body.

In his time, Mapplethorpe reinterpreted and questioned what we think of as beautiful. What he saw on the streets of New York, what he saw in the clubs of New York, the people he met: he brought them all into his studio and elevated them. He was bringing his subjects into a space of classicism.

That's what I have done too. I've tried to get the fashion industry to embrace different types of beauty, whether it was about shape or age or religious background or sexuality. Breaking the norm of what is beautiful. People wanted to see themselves reflected. Growing up, people didn't see themselves reflected in classic portraiture or in fashion. And it's a powerful thing when people see themselves and can relate.