



Plate 1. *Untitled (self-portrait)*. 1971



Plate 2. *Untitled (Patti Smith)*. 1970



Plate 3. Patti Smith (*Don't Touch Here*). 1973



Plate 4. *Untitled (Patti Smith)*. 1971



Plate 5. *Untitled (Patti Smith)*. 1971/73



Plate 6. *Candy Darling*. 1973



Plate 7. *Candy Darling*. 1971/73



Plate 8. *Untitled (Sam Wagstaff)*. 1972/73



Plate 9. *Untitled (Sam Wagstaff)*. 1973/75



Plate 10. *Untitled (self-portrait)*. 1970/73



Plate 11. *Untitled*. 1970/73



Plate 12. *Untitled*. 1970/73

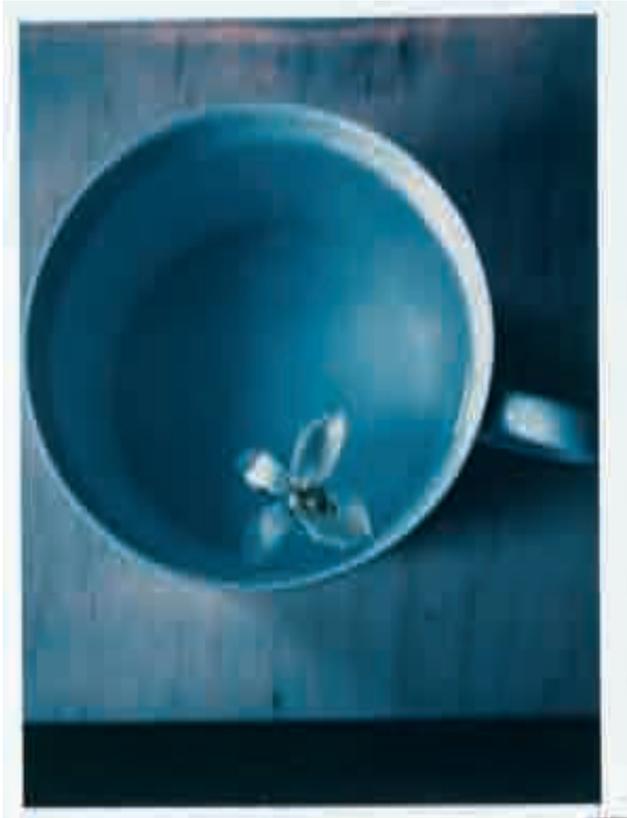


Plate 13. *Untitled*. 1970/73



Plate 14. *Untitled*. 1975

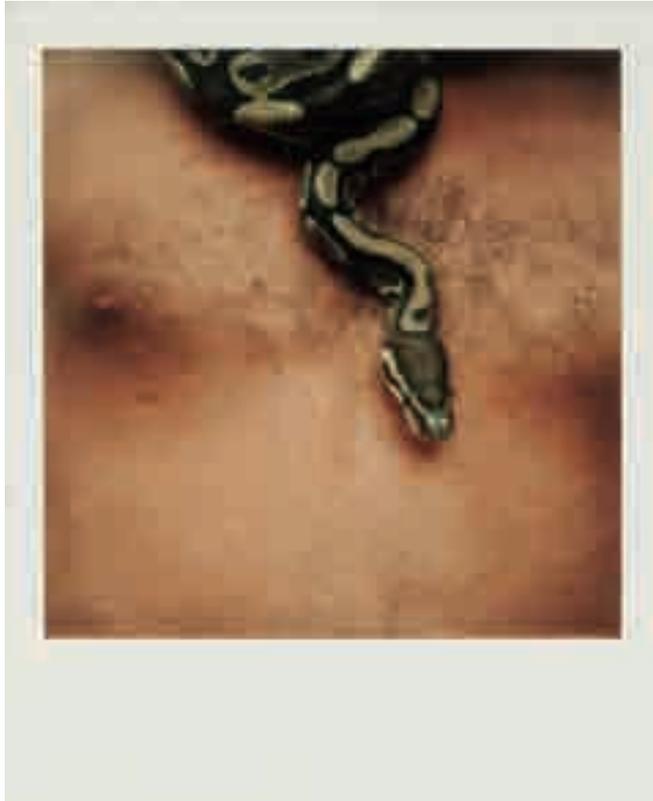
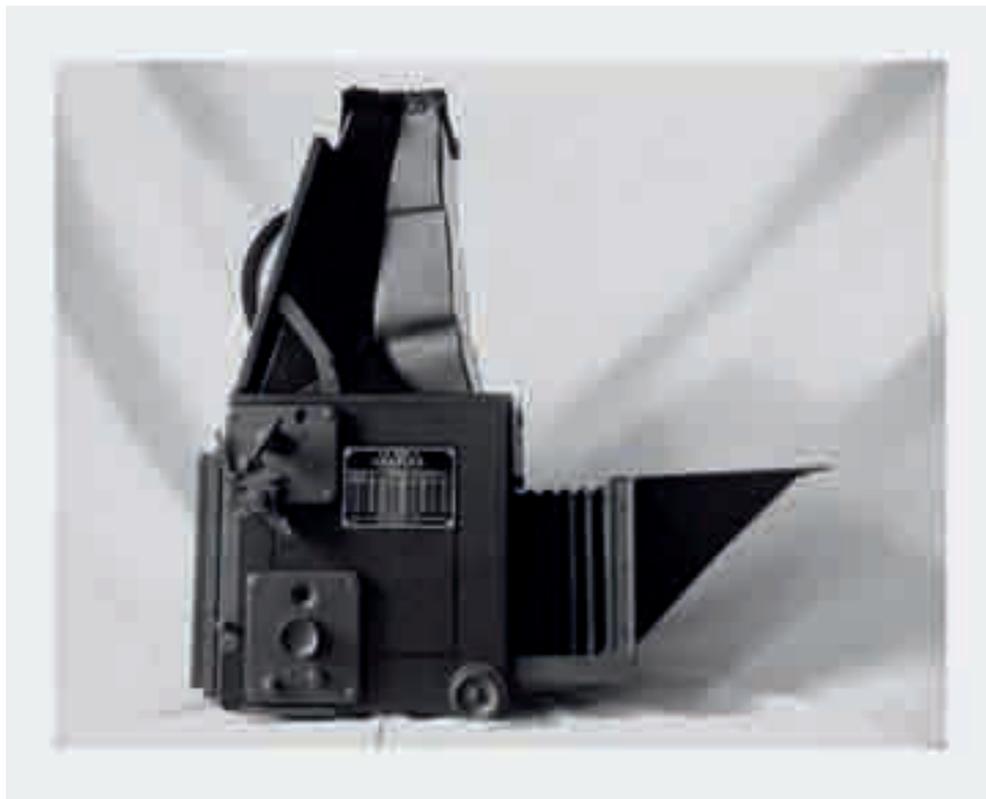


Plate 15. *Untitled*. 1975



# **Polaroids**

# **Mapplethorpe**

**Sylvia Wolf**

**WHITNEY**

**PRESTEL**

Munich · Berlin · London · New York



## **Contents**

Color Plates	1–15
<b>An Authentic Artlessness</b>	
Robert Mapplethorpe's Polaroids 1970–1975	20–65
Black-and-White Plates	66–233
Essay Notes	234–235
Plate List	236–243
Selected Exhibition History	244–245
Selected Bibliography	246–247
Index of Names	248–249
Acknowledgments	250–251
Whitney Museum of American Art Board of Trustees, Officers, and Staff	252–253
Copyright	254



Fig.1. Harry Mapplethorpe. *Robert Mapplethorpe in ROTC Uniform*. 1963. Gelatin silver print from color transparency, 7 x 5 in. (17.8 x 12.7 cm). Collection Edward Mapplethorpe

## **An Authentic Artlessness** Robert Mapplethorpe's Polaroids 1970–1975

In the summer of 1963, Robert Mapplethorpe was caught stealing a magazine of gay pornography from a newsstand in Times Square, New York. At age sixteen, working as a messenger in the months before entering art school, he had only just discovered that such publications existed and was legally too young to buy pornography, yet the longing to see proved too great for him to withstand. Gay pornography would make a lasting impression on him and would come to inform his artistic practice. In an interview in the late 1980s, he would recall,

*I became obsessed with going into [magazine stands and storefronts] and seeing what was inside*

*these magazines. They were all sealed, which made them even sexier somehow, because you couldn't get at them. . . . I got that feeling in my stomach, it's not a directly sexual one, it's more potent than that. I thought if I could somehow bring that element into art, if I could somehow retain that feeling, I would be doing something that was uniquely my own.<sup>1</sup>*

For a young man who was only beginning to explore his sexual impulses, such raw and powerful emotions were both threatening and exciting—and the shame of being caught was likewise terrifying. (In fact, Mapplethorpe managed to break free of his captor and escape<sup>2</sup>). Perhaps out of fear, then, Mapplethorpe buried his feelings and in the year ahead renewed his efforts to conform to heterosexuality. But the desire to experience what is taboo, to get past veils of censorship and gain access to the forbidden, would return with visceral power, and in his second and third year in art school he would construct collages out of the very kinds of pictures found on Times Square newsstands. Later in his career, of course, his portraits, sexually explicit photographs, male nudes, and still lifes of flowers, all throbbing with homoerotic overtones, would make him famous.

The highly stylized, neoclassically inspired works that Mapplethorpe made between the late 1970s and his death, in 1989, did not emerge fully formed, however; nor did the homoerotic photographs that made him one of the most notorious photographers of the

1980s and a lightning rod for conservatives. His mature work was preceded by a largely unknown body of over 1,500 photographs, made with Polaroid cameras and film, during the six-year period 1970 to 1975. Unlike the carefully crafted and controlled images that Mapplethorpe would stage later in the studio, his Polaroids are marked by spontaneous invention. Some convey an unexpected tenderness and vulnerability; others have a toughness and immediacy that would give way in later years to a more-refined formalism. Compared to the work for which Mapplethorpe is best known, these are imperfect pictures that provide a glimpse of his early concern with light, composition, and design. An examination of this single aspect of his career, in the context of the period, the culture, and the artist's background, allows us a better understanding of the whole. Above all, though, Mapplethorpe's Polaroids give us access to his creative development at a time when he was shaping his identity as an artist and as a man.

## **In Formation**

Before Mapplethorpe began experimenting with a Polaroid camera, he had shown no particular interest in taking pictures, despite the presence of photography in his history. His father, an engineer by profession, was an amateur photographer who kept a darkroom in the basement of the family home in Floral Park, Queens.<sup>3</sup> Robert's mother, in addition to maintaining the house, often

assisted her husband in his hobby. Born on November 4, 1946, Mapplethorpe was the third of six children. Life in Queens was ordinary and unchanging: "I came from suburban America," he once remarked. "It was a very safe environment. And it was a good place to come from in that it was a good place to leave."<sup>4</sup> When it came time for college, Mapplethorpe longed to study out of state, but his father insisted that Robert attend his own alma mater, Pratt Institute, in the nearby borough of Brooklyn. Mapplethorpe enrolled there in September 1963 and declared a major in advertising design. Because he had graduated early from high school and was only sixteen when he entered Pratt, he spent his freshman year living at home.

Mapplethorpe's college years, from 1963 to 1969, coincided with a volatile time in American history. The civil rights movement, aimed at producing legislative change that would end discrimination against blacks, was becoming a powerful national force. In 1968 violent protests against the Vietnam War broke out across the country and Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated. The women's movement was developing strength and visibility, as evidenced at the Miss America Pageant of 1968, where protesters threw bras, girdles, curlers, makeup, and high-heeled pumps into a garbage can, discarding them as "instruments of torture." On June 28, 1969, New York police officers raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in