

Mapplethorpe: Views Beyond the Shadows

By Ross Owens

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A striking series of photo-engravings by Robert Mapplethorpe is currently on exhibit at the Triton Museum of Art, 1505 Warburton Ave. in Santa Clara. Many of the works were completed within a few years of the photographer's death in 1989.

The name Mapplethorpe, of course, is well known, but, unfortunately, for all the wrong reasons. The artistry and intricacy of the late photographer's work has been overshadowed by his highly controversial forays into the realm of homoeroticism and by the rantings of a certain senator from North Carolina, who took it upon himself to be the arbiter of the country's aesthetics. That's a shame because Mapplethorpe's photographs exhibit a delicate touch, a profound understanding of light and dark and a deeply rooted appreciation of beauty and its boundaries.

This is not to say the photo-engravings aren't thought provoking. The pictures are eerie and beautiful and still charged with meaning, but their messages are more abstruse and therefore less likely to trigger a storm of Jesse Helms wannabes.

Smoke, haze, and shadows figure prominently in all the pictures at this particular exhibition. In one engraving, a beautiful rose seems to be emerging from the darkness, ringed by a circle of smoke. In another, the powerful perpendiculars of a white church cross are obscured by the dark diagonal shadows cast by the walls of the buildings around it. In yet another, a man's bare back becomes the screen for shadows cast by light through a window.

One of this modest exhibition's few portraits shows a satyr-like face with the sinewy features of a dancer, glancing suspiciously at us, his tousled hair interrupted by the points of his animal ears.

The most ominous work of the collection is a high-contrast engraving that captures the instant of a handgun's explosion. A fine stream of smoke is shooting forth from the muzzle of a coal-black revolver, held at the bottom of the photo and pointing diagonally at some unseen target that lies somewhere beyond the top of frame.

Divorced from the controversy that accompanies some of the better known works, the photo-engravings at the Triton provide an opportunity for museumgoers to appreciate Mapplethorpe less as a political symbol and more as the fine photographer he once was.