



MAPPLETHORPE

A Film by Ondi Timoner

Starring Matt Smith, Marianne Rendón, John Benjamin Hickey, Brandon Sklenar, McKinley Belcher III, Mark Moses

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SYNOPSIS

Robert Mapplethorpe is arguably one of the most important artists of the 20th century. Mapplethorpe discovered himself both sexually and artistically in New York City throughout the 70's and 80's. The film explores Mapplethorpe's life from moments before he and Patti Smith moved into the famed Chelsea hotel, home to a world of bohemian chic. Here he begins photographing its inhabitants and his new found circle of friends including artists and musicians, socialites, film stars, and members of the S&M underground

Mapplethorpe's work displayed eroticism in a way that had never been examined nor displayed before to the public. The film explores the intersection of his art and his sexuality along with his struggle for mainstream recognition. MAPPLETHORPE offers a nuanced portrait of an artist at the height of his craft and of the self-destructive impulses that threaten to undermine it all.

MAPPLETHORPE marks the narrative feature directorial debut of Ondi Timoner in partnership with sibling producers Eliza and Nate Dushku. Timoner is the only two-time winner of the Sundance Grand Jury Prize for her documentaries *Dig!* (2004) and *We Live in Public* (2009), while Eliza Dushku is a veteran actress of film and television, who finds herself on the other side of the camera. Shot on 16mm and Super 8mm film stock, the movie provides a rich, textured view of the New York art world in its heyday. And through Smith's image-altering performance, offers a vivid, challenging portrait of a true cultural icon.

TRT: 95 mins.

Country: U.S.A.

Language: English

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Filmmaker Ondi Timoner's first exposure to the work of Robert Mapplethorpe came when she was just a kid. "I was 12 years old and I had a calendar of Mapplethorpe's flowers," she says. "I absolutely loved it. But I had no idea that there was this other side to his photography."

The photographer's famed floral portraits, especially of the white Calla Lily, have rippled across generations. "Everybody has been exposed to Mapplethorpe's flowers," producer Nate Dushku says. "No matter who you are, you just know those images." Producer Eliza Dushku adds, referring to the artist's adult-oriented work, "I remember speaking to our mother about when she attended one of Mapplethorpe's exhibits in Boston. All the

artwork was covered up and the people had put their heads under a curtain in order to view it.”

That duality within Mapplethorpe’s art—between the mainstream and the taboo—was a key for the team in approaching the project. Timoner explains, “He was taking flowers and sexualizing them. Meanwhile, he was taking visions of taboo sexuality with men and twisting and subverting those, turning them into gorgeous, sculptural pieces of art. And in doing so, in fact, he took photography and made it a collective art form. He was like Rodin or Michelangelo, but with a camera.”

Timoner herself understands subverting art forms. She’s built her reputation as one of America’s leading voices in documentary filmmaking over the last 15 years. Her 2004 film *Dig!* chronicled the ups and downs of psychedelic bands The Dandy Warhols and The Brian Jonestown Massacre, winning the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance. Another Grand Jury Prize came five years later with *We Live in Public*, Timoner’s profile of an internet mogul who lived on camera for months at a time.

For both of those projects, Timoner spent years in production and eventually shaped the finished films from thousands of hours of footage. In the case of MAPPLETHORPE, a similarly long gestation process occurred.

As early as 2003, siblings Eliza and Nate Dushku were introduced to the original script for Mapplethorpe by writer, Bruce Goodrich. In 2006, Goodrich optioned his screenplay to Timoner. The parties approached the Mapplethorpe Foundation in 2008 seeking backing and support for a film. A match was made marrying director Timoner and the Dushku siblings who funded the option from the Foundation for the right to tell the artist’s life story and reproduce his artwork for the film. In 2009, screenwriter Mikko Alanne joined the project to work on the script.

After the success of *We Live in Public*, Timoner was approached by the Sundance Institute and she submitted the MAPPLETHORPE script. In 2010, Timoner, Goodrich, and Eliza and Nate Dushku were invited to Sundance’s Director, Writer, and Producer Labs. “It’s such a great program for filmmakers,” Timoner says. “We were able to engage with and be critiqued by Robert Redford and Ed Harris and Richard Linklater and Joan Tewksbury and Michael Hoffman and Joan Darling. These people are my mentors to this day.”

As part of her research process while working on the screenplay, Timoner was mailed a box filled with fifty books from the Mapplethorpe Foundation. “They have been extremely generous with me for over a decade,” she says. “One book on his early works was a huge influence on the script, because I found that to be a really great avenue into his coming of age. You could see him developing. And one of the books was about Rodin and Michelangelo. So Robert Mapplethorpe himself really impacted the script and the film as it went along on its journey.”

For Smith, who was born and raised in Northampton, England, Mapplethorpe didn’t exist in his mind as singular a cultural touchstone as artists such as Jean-Michel

Basquiat or David Hockney. “But it was through association with the script that I started to investigate him,” Smith says. “And wow. He was such a vivid, brilliant artist who lived his life in such a vivid, brilliant way. You add the story of his sexuality and the cultural climate into this melting pot, and you have an utterly compelling and fascinating man to make a film about.”

Smith auditioned on tape—twice. “The first one wasn’t very good,” he says with a laugh. “So I thought a bit more and did it again.” When Timoner and the producing team watched the second tape, they were dumbstruck. “My mouth was agape,” Timoner recalls. “In Matt’s audition, there was a brooding and troubled soul who’s never quite satisfied. Like a dark tool of mystery. Always grasing and digging deeper for more. It was absolutely Mapplethorpe.”

Smith was cast in early 2016 and the film finally commenced production in July of 2017. Principal photography wrapped in just 19 days. “It was a hell-raising, crazy shoot, but it all worked out,” the director says. “We shot in thirty locations and sometimes we utilized a multi-use location. Hotel Chelsea, *Drummer* magazine, the fashion shoot, the S&M dungeon, all of that was one single place.”

For one of the movie’s most crucial locations—New York’s Whitney Museum, which presented a sensational exhibition of Mapplethorpe’s work in 1988—Timoner was able to access the real thing. Though the Whitney relocated downtown in 2014, the building is currently owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the historic space still includes leftovers from the Whitney days.

“I remembered the ceiling of the Whitney Museum, with all those big round lights,” Timoner says. “It was nail-biting whether we were going to get permission to film there, so I really have to thank the Met for that. We were the first film ever to shoot there.”

However, for the iconic Chelsea Hotel, the now-closed residence where Mapplethorpe was one of many famous residents, the production needed to seek a substitute in Yonkers, NY. “Before the Chelsea got sold, I checked in there in 2011,” Timoner says. “I did what I’d call a sleepover location scout. The front desk guy was a fan of *We Live in Public* and gave me the marriage suite. So I took my iPhone and shot everything I saw there. That stairwell especially stood out to me as a defining factor. So I knew if I could just sell people on seeing that stairwell being real, they would fall for it.”

The MAPPLETHORPE’s shoot was quick and the schedule was such that the final years of Mapplethorpe’s life were filmed first. “I needed Matt to starve a bit to get ready for the role,” Timoner explains. “But I didn’t want him to be starving for the earlier years of Mapplethorpe’s life.”

Indeed, prior to the start of filming, Smith dropped about twenty pounds. “I’d just come off one job where I had to be a bit bigger physically,” he says. “I didn’t have that much time to lose weight. But I had about a month, so I changed my diet quite rapidly and just lost as much weight as I could.”

Smith also spoke in a distinct New York accent all day (Mapplethorpe was born in Queens), even when not filming. “It was a way for me to try to embody him and live as him as much as I could. The whole thing was a great challenge as an actor and a difficult, nerve-wracking one. I’m not sure any film can cover all the richness of one person’s life. But hopefully in there somewhere is an essence of Mapplethorpe and his work and the courage and defiance that he showed.”

Eliza Dushku marvels at Smith’s transformation. “To say that he enveloped himself in the role is an understatement,” she remarks. “One afternoon during production, a number of members from the Mapplethorpe estate come to watch the filming. I’ll never forget the looks on their faces when they watched Matt perform. They expressed that they felt like they were seeing Robert. It was truly remarkable.”

For the actor, a major draw to the film was the idiosyncratic, sometimes critical portrait of the artist that it offered. “This could not just be a flowery version of this man,” Smith says. “It was ugly at times in his life. How tricky he could be. God, he could be selfish. He could be self-destructive. He did offend people and he didn’t give a fuck. I’m sure it made him at times quite difficult to be around. But many people found him quite kind and loving and intimate and caring. Like all really interesting human beings, hopefully he was a bit of everything.”

Timoner grappled with that discord in Mapplethorpe’s personal history. “There’s a scene between Robert and his brother Edward, where Edward says ‘Aren’t you worried about spreading it?’... That’s the hardest moment of the whole thing for people and I thought a lot about if the audience is going to feel for him. But that’s what I try to do with my films—to make everybody engage by judging and then realizing they can’t judge—and in that vacillation they lean in. We can embrace the gray area. Everyone is dark and light and everyone has fatal flaws.”

The dance between light and dark also played out in the film’s remarkable visual style. Shot entirely on film by veteran cinematographer Nancy Schreiber (*The Celluloid Closet*, November), each scene is suffused with depth and texture. “When I began my career, I was shooting with both 16mm and 35mm, but we are in the digital age now. So for me it was like embracing an old friend. It was exciting to work with the colors and grain of Super 16. Also it made sense to us to represent the decades of Robert’s life in celluloid.”

Regarding the use of real film stock over a digital camera format, Nate Dushku points out, “When you’re shooting a story about a photographer who’s medium was film, it just makes sense from a narrative perspective. When you’re shooting on film, there’s a kind of reverence for the process. The focus and the energy on set becomes laser sharp. We wanted to make the sacrifice to honor the craft.”

Schreiber adds “I was very fortunate to have amazing and diverse camera team on MAPPLETHORPE. I came up through the ranks in the electric department. I know how hard it can be for women coming up to be represented in the technical departments. I have always tried to hire women and minorities in my three departments, camera electric and grip.”

For Smith, the filming experience reflected Mapplethorpe's own maverick qualities. "I loved that we shot on film," he says. "It's great to feel the texture of New York. This is a period movie with a pretty small budget and evoking a location can be a very difficult thing to achieve. We had a great costume designer, Tom Broecker, who did a fantastic job."

Timoner also cites the contribution of production designer Jonah Markowitz (*The Diary of a Teenage Girl*). "When we first met, Jonah showed up at a cafe with like five thousand books and a PDF that was an endless show of his MAPPLETHORPE proposal. He showed me the most gorgeous Mexican blue and faded reds and tamped down color and just everything I could've hoped for. He understood that 70's quality that bleeds into the 80's. He just got it. We also have very similar energy, just bouncing off the walls together and having the best time, which unlocks creativity."

MAPPLETHORPE, in essence, is a celebration of the artistic impulse. Says Smith, "We all want to encourage that sensibility and that temperament in people who create. Robert was just a young artist trying to make his way. It was difficult but he stuck to the path and he was dogmatic and worked really hard. I don't think we can underestimate just how dedicated he really was—for whatever reason. Was it for fame and notoriety or was it because he loved what he did? I think it was probably both. Needless to say, he was very dedicated and that's what allowed him to leave a great artistic legacy."

Timoner is in complete agreement with her star. "My goal in making this film was to make an anthem for artists. I make films about impossible visionaries, about people who are unable to turn away from the quest, even when they come up against doubt and ridicule and struggle. Robert Mapplethorpe set out to make people bend to his vision, to embrace what they deemed obscene, and worship it as holy. That's an incredible thing he did."

She adds, "I want for us to look at a Mapplethorpe and ask, 'How did that happen? What was the motivation behind that? How did that come to be?' And perhaps to understand."