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just news

Mapplethorpe photographs lead to indictments

Show Brings Record Crowds to Cincinnati Exhibit

BY JEFFERY ZURLINDEN

The Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati and Director Dennis Barrie pleaded not guilty last month to a Hamilton County, Ohio grand jury indictment of pandering, obscenity and illegal use of a minor in nudity oriented material.

The charges stem from a photographic retrospective, in particular from seven photographs from a nationally touring show, *The Perfect Moment*. The artist—Robert Mapplethorpe, America's best known gay photographer.

The allegedly obscene material comes from the "X Portfolio," a dozen homoerotic sexual pictures. The photographs depict fisting, inserting a finger into a penis, inserting a cylinder into a rectum, a self-portrait of the artist with a whip handle in his rectum, and one man urinating on another. The photographs showing alleged illegal use of a minor

Center. The nerves include racism, pornography, the need to control society, fear of sexuality, censorship of the arts and "a great deal of homophobia, that can't be disputed," says Banister.

This is not the first time Mapplethorpe's photographs have stirred controversy. Last summer, the show's "X Portfolio" sparked debate in Congress over federal funding of art exhibitions. Senator Jesse Helms and Congressman Richard Armey led the fight to demand a standard of "decency" for government sponsored art programs, especially programs funded through the National Endowment for the Arts.

At that time, Washington's Corcoran Gallery of Art cancelled the show rather than be caught in the crossfire between Congress and the National Endowment for the Arts. Instead, a privately funded gallery, the Washington Project for the Arts, courageously mounted the show and drew record attendance.

Controversy has also been good for business in Cincinnati. Each day between 2,000 and 3,000 visitors—twice the usual number pay to see the show. In fact, every museum that has hosted the Mapplethorpe show, including Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Arts, has also attracted record crowds.

Many people do double takes when they see the sex pictures. "At first it was shocking," said a design student who saw the show in Chicago. "Then you see the beauty of the forms. These photographs made me shift back and forth between subject matter and composition."

To be legally obscene, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled a work must fit three criteria: does the work lack artistic, literary, political or scientific merit; does it offend contemporary community standards, and does it appeal to prurient interests.

If not pornography, then what did the artist intend? Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS last March, seldom explained his art. But a widely reported story, retold in the Whitney catalogue, goes like this: "I would see a young kid walking down 42nd Street and then go into a magazine storefront, which were places I didn't know anything about. I became obsessed with going into them and seeing what was inside these magazines. They were all sealed, which made them even sexier somehow, because you couldn't get at them. A kid gets a certain kind of reaction, which of course once you've been exposed to everything you don't get. I got that feeling in my stomach, it's not directly a sexual one, it's something 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."

Undeniably the content of some of Mapplethorpe's photographs makes people uncomfortable. According to Philip Brookman, curator and director of the Washington Project for the Arts, "Mapplethorpe's art confronts people in the mainstream with issues that they're afraid of, black men and homosexuality."



are candid portraits of a partially dressed young child.

These photographs are only a small part of the 175 black-and-white and color photographs that document all phases of Mapplethorpe's art—portraits, fashion, flowers, nudes, homoerotic, and explicit homosexual-sado-masochistic sex.

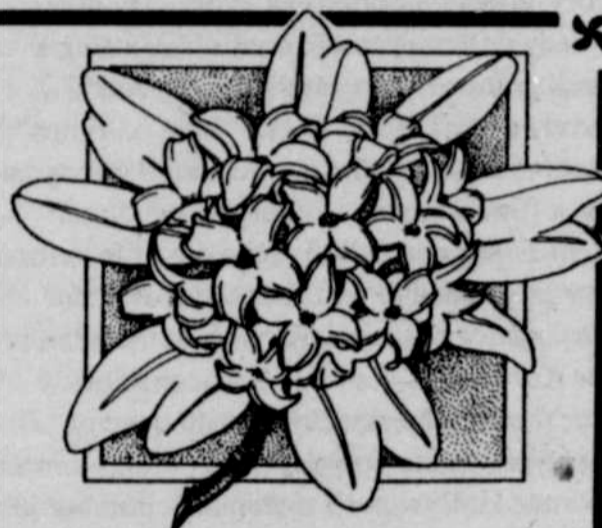
The indictments were the latest move in a four way political wrestling match between the Arts Center, the Citizens for Community Values—an antipornography group—and the Cincinnati and Hamilton County prosecutors' offices. After a letter writing campaign by the Citizens for Community Values and rumors that the police would raid the show, the Arts Center filed suit with the city and county to determine by jury if the photographs were obscene.

The suit was dismissed; but on April 7, Cincinnati police closed the museum to the public and videotaped the show, presumably as evidence of obscenity. However, no photographs were confiscated. An injunction by U.S. District Judge Carl Rubin prevents the city or county from seizing photographs or harassing museum patrons.

This controversy unfolds in a city that, with pride, claims to be free of adult book stores, peep shows and X-rated video rentals. Says a local art patron, "If you knew Cincinnati like I know Cincinnati, this is a 'clean' city."

"This show has touched on every nerve that's conceivable," says Amy Banister, Director of Communications at the Arts

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