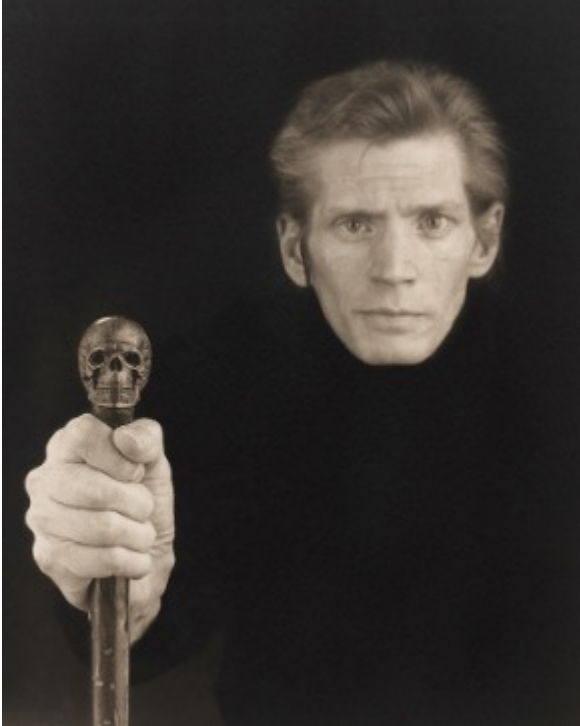


The devil's beauty

by [Adam Hearlson](#) in the [June 22, 2016](#) issue



SELF-PORTRAIT: Mapplethorpe challenges the viewer to see what he sees. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation / Courtesy of HBO.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, the epicurean elder brother Dmitri tells the chaste younger brother Alyosha that beauty is not simply God's creation. Sodom, he says, was full of beauty when it was destroyed, but its beauty did not save it. Dmitri says, "Did you know that secret? The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious and terrible. God and devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man."

Like Dmitri, photographer Robert Mapplethorpe knew that the beautiful is a battleground, and he was happy to play on the devil's side. The lasting gift of his work was his ability to tease out the danger in the beautiful.

The J. Paul Getty Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are sponsoring a joint retrospective of Mapplethorpe's work—*Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium*. The exhibits coincide with *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures*, an HBO documentary that premiered on television on April 4.

Mapplethorpe's work is intimidating and requires a host of conflicting adjectives to describe it: beautiful, grotesque, libidinous, chaste, excessive, erotic, taboo, soft, hard, intimate, graphic, shocking, and revealing. His subjects range from still lifes of flowers to glamour shots of celebrities to the notorious *X Portfolio* which led then senator Jesse Helms to reprimand government arts agencies for sponsoring explicit gay erotica.

In one self-portrait taken while dying of AIDS, Mapplethorpe's head floats on a black background, emerging (or retreating) from the shadows where the artist felt most comfortable. In the foreground he holds tightly to a cane. Instead of looking virile and erotic as in earlier self-portraits, he looks feeble and tired.

The photograph stokes our empathy for his fading life, but the figure in the photograph is still dangerous. One can't be sure what he has planned with this cane. Is it a weapon or a toy or a crutch? Is it a blind man's stick ready to orient him in the coming dark? Mapplethorpe's granite features and wide eyes challenge the viewer and imprint themselves on the retina so that when the viewer closes his eyes, Mapplethorpe is still staring back. The composition is beautiful but also sinister. Mapplethorpe is tempting the viewer to follow him into the shadows and see what he sees.

In an exchange with friend and lover Jack Fritscher, Mapplethorpe wrote, "I want to see the devil in us all, that is my real turn on." He realized that the battleground of God and the devil has always been a fertile place for an artist. It makes sense that he chose the devil as his companion, given the fact that he was denounced as demonic by Helms and others who claimed to speak for God.

Mapplethorpe frequently invoked the iconography of the devil, using such items as horns, tails, whips, and chains. His Catholic upbringing is noticeable in subtle references to medieval depictions of the devil. Yet his work does not incite fear of the demonic or frighten people toward devotion. Instead, it's a testament to *felix culpa*, when excommunication from the people of God becomes a moment of creative liberation.

In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton recognized that the true danger of the devil is his beauty. For Milton, fear and loathing of the devil was inextricably intertwined with a deep attraction. The church too sees danger in beauty—its relationship with the beautiful has always been flecked with the fear that beauty is seductive and can

lead to unbridled lust.

Yet in the Hebrew scriptures, Satan shows up as part of God's own heavenly court. In the book of Job, *hassatan*, or the adversary, expresses God's doubt in the faithfulness of humanity and is sent to scrutinize human beings and expose their most private desires and devotions.

Mapplethorpe's most provocative photographs expose how closely aligned are desire, devotion, and disgust. The photographs are meant to be adversarial—they question how art that's dismissed as disgusting and demonic stokes desire. They expose the ways we hide our attraction to the devilish (even from ourselves), how attraction reflects our true desires, and how desires fund devotion. This is, after all, the role of *hassatan*, the adversary who tempts us into spaces where we might see the true shape of our devotion.