

## LIFE AS ART

*Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* Follows the Photographer's Gaze

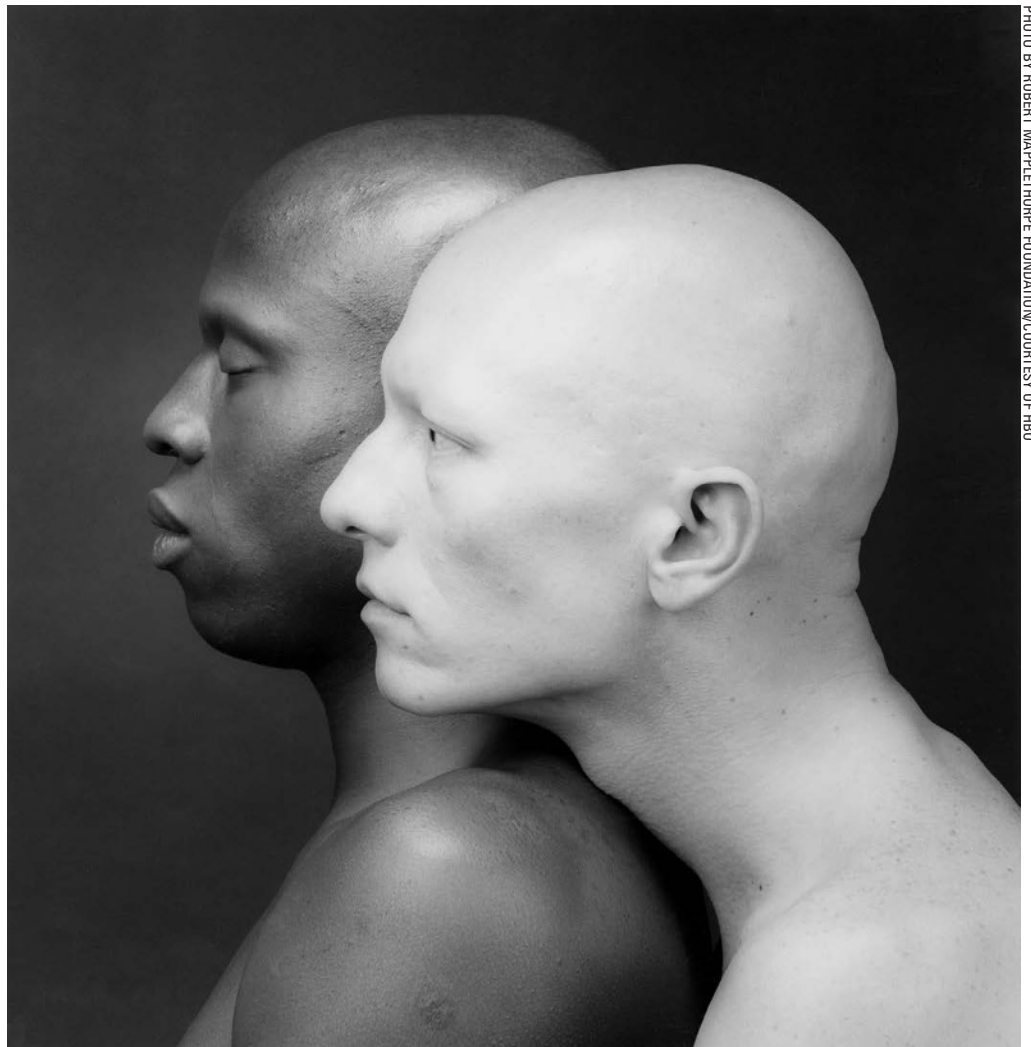
**T**he documentary feature *Mapplethorpe: Look at the Pictures* debuted on HBO on April 4 in conjunction with simultaneous retrospectives at the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). From directors Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato (*Party Monster*, *Inside Deep Throat*), *Look at the Pictures* follows Mapplethorpe's beginnings as a young artist in New York City through his meteoric rise in the art world to his untimely death in 1989 at the age of 42 from HIV/AIDS.

His death occurred just months before the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) exploded into controversy fueled in part by his work. The film's title comes from a speech delivered that same year by Senator Jesse Helms denouncing Mapplethorpe's art, which pushed boundaries with frank depictions of nudity, sexuality and fetishism, igniting a culture war that continues to this day.

With complete and unprecedented access to the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, the film draws on archival materials and features never-before-seen photographs and footage—including rediscovered audio interviews with the artist himself—as well as intimate revelations from nearly 50 family members, friends and partners. The film, which had its premiere at Sundance, also offers viewers long looks at Mapplethorpe's most controversial imagery, including what could arguably be called his most confrontational photograph, "Self Portrait with Whip."

Editor Langdon F. Page and co-editor Franci Kachler used Avid Media Composer to assemble the documentary feature. "It's like returning to an old friend," Page says of revisiting Avid workflows after having used Apple Final Cut Pro 7 for several years. "The interface works as well as it always has, but it's able to carry the weight of new codecs and all the new technologies."

For Page, one of the most demanding aspects of the project was the construction of a narrative



Ken Moody and Robert Sherman, 1984

arc using the more than 2,000 available still images spanning Mapplethorpe's earliest pre-photographic material in the 1960s to his final photographs in 1989. "It was really about crafting a story that was going to be compelling enough that it could be based on people talking and still images," he recounts.

"We made a conscious choice early on that we

didn't want to use effects on the pictures," Page continues. "We specifically chose to not even put any moves on Mapplethorpe's pictures in order to differentiate Mapplethorpe's work from the other stills in the film. We don't move, we don't do any pushes on any of the Mapplethorpe stills, so they are literally just sitting there. To make that work, the story has to provide its own momentum, and

PHOTO BY ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE FOUNDATION/COURTESY OF HBO



Robert Mapplethorpe Self Portrait, 1980

you [as editor] have to commit to it and not be afraid that your audience is going to lose interest because they aren't being barraged with a bunch of movements or effects."

Add to that the increasing amount of archival audio footage that turned up as the filmmakers went through the project. "Even though the themes remain the same, you can track the evolution of

his work in connection with his life. It was all there in the beginning: the portraits, the sexuality, the still lifes," Page says. "It was a question of weeding through all of that and picking out the gems."

Directors of photography Huy Truong and Mario Panagiotopoulos captured footage of Mapplethorpe's work at the Getty archives and formal interviews using a combination of Sony



Directors Randy Barbato and Fenton Bailey





Britt Salvesen and Paul Martineau in the film



Robert Mapplethorpe photo by Edward Mapplethorpe

PMW-F5 and Sony PMW-F55 CineAlta 4K cameras augmented with a Canon EOS 5D Mark III DSLR.

"I prefer the form factor of the F5 over many other cameras, and it's a fantastic workhorse," Truong comments. "Nothing ever really goes wrong with it and it gives you plenty of latitude, plenty of color, and provides a small package."

For *Look at the Pictures*, Truong sought to balance the stark black and white imagery of Mapplethorpe's work with a color palette inspired by the music video vibe of the 1970s and '80s, lighting his subjects with the signature studio style of the artist's later years.

"It was a little intimidating, to be honest, because it was a documentary about a photographer," Truong admits. "When I think of docs on photographers, I immediately think of Richard Avedon's *Darkness and Light*, of course, but I was more drawn to a documentary on James Nachtwey called *War Photographer*, from 2001. In that film they put the viewer in the photographer's role by placing a small camera next to [Nachtwey's] trigger finger so you could see what he was shooting and when he was making the decision to shoot that picture. Mapplethorpe isn't around anymore so we couldn't duplicate that, but it helped inspire the motif used throughout the film of shooting through the Hasselblad waist-level viewfinder."

Truong outfitted the Sony F5 and F55 with a Sigma 18-35mm *f*/1.8 lens. "I was extremely surprised by how well it worked," the cinematographer says. "I think that lens is highly underrated and under-used for documentary sit-downs, but it was very helpful when we were shooting in intimate situations. It was very fast, and on the wide end it makes you feel like you're sitting there with the subject. It puts you in the room. Because it's a fast lens, it gives that same lower



Edward Mapplethorpe in the film

depth of field that you would get with the longer lenses or primes."

With interviews shot on two cameras and much of the original source material taken from slide shows, VHS tapes and Super 8 footage, Page and his editing team were required to work with dozens of image formats, but the biggest challenge was rescuing audio material recorded on microcassettes and cassette tapes. "Being able to clean up that audio to the point where it could hold up in a theatrical setting was very important," he underscores.

"Traditionally in editing we're called 'picture editors,' but the confluence of picture and audio makes them both a big part of our toolkit," Page adds. "I like to be involved in a project from the script stage, going back to transcripts and original source material, all the way through the evolution of the edit and the story to the final sound spotting and mix.

"It's really essential to have the editor involved as early as possible to as late as possible," continues

Page, who has worked on five other films with the directorial duo. "Fenton and Randy are always grateful to have the editor involved all the way through because, as directors and producers, they've got an awful lot on their plate. The editor is the one who really has an awareness of every single frame of both audio and video in the film, so we're making sure that nothing gets misplaced or distorted along the way," he says.

"You have to trust the material," Page concludes about what he has learned from previous collaborations. "I would say I've evolved in my craft a certain patience, an openness in this case to listen to the material itself. To not force a sporadic, aggressive, television-esque rhythm onto what are ultimately still elements, sit-down interviews and pictures. The danger is that it can very easily become a VH1-esque or MTV-esque effects-driven sort of sparkly, jazzy documentary. Early on we were very conscious that we wanted to get away from that." **dv**