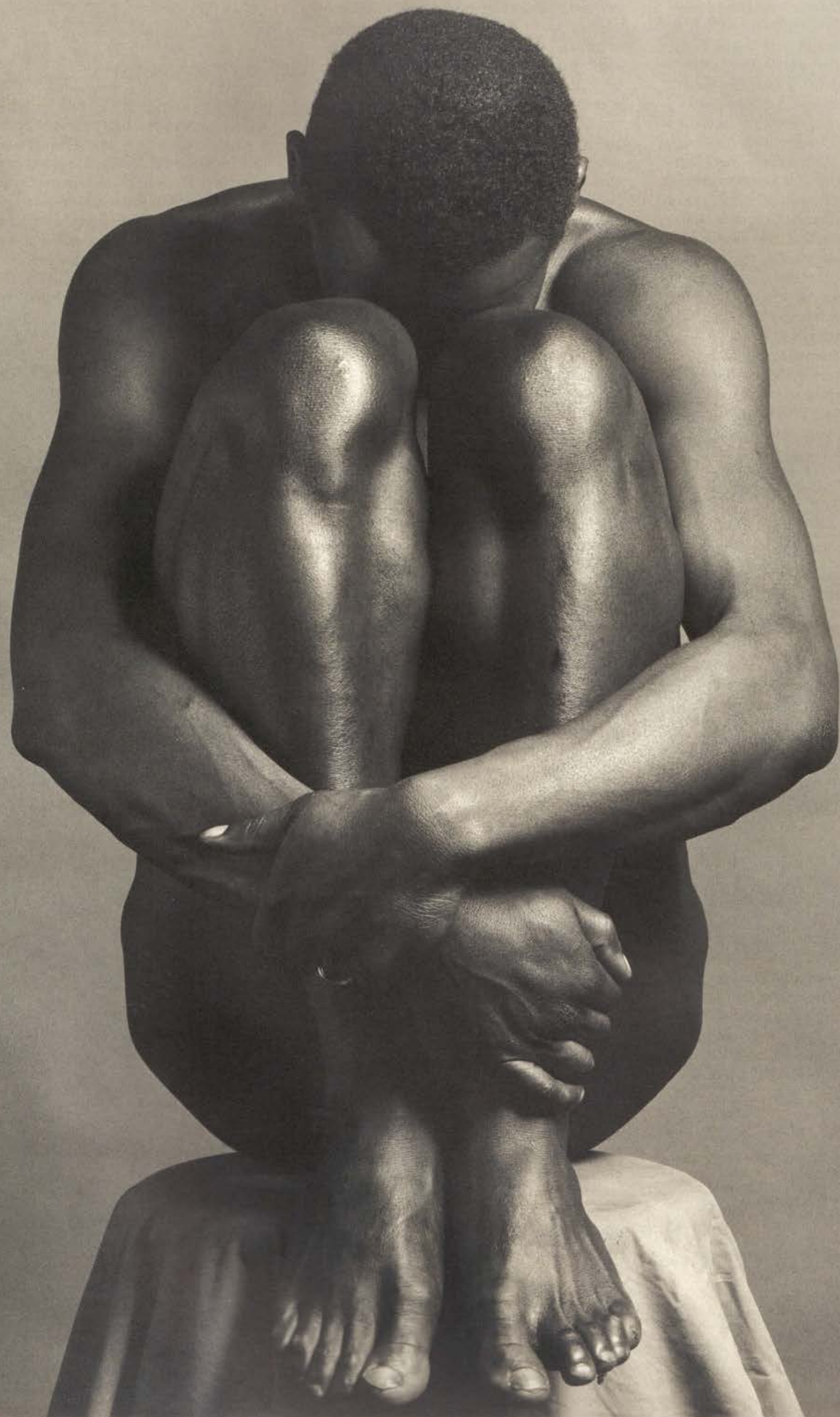


Picture Imperfect

Race, sexuality and portraiture
by Evan Moffitt



Twenty-five years ago, a portrait sparked a national debate about sex, artistic expression and censorship that galvanized the cultural politics of the United States. That portrait was Robert Mapplethorpe's *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980), a close-cropped photograph of a black man's penis hanging exposed from his open fly. It was a key piece of prosecutorial evidence in an obscenity trial filed by the City of Cincinnati over the exhibition 'The Perfect Moment', which had travelled to the Cincinnati Art Museum after its planned run at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. was cancelled by Republican congressmen. The photograph was not the only controversial work on display there but, unlike the others, it managed to offend everybody, from white religious conservatives to black gay liberals.

Mapplethorpe framed and lit all his subjects – from flowers to sadomasochistic sex acts – so they appear abstract and pleasing to the eye. Both rose and rectum received the same refined classical formalism. In the Cincinnati trial, curator Janet Kardon described Mapplethorpe's *Lou, N.Y.C.* (1978), a photograph of a man sticking a finger into his urethra, as a work of artistic value because: 'It's a central image, very symmetrical, a very ordered, classical composition.' The consistency of this approach also constituted its radicalism, at a time when alternative sexualities were less accepted and, in some states, homosexuality was still censored and criminalized.

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Cincinnati trial and the 'culture wars' that followed, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Getty Museum have jointly acquired a bulk of the photographer's archive from the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Its arrival in Los Angeles was celebrated by 'The Perfect Medium', a sweeping dual-museum retrospective that opened in March. But, 25 years later, it isn't the photographs' sexual charge that unsettles most. Many critics and historians who failed then to see their problematic racial dynamics can clearly identify them now. So, what has changed?

In the early 1990s, homophobic anti-sodomy statutes and brutal 'broken windows' policing ravaged the gay black body; black people mostly appeared in the media as perpetrators of drug violence or victims of AIDS. Now, white gays enjoy widening presence in film and television, while black men – gay and straight – consistently appear on

the nightly news as victims of police brutality and (according to figures released this year by the Centers for Disease Control) 44 percent of all new HIV diagnoses in the US are among African Americans, though they comprise only 14 percent of the population. Not much, it seems, has changed. The principal aim of the Black Lives Matter movement has been to insist in response to these tragedies that, as Judith Butler put it, black bodies are 'bodies that matter', deserving of the same legal protections and access to healthcare that whites enjoy. But the lifeless bodies of Michael Brown, Laquan MacDonald and nearly a dozen others, seen in the photographs and video footage of their deaths used as court evidence, mattered little to the jurors who acquitted the cops that killed them. The question of representation has rarely been as urgent as it is today.

The Republican politicians who denounced *Man in a Polyester Suit* believed the openly gay photographer's emphasis on male sex, if not sexuality, qualified the picture as 'homosexual smut' and an assault on Christian values. Black gay artists and critics were more conflicted: Kobena Mercer recognized an object he desired, but one whose metonymic capacity to stand in for an entire body perpetuated a racist stereotype. He quoted Frantz Fanon: 'One is no longer aware of the Negro, but only of a penis; the Negro [...] is a penis.' The cheapness of polyester suggests that even when wearing a suit, the uniform of bourgeois white culture, the black man doesn't fit in. Glenn Ligon responded to this sexual objectification with his photographic installation *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991–93), a display of Mapplethorpe's anthologized black male portraits annotated with quotes from figures such as Fanon, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison.

If *Man in a Polyester Suit* is a failed attempt to make part stand for whole – a penis for a man – then Mapplethorpe's other portraits of black men are successful attempts to make whole stand for part: in them, the entire figure becomes a phallus. Take *Jimmy Freeman* (1979), for example: the subject's folded pose turns his body into a pinwheel that spins on a genital axis. The tensile, athletic body of *Thomas* (1987), posed in a Vitruvian circle, seems ripped straight from a Greek amphora; his muscles are as obdurate as stone. The close-cropped buttocks of *Derrick Cross* (1983) are as voluptuously abstract as a Constantin Brâncuși bronze. By riffing on a canon familiar to white, museum-going audiences, Mapplethorpe's photographs suggest they deserve the denomination of 'Art' in spite, and not because, of their supposedly 'troubling' subject matter. Yet, this aestheticization of racial difference censors the historic violence inflicted upon black skin.

Rotimi Fani-Kayode, a Nigerian British photographer and contemporary of Mapplethorpe's, produced a dazzling but little-known body of work just a few years before his death from AIDS-related complications in 1989, some of which were shown in New York earlier this year in a compact exhibition at Syracuse University's Palitz Gallery. Fani-Kayode's studio portraits of nude black men elegantly meld Western

Europe and West Africa, black and gay culture – a syncretism that highlights the challenge of marginalization on multiple fronts (sexuality, race, nationality). Unlike Mapplethorpe's classical black and whites, the colour photographs in Fani-Kayode's last series, 'Nothing to Lose' (1987–89), are sumptuously baroque: chiaroscuro, velvety shades of umber and scarlet, drapery, flowers and fruit all recall the paintings of Caravaggio. In the late 1980s, at the height of the AIDS epidemic and a resurgence of political conservatism on both sides of the Atlantic, Fani-Kayode and others – from Andres Serrano to Derek Jarman and Madonna – incorporated baroque aesthetics into their work as a way to uncover the perverse, queer desire hidden not just within the canon of art history, but the dominant social, political and cultural institutions that shape it. If Mapplethorpe's quotations are retrograde, Fani-Kayode's are subversive.

In the arresting photograph *Gold Phallus* (1989), a crouched figure wears a Venetian plague doctor mask, a 16th-century emblem of the reaper. His penis, painted gold, mirrors the mask's ghoulish proboscis, while a string tied around its shaft seems to tug it in two directions. By focusing our gaze on the golden phallus of its title, the photograph recalls *Man in a Polyester Suit*; but, unlike that violently close-cropped image, Fani-Kayode exposes the crime of objectification by including the figure's full body in the frame. *Gold Phallus* depicts a man enslaved by white desire, which the mask suggests is a kiss of death.

In Fani-Kayode's earlier black and white *Union Jack* (1987), the male model's muscular thighs in contrapposto could belong to Derrick Cross, were it not for the fraying British flag that hangs from his left hand, like the ornamental drapery that lends structural support to marble sculptures. Its corner snags on his foot, disguising a gesture of defiance to imperialism as one of classical repose. The flag's placement recalls a towel in a men's locker room, removed by an exhibitionist; it no longer shields the black body from view in the name of public decorum.

Such ambiguous symbolism reflects an ambiguous relationship to photography. As a gay black man, Fani-Kayode was doubly invisible: subject to white gay men's racism and black Africans' homophobia. In the 19th century, Europeans employed photography as an extension of phrenology to justify colonial subjugation. Photography has long been used to marginalize and to solidify binary ways of thinking. Fani-Kayode's work acknowledges that photography can never fully capture black gay diasporic experience, since nothing truly can. The photographs lay no claim to truth but, instead, fashion a self-aware fantasy.

Like 'Nothing to Lose', Lyle Ashton Harris's 1994 series 'The Good Life' toys with racial and sexual fantasy. In it, intersectional subjects parody tropes of black and queer identity. For *Venus Hottentot 2000* (1994),

Opening page
Robert Mapplethorpe
Ajito, 1981,
silver gelatin print, 46 × 36 cm

Courtesy
the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation,
the Los Angeles County Museum
of Art, the J. Paul Getty Trust and
the David Geffen Foundation;
© Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

Fani-Kayode's work acknowledges that photography can never fully capture black gay diasporic experience. The photographs lay no claim to truth but, instead, fashion a self-aware fantasy.



1



3



2

1
Rotimi Fani-Kayode
Adebiyi, 1989,
archival c-type print, 51 x 61 cm

2
Rotimi Fani-Kayode
The Golden Phallus, 1989,
archival c-type print,
51 x 61 cm

3
Lyle Ashton Harris
Venus Hottentot 2000, 1994,
unique polaroid, 60 x 50 cm

Courtesy
1 & 2 Autograph ABP • 3 the artist
and David Castillo Gallery,
Miami



Framing matters, especially in portraiture, where human bodies are at stake.

fellow photographer Renee Cox posed with prosthetic breasts and butt as a millennial Saartjie Baartman, the 19th-century Khoi woman paraded around Europe as the 'Hottentot Venus'. Cox's dark body pads stand out against her lighter skin, but she poses with pride, as if to say that no stereotype can define her. In another photograph, *Saint Michael Stewart* (1994), Harris himself dons a cop uniform and red lipstick, queering historically discriminatory, macho police forces while canonizing Stewart, an unarmed black graffiti artist who died mysteriously in New York Police Department custody in 1983. (Stewart's arresting officers were all acquitted, a poignant fact in light of black activist Sandra Bland's unexplained death in a Texas jail cell last year, and the subsequent lack of indictments.)

At the 1983 African-American Day Parade in Harlem, Lorraine O'Grady helmed a parade float bearing a massive gilded picture frame and a skirt emblazoned with the performance title *Art Is...* down New York's Seventh Avenue. At various points along the parade route, O'Grady and fellow performers bearing empty picture frames jumped off the float and invited members of the crowd to pose inside them. Photographs documenting

the event show joyful people eager to become works of art. O'Grady's performance acknowledges the frame's ability to restore the power of self-representation to those historically deprived of it.

Portrait photography exemplifies a principle contradiction of its medium: it claims to capture the essential qualities of its subjects more accurately than painting or sculpture, while also being highly contingent on the styles and techniques of its practitioners. But is a portrait ever not a fiction? *Man in a Polyester Suit* makes this failure plain, though that does not make it a fatal flaw. Perhaps it's unfair to demand that Mapplethorpe's portraits honestly and accurately portray their sitters; photography is not a 'perfect medium', as the LACMA and Getty shows' title suggests. But that's why framing matters, especially in portraiture, where human bodies are at stake. Mapplethorpe's framing reduces subjects with complex histories to coveted erotic objects. The portraits by Fani-Kayode, Harris and O'Grady, on the other hand, constitute a different form of photographic exchange – one in which power lies not behind the camera but in front of it. By giving their models the agency to perform freely before their lens, they rescue

photography from its racist, sexist and homophobic past. Their portraits refuse to show us who we want or expect to see. ♦♦

Evan Moffitt is assistant editor of frieze, based in New York, USA.

'Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium' is on view at the Getty Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA, until 31 July. Earlier this year, Lorraine O'Grady's 'Art Is...' was at the Studio Museum Harlem, New York, and at the Pérez Art Museum, Miami, USA, while a solo retrospective of Rotimi Fani-Kayode was at the Palitz Gallery, Syracuse University, New York.

Lorraine O'Grady
Art Is ... (Cop Framed), 1983/2009,
 chromogenic colour print,
 40 x 50 cm

Courtesy
 Alexander Gray Associates,
 New York, and DACS, London;
 © 2015 Lorraine O'Grady