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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
FINE ART PRINTMAKING

TITLE
RACIAL AMBIVALENCE:
ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE'S "BLACK BOOK"

BY
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SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ART AND DESIGN AND
COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
FINE ART PRINTMAKING.

1995.

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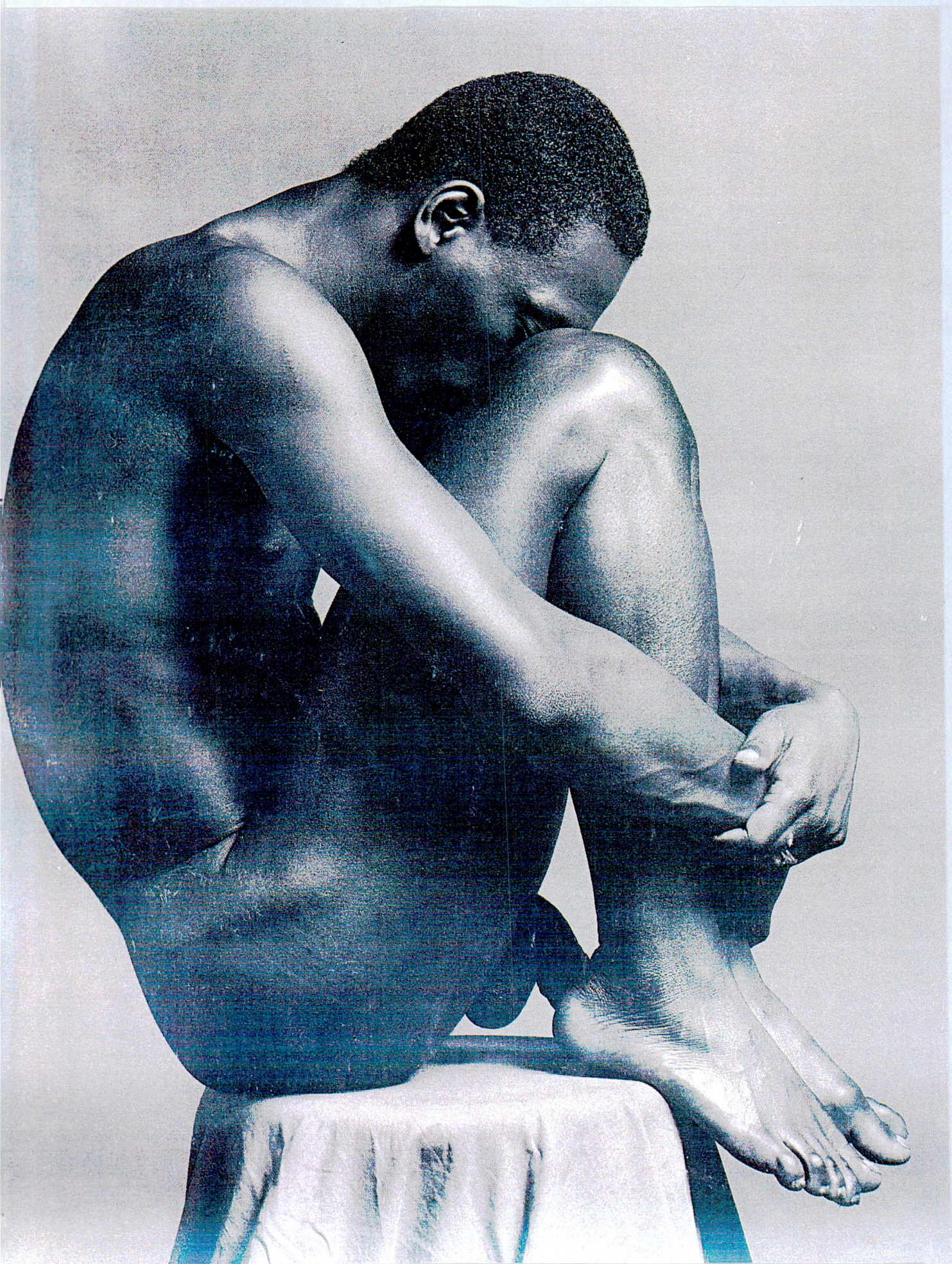
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INTRODUCTION.

IRREPRESSIBLY BRONZE, BEAUTIFUL & MINE (FOR ANA MENDETA)

I.

all my life they've been near me
these men/
some for a while like the
friend of my father's who drove
each summer from denver to
st.louis/with some different
white woman/i remember one seemed
to like me/she had rose blonde hair
i wondered/why do you like me
you're with him and he's mine
he's colored /he'll always be like that/
like me/i think
he knew my eight year old
precocious soul was hankering
for days to come with one/
one of them colored fellas
who'd be mine/on purpose/
not just cause of some pigmentation
problem/or a grandfather clause
in mississippi/i live there near
the water/the river/the salt
caking my calves/me laughin with
the younguns/the boys who'd be
black men one day

if they live so long
he brought me rocks/each sojourn
quartz marble granite and sandstone
onyx ovals i could hold onto when
he drove off with the white woman
i never felt sad/i didn't know i might
be experiencing rejection/a little
coloured girl with an ebony stone
in the palm of her hand

i knew that was his heart
where could a man go without his heart
a child by him mississippi grasping
dream/yet to grab holto a man
but nighttime and motown asked me to dance
sang sweet dreams of sweat
moist kisses/those arrogant torsos
daring crackers or a fool to
look the wrong way/no just look
a funny way and it'd be over
or just begun

look at me pretty niggah
bring it over here/i'm grown
now and the stones don't sit
static in my hand/you know
how it is black volcanoes erupt
they say when miles davis manager
to whisper/they erupt they say
when the blackstone rangers take
a stroll/black volcanoes seep
lava anywhere there's true love
now i'm not talking about a hoot
and holler or a dance on a dime
but whenever there's true
love/black volcanoes seep lava
and it's always been mine always
my dear like the bible
say an eye for an eye/there's
a me fora you

bring it on baby

i've been holdin your heart in
my hand since i was a child
i've been preoccupied on occasion
but i had to grow some too
cause i wanted what all you were
what all you are/now your're a man
you've got the world watching your
every move/i've got your heart
and by the mississippi/when i was a
child/he callt that a groove
sweet black eyed pea
honey dripped husk

bring it on/i'm not afraid

i've known you all my life
and this my dear is just the
beginning
the first linking of what they're gonna hear
it ain't no lie that we could sing
don't be embarrassed/just appear
right there
the way i have you/those
times your strength can't be met
just be

remember me/oh back then
when you rode off and left
your heart in the palm
of my child hand

II

he's of course george jackson
doing push-ups and visiting angela
soledad soledad

confined to the beauty alone
fighting cement walls for air
malcolm's last breath king's crumbling torso
speak to me of beauty
blood beauty courage sweating rage
of course he's lumumba
see only eyes/bob marley wail
in the night ralph featherstone
burning temples as pages of books
become ashen and smolder by his ankles
walter rooney's blood fresh soakin
the streets/leon damar spoke poems
with his face/Casare cursed our enemies/
making welcome our true voice
the visage of a people
continually mourning
recognized our beauty so slowly
our heroes fade like jackie wilson
in silence/in the still of the night
soledad miamor soledad

III

among palms whistling lizards
nestle by roots freshly humid
roots by palm fronds the sun
tickles lovers inviting them to
make quickly some love in
moist sands seeping through toes
pull down the bosom the legs
wiry and thick haired pull down
the petticoats/lace panties
perfumed lips skipping over
shoulders muscles making music
where before only acacias and macaws
dared solo/many duets
have been abandoned by the trunks
of palms searching for
moonlight/rushing toward the sky
as tongues would wrap round
each other/dew like honey
slipping from their lips
whole skies fallen by
their feet

jagnars prow1 when their
eyes meet

IV

let me be a chorus of a thousand tongues
and your lips dance on a new moon/while
Daddy Cool imagines syncopated niggahfied
erotica on Griggs Rd/.

NTOZAKE SHANGE.



INTRODUCTION

Robert Mapplethorpe's 'Black Book' is introduced by means of a poem 'irrepressibly bronze, beautiful and mine' by Ntozake Shange. It is the story of an eight year old girl who yearns for the admiration and affection of a black man. Her love is directed towards a friend of her fathers who visits St. Louis each Summer with some different white woman. She is perplexed as she remembers one of the white women who liked her

why do you like me
you're with him and he's mine
he's coloured/he'll always be
like that like me

The man that she desires presents rocks of quartz marble etc, on the occasion of each holiday. She interprets these stones as symbols of his heart. However he leaves each time with the white woman.

The poem sets the scene for the photographs in 'the Black Book' and creates a scenario of unfulfilled dreams. One senses the racial tension from the black child who vies for the love of the black man, against her rival the white woman. The black child (as the poem progresses she becomes the black woman) longs for the black masculinity which eludes her.

This image of interracial relationships is relevant to the 'Black Book' because the white photographer is in control of the gaze. He is in control of the manner in which these black nudes are depicted. As a result of this relationship Mapplethorpe's work has received immense criticism. He has been deemed guilty of the objectification of an already marginalised group. He has depicted lower, class gay, Black Americans on 'the Black Book' and has been accused of marginalising further a group of people who are already in the peripheries of normative society. He has been accused of reinforcing negative stereotypes of the black man. Thus disempowering him. Critics have accused him of creating images of a marginalised section of society simply to enhance his own name as an author. The thesis will discuss many of the criticisms of Mapplethorpe's representation of the Black Male Nude. It will discuss the relevance of relating feminist film theory to the work in an effort to assess the 'power relations' between author and model.

It will discuss the impact of images which have blatantly racist content and to decipher the impact of such images. The thesis will ask who is empowered and who is disempowered by this representation of difference. It will interpret images and strive to prove that these images address racism and therefore deconstruct racial stereotypes.

The thesis will investigate the implications that when the audience is guilty of racist attitudes, that such attitudes affect the interpretation of the photographs. It will discuss the political climate at the time of publication and hence its effect on one's perception of the work. The thesis will also analyse the relationship between author and models and to establish that, contrary to much criticism, that Mapplethorpe actually collaborates with the models. Therefore empowering their situation by placing them in the realms of the Fine Art Nude.

The thesis will discuss Mapplethorpe's methods of representing the black male body and the context in which the body represented exists. It will interpret the varying conflicts of interest which combine to intensify the controversy around Robert Mapplethorpe's 'Black Book'.

CHAPTER 1.

Robert Mapplethorpe's 'Black Book' is a representation of black, gay, American males. The models are portrayed in various guises. Some of the images are composed with halo - like backgrounds surrounding an individuals head creating a God-Like personae. Others are depicted as tribesmen, soliders, sailors and athletes at peak fitness and strength. In other images sections of the body are aestheticised and eroticised.

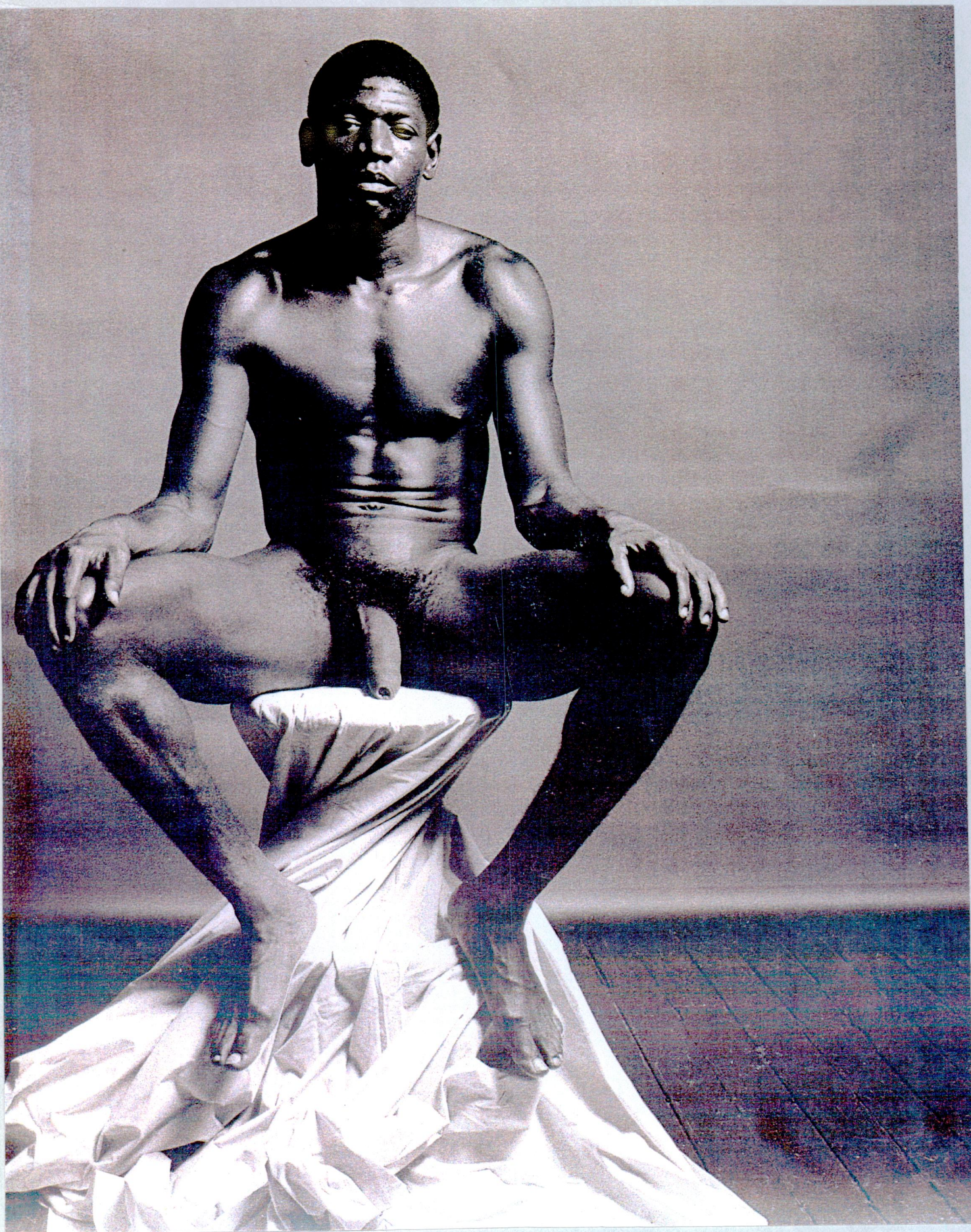
Mapplethorpe utilises three formal conventions which are traditionally integral methods used in the representation of the nude. The conventions are integrated to guide the viewers gaze to the body depicted in the photographic image. Firstly a sculptural code, which focuses on the posture of the figure in the pictorial space. The next, a code of portraiture which centres on the face, its expression, the return of the gaze to the viewer or away from the viewer. The third is a system of lighting and framing which Mapplethorpe uses to accentuate the tones and textures of the flesh, often framing the body as fragments therefore it becomes purely an object of the gaze eroticised, fetishised and aestheticised. The body becomes an aesthetic artefact, an embodiment of fantasy and desire.

Mapplethorpe also employs black and white photography, the chosen medium of the Black Book to the utmost. This medium naturally complements the black and white tones featured in the black man's body and the background.

The use of glossy prints emphasise the black shiny textures of the skin. It accentuates the forms of the body.

The combination of these factors already mentioned, the sculptural coding, system of portraiture. The use of lighting and framing codes and the effect of the glossy surface of the print on the body combined with the exceptional physiques of the various models form a unique source of visual pleasure. The fact that the body presented in this manner is the body of the black man makes this representation highly problematic. Kobena Mercer states in his discussion, 'Imaging the Black Man's Sex' that

a significant element in the pleasures that the photographs make available consists in the fetishism that they bring to play.



Such fetishism not only eroticises the visible difference that the black male nude embodies, it also lubricates the ideological reproduction of racial otherness as the fascination of the image articulates a fantasy of power and mastery over the other.

PHOTOGRAPHY/POLITICS; two, comedia, london 1986

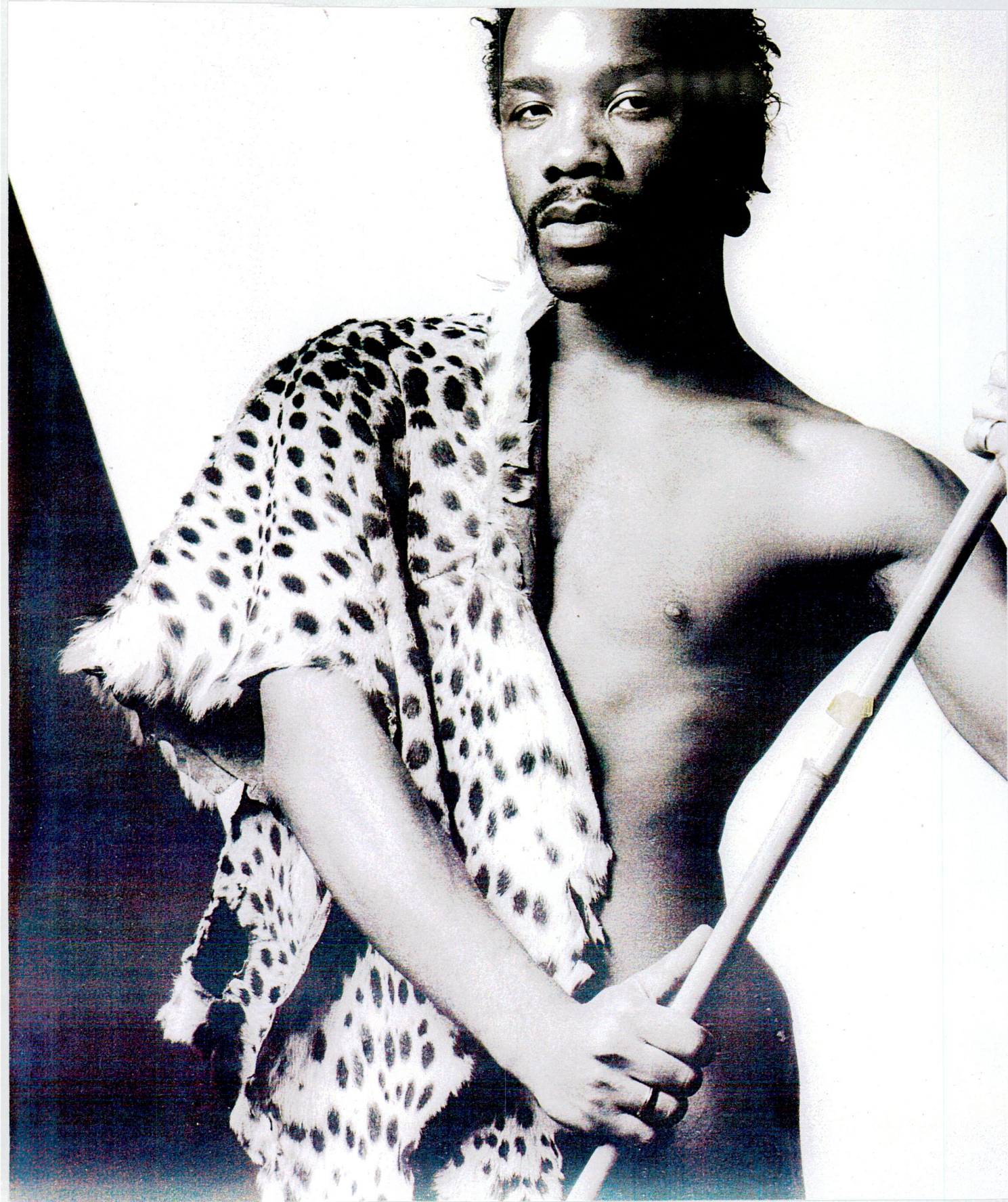
Much of this kind of criticism is dependent on feminist theory. It therefore draws parallels between Mapplethorpe's representation of the black nude and the age old representation of the female nude, in both art and popular culture. Laura Mulvey illustrates in basic terms, that men look and women are looked at. (Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema.

SCREEN. VOL.16 '75 NO.3)

Therefore, although the image of women is ever present in visual representation, the images clearly do not convey any of the experiences, historically or otherwise, of the woman represented. The function of the image is to show the male viewer what he wants to see. Thus the female is disempowered and the male is empowered as he is in control of the gaze. The importance of referring to the place of the female in visual representation is that it reveals the power relations involved and the subordination at work in the conventions apparent in the visual representation of the body.

In relating this system of analysis to Robert Mapplethorpe's black nudes, there is an obvious difference. Both Mapplethorpe and the models portrayed are male. Therefore, if relating the feminist theory as a relevant discussion, the power relations are transformed from male/female to black/white. As Mapplethorpe focuses on the aspects of difference in his presentation of the black male body. Is he reinforcing common stereotypes of the black man as savage, tribesman, basically placing the black in the position of the 'other'. His depiction of the black man's skin is highly fetishised. The body parts appear distinctly separate from any individual man. They are simply a source of pleasure.





The image in 'the Black Book which has attracted most racist criticism is the 'man in Polyester Suit' (1980). The image features an extremely large penis protruding downwards. The penis is the object which identifies the model as a black man. Is Mapplethorpe, therefore, reinforcing the myth that all black men have huge penises. Frantz Fanon states, when diagnosing the image of the negro in psychiatric white patients.

One is no longer aware of the
negro, but only of a penis.

The negro is eclipsed. He is
turned into a penis.

He is a penis.

(Fanon, Frantz ; **Black Skin, White Masks**, Paladian London '70 p.120)

Automatically one could derive that 'the man in Polyester Suit' is a reiteration of the colonial myth. This scenario becomes more problematic when the photographer is a white male.

In the fantasmatic space of the
imaginary, the big black phallus
is a threat not only to the white
master but also to civilisation
itself, since the 'bad object'
represents a danger to white
womanhood and therefore the
threat of miscegenation and
racial degeneration.

(Mercer, Kobena ; **Skin Head Sex Thing**, New Formations v16)

One questions Mapplethorpe's intentions in framing this enormous penis. What is he suggesting. Is Mapplethorpe reiterating, the colonial idea that the black man is nothing but a penis ? Is the negro nothing but a savage beast ? Perhaps he can never quite integrate into white western civilisation ?. Is his essential spirit, his sexual promiscuity given his base animal instinct ?. Does the polyester suit simply reiterate his lack of style and taste in to-days white dominated culture. The phallus appears far too large to remain within the restrictions of this alien garb. The beast has never been tamed.

The ambignties in this image are manifold for example the Black Man's penis in contrast with the seemingly respectable image of the suit. Kobena Mercer speaks of the binarisms inherent in the image. He suggests ' that

the oppositions hidden/exposed
and denuded clothed play upon
the binary oppositions nature/
culture and savage/civilised
to bring about a condensation
of libidinal investment, fear,
and wish fulfillment in the
fantasmatic presence of the other.

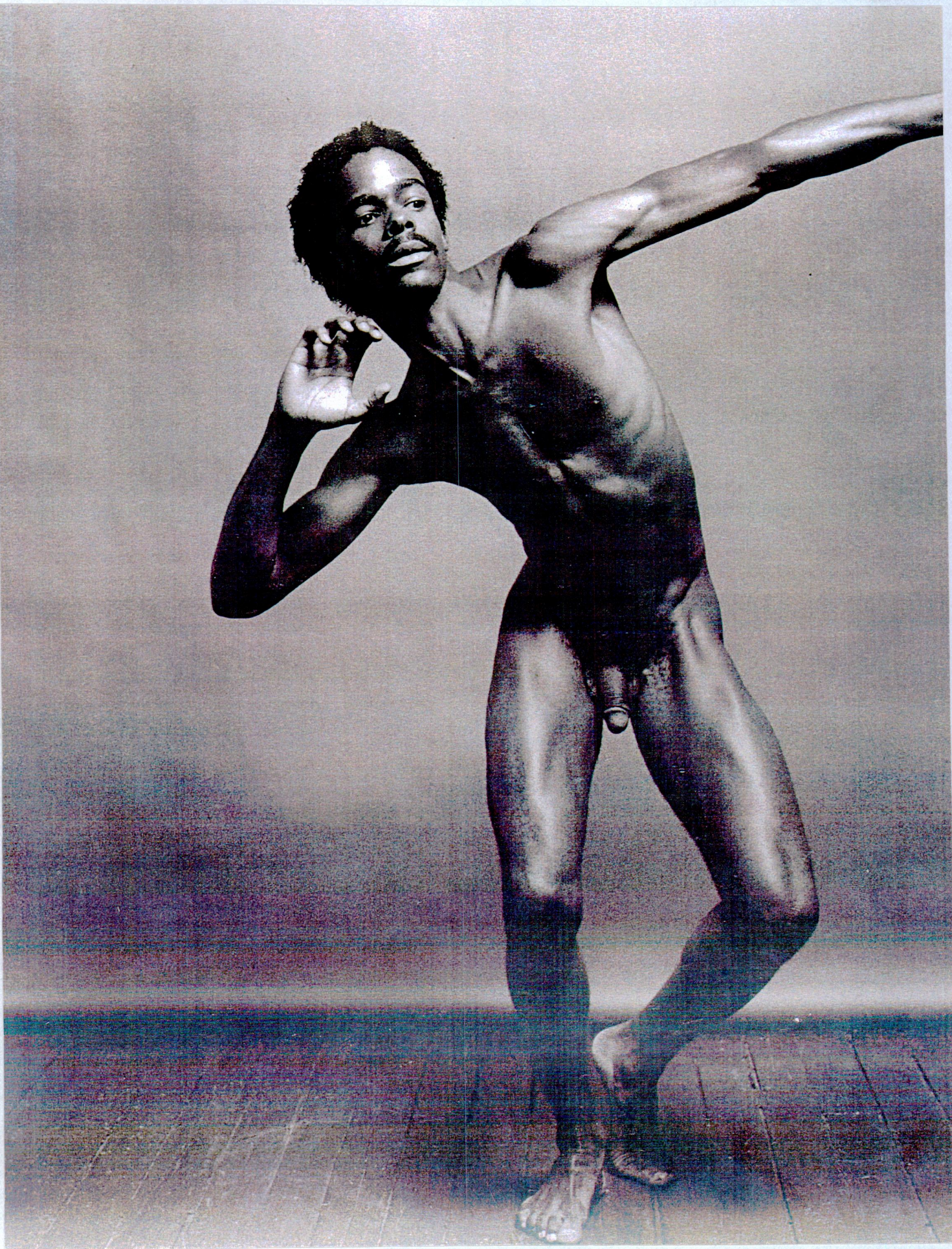
(Mercer, 1992)

The binarisms inherent in the image seem to repeat the assumption that sex is the essential nature of black masculinity while the cheap tacky polyester suit confirms the black man's failure to gain access to culture.

What are Mapplethorpe's intentions in his depiction of the Black Man ?. Is he simply reiterating negative stereotypes, or does he in fact strive to deconstruct them ?.

The debate centred around Mapplethorpe's representation of Black Americans is made more problematic by the fact that the models are homosexual. From the point of view of society's norm, this is a breach of cultural norms. There is another breach of the norms which is class difference between photographer and mode. This class infraction combined with racial difference seems to empower the author. Armed with this knowledge, combined with a superficial viewing on 'The Black Book' it would seem quite obvious to analyse Mapplethorpe's observance of Lower Class, Gay, African, Americans as the blatant objectification of an already marginalised minority. Perhaps one could argue that given the distancing between the viewer and the object of the gaze that Mapplethorpe reiterates their disempowered position. He is representing a site of sexuality as it is not normally observed.

Objectification in these circumstances has serious implications of blatant disempowerment. The model is automatically seen as submissive and dominated while the viewer being the antithesis is empowered and in control. Black, Gay, Male Americans are on the margins of society and the photographer is a white male. There is obvious room for argument.



The historical context that the "opposing" sides find themselves has master/slave implications. Surely these kind of subject/object implications are not justifiable. Unless of course Mapplethorpe's work addresses racism as opposed to the images having racist contents. Mapplethorpe's images may serve to deconstruct the racist stereotype as opposed to using fixed stereotypes to reiterate the black man's disempowered position.

"an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on fixity in the ideological construction of otherness".

*(Bhabra Homi: The other question: the stereotype and Colonial Discourse
Screen, vol. 24, No. 4, 1983)*

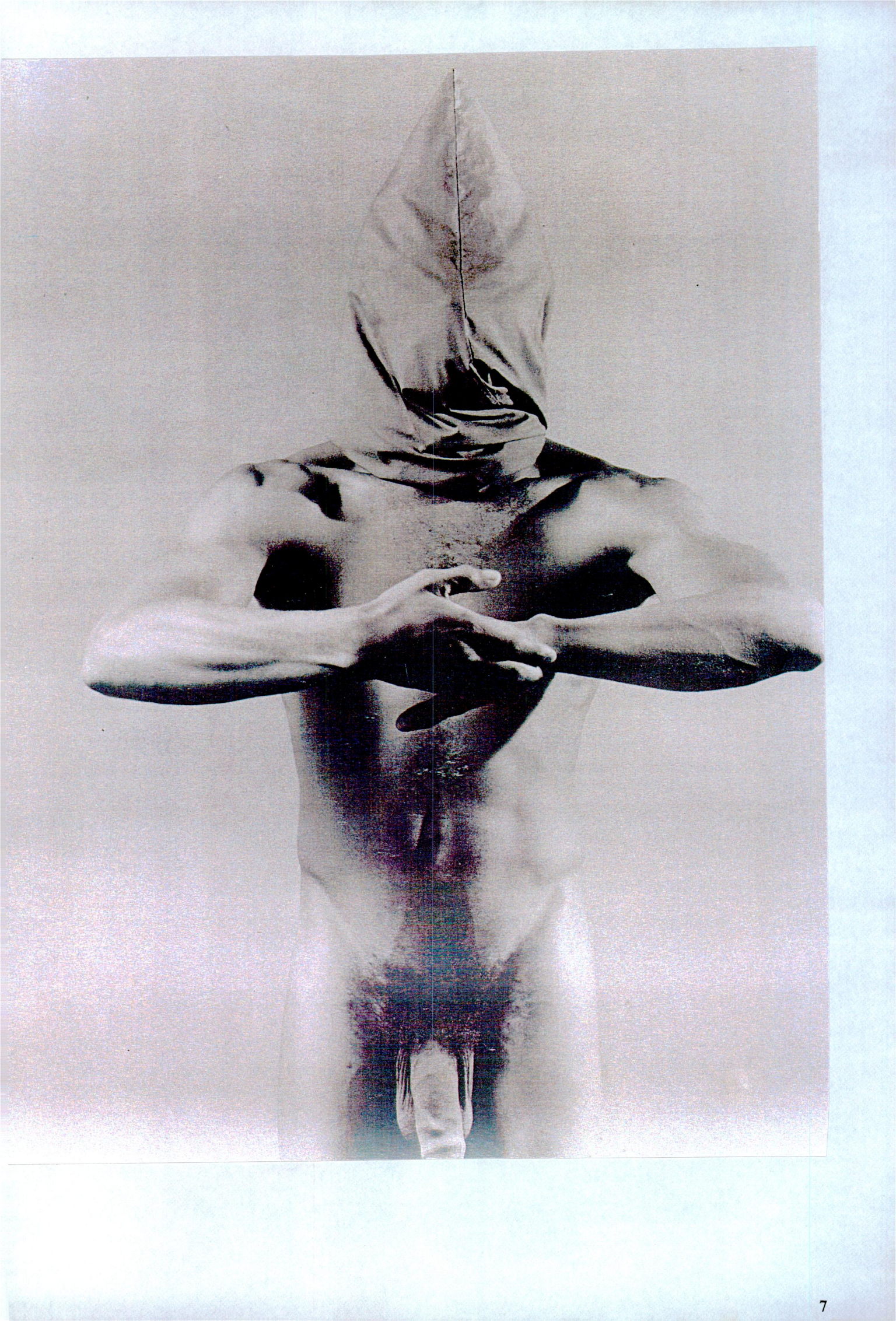
If one is going to condemn works such as Mapplethorpe's photographs, as inadvertently racist, one must ask another question. If an artist uses racially charged signs and symbols in his/her work. Is it possible to avoid passing on their history, stereotyping etc. ?

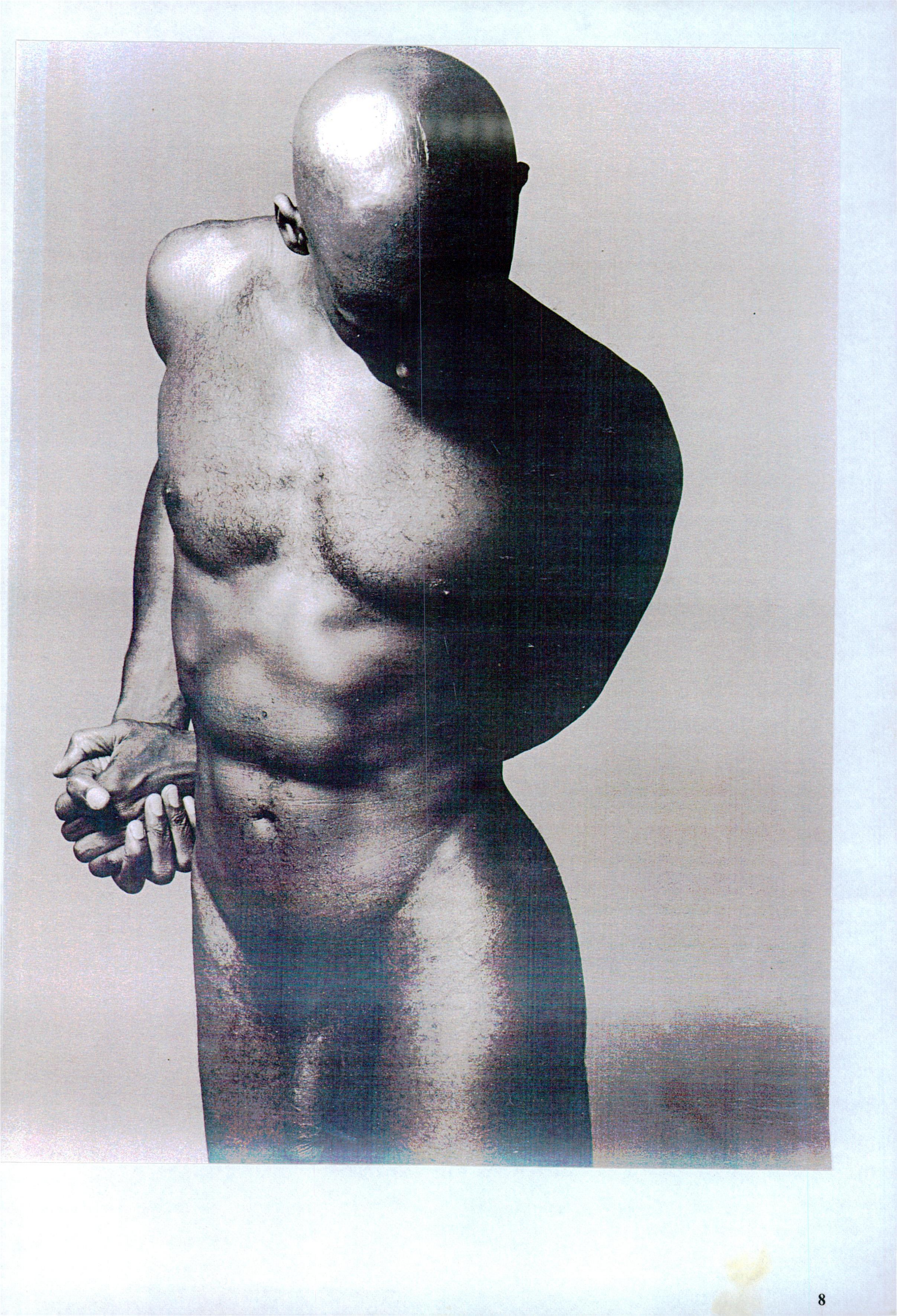
Thomas Yingling in "How the eye is Caste" believes that Mapplethorpe's views on race are not consistent "Untitled" for example is an image of a black male nude, his head hooded. This image has eerie connotations when the viewer has the knowledge of the historical implications of such an image. When one associates the image with the unjust history of black men and lynching, hanging etc. Yingling believes that this image does not simply serve to make a statement on injustice past. He sees the image as a method of dehumanising the black so that he is nothing more than his large penis. That aforementioned in Franz Fanon's diagnosis of white psychiatric patients "The Negro is eclipsed He is a penis"

(Fanon, 1970, pg. 120)

Yingling states however that this is not so much a racist image as an image that "addresses racism".

The shroud over the man's head, therefore would serve as an informed symbol of African American history. To fulfill this purpose, the shrouded head would need to cancel out the rest of the body image which appears to be an uninformed, passive use of the black body in the pictorial space. Images such as this 'cannot escape the charge of racism'. However, if one is aware of the historical context of this image, it serves as a deconstruction of traditional stereotyping. When viewing images such as 'Untitled' and 'Man in Polyester Suit' as with Cindy Sherman's film stills one must be aware of the stereotype referred to. The audience is complicit when it holds or believes in negative stereotypes. If one does believe or support negative stereotypes then 'Untitled' and 'Man in Polyester Suit' are highly offensive, racist images. If, however, one is aware of the stereotyping, then the image may serve as a subversive one.





It is however the fetishistic interest in the black man's body and skin which Yingling believes objectifies them and denies them their subjectivity. Again it is the idea of racial difference between author and subject which comes into play. In the same way as feminists considered images of women as synonymous with their objectification. Yingling believes that when these black men are represented in a sexual manner that this translates as blatant objectification also. It is a little impetuous however, of a critic to suggest that because the models are photographed nude that therefore the image automatically has racist content. It is not the fact that the models have actually been photographed nude that gives the work a racist charge, it is of course, the way the models are photographed. That is important.

The main criticisms against the methods utilised by Mapplethorpe to photograph the black men are a) the fact that the models rarely meet the gaze of the viewer b) the models are more often depicted in fragments than as whole bodies and c) that in each image where the phallus is depicted, it is unrealistically overvalued and fetishised. It is important again to assess where possible the relationship between photographer and models. In an interview with Mapplethorpe in 'Vanity Fair', he discusses the fact that over half of the models who appeared in 'the Black Book' had died as they could not afford the health insurance, which would have provided them with AZT. Mapplethorpe states without sentiment

"They all died quickly, the blacks"

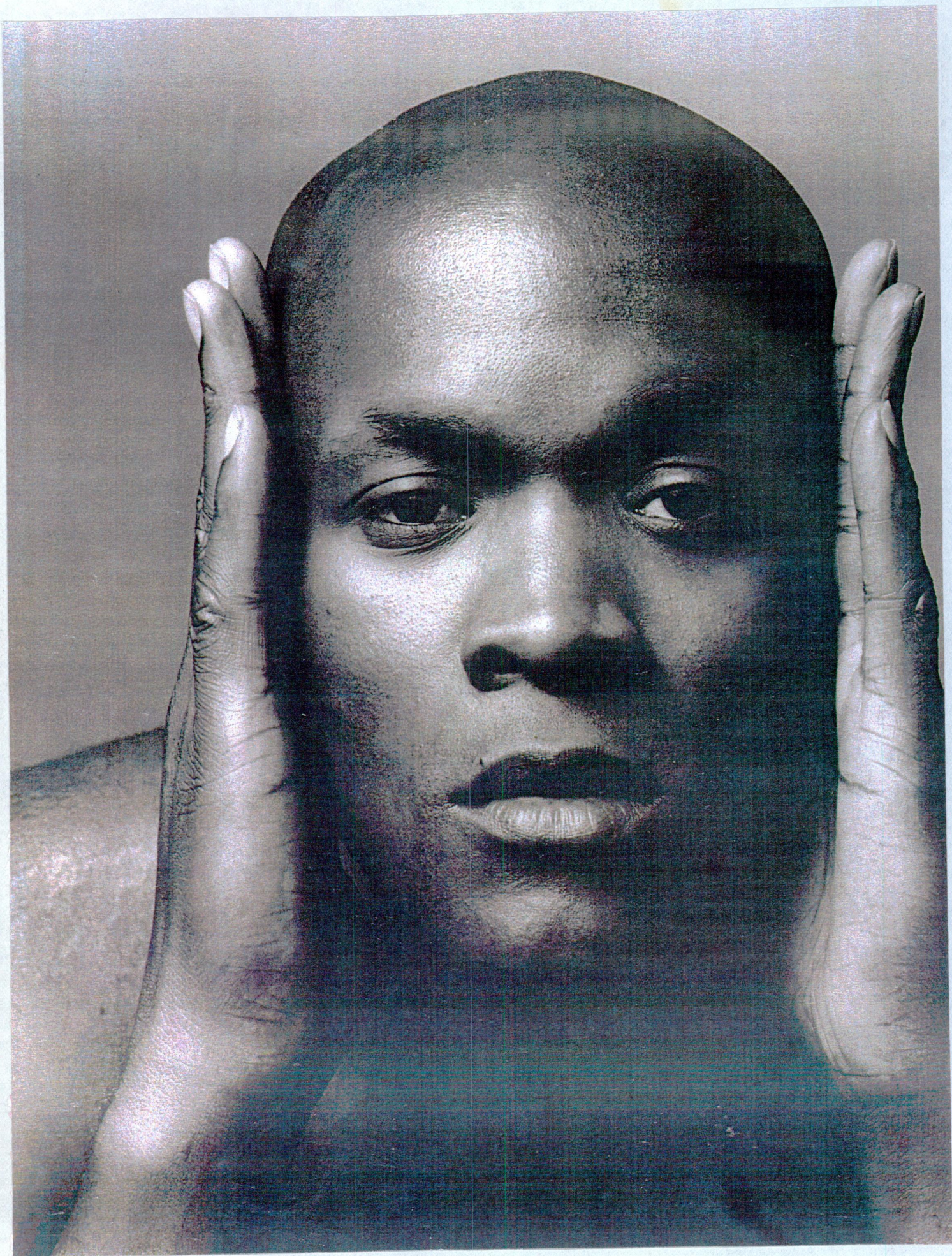
Thomas Yingling suggests that this kind of "generic categorisation" is synonymous with (Yingling, 1990) stereotyping. While Yingling's assumption is quite valid, this kind of criticism is a familiar objection to stereotyping. It is bred from the same spirit as that seen in feminist theory. The assumption however, that Mapplethorpe's work can be read in the same manner as the heterosexual work of photographers is far too great. Feminist theory may apply aptly to the image of the female in visual representation, but in 'the Black Book' scenario, the relationship between author and model is homosexual. Both model and photographer, as afore mentioned are male. The context of this visual representation is a Metropolitan, urban, gay, male culture. The 'gendered hierarchy' of seeing/being seen is not so rigidly inherent in homo-erotic art because sexual sameness changes one's views of the active subject and passive object.

This point can be illustrated by the fact that Mapplethorpe himself features else-where in his work. In self portraits and one sado-masochistic work where the artist is featured with a bull-whip inserted in his anus. Here Mapplethorpe, himself, is the object of the gaze. By featuring in the sado-masochistic work, he implicates himself as a participator in the image as opposed to an artist simply empowered by the marginalisation of a disempowered group. In this way one can read Mapplethorpe's work as a documenttation of a homoerotic lifestyle of which he was a participator in the image. As opposed to the work of an outsider oberving the 'other'

I was part of it. And that's
where most of the photgraphers
who move in that direction
are at a disadvantage
in that they're not part of it.
They're voyeurs moving in.
With me it was quite different.
Often I had experienced some
of those experiences, which I
had later recorded, myself, first
hand without a camera.

It was a certain moment and I was
in a perfect situation in that
most of the people in the
photographs were friends of
mine and they trusted me
I felt almost an obligation
to record those things,
It was an obligation for me
to do it, to make images that
nobody's seen before and to do
it in a way that is aesthetic.

(Mapplethorpe, BBC Interview, 1989)



As Mapplethorpe cites himself as a member of a particular marginalised community, one questions his motivations in representing black nudes in this manner. As with any author, artist etc. one cannot place too much mass on the relevance of such statements. However, when Mapplethorpe photographs black nudes he is certainly, as he states above, making 'images that nobody's seen before' and certainly in a manner which is aesthetic.

In the BBC interview when asked about his motivation in representing black nudes he stated.

At some point I started
photographing black men.

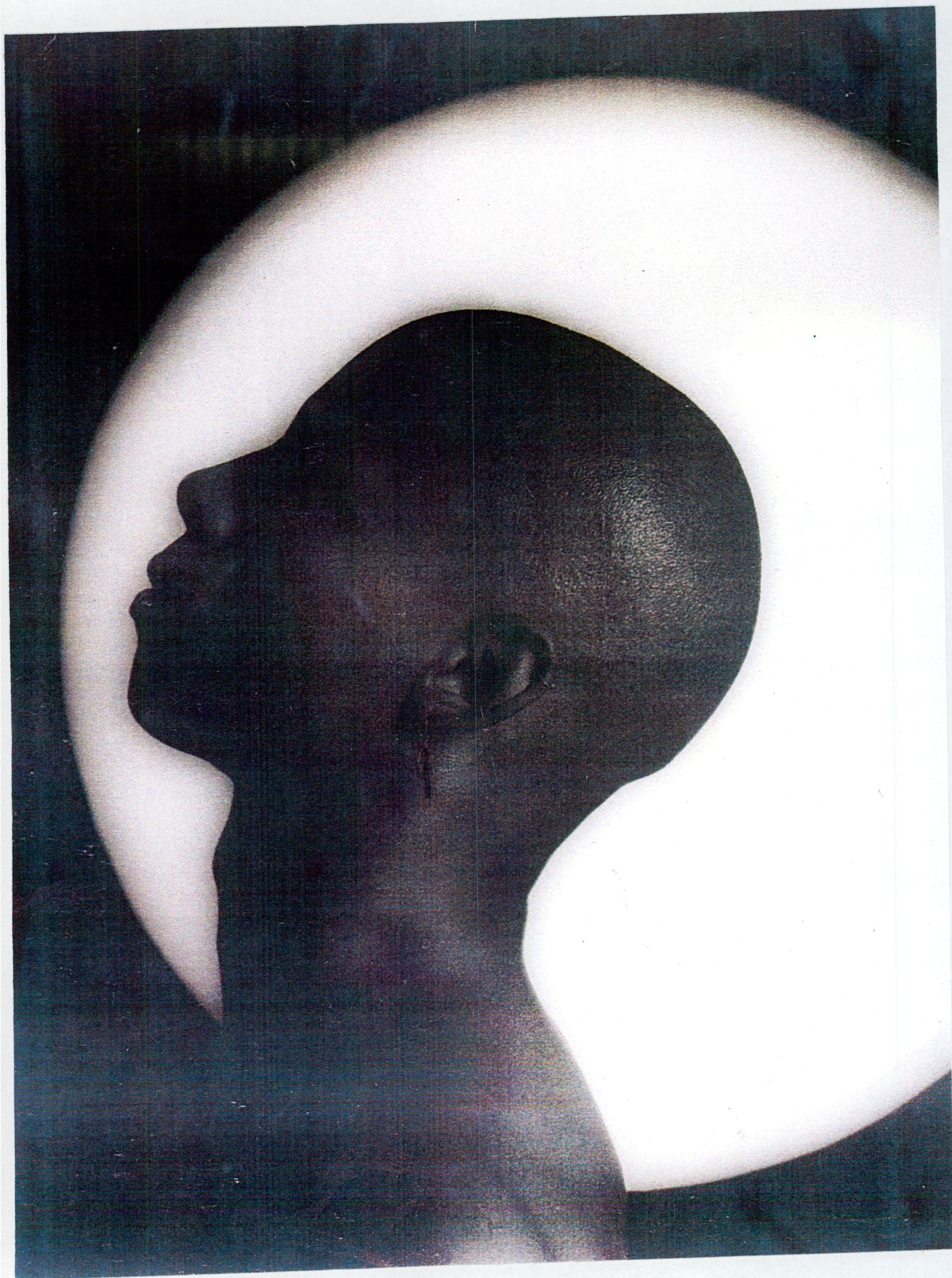
It was an area that had'nt
been explored intensively.

If you went through the
history of nude male
photography, there were
very few black subjects.

I found that I could take
pictures of black men that
were so subtle that the
form was so photographic.

(Mapplethorpe, BBC Interview 1989)

Obviously this can be interpreted as the unearthing of a kind of innovative 'discovery' in fine art, with benefits only to the artists reputation. However, if one interprets the representation of black nudes as a starting point for the inclusion of the black in the realms of fine art. They are, in fact empowered by the representation as opposed to disempowered. Mapplethorpe's position as a gay artist is also on the margins of society. Therefore if his work serves as a starting point for the inclusion of the black nude in nude history. Then one senses a kind of collaboration between artist and model.



CHAPTER II.

In chapter one, many of the arguments put forward by critics to condemn Mapplethorpe's representation of Lower Class, Black, Gay, American males have been discussed. Mapplethorpe has been deemed guilty of objectification of an already disempowered group. He has been accused of marginalising further a group who already find themselves on the peripheries of normative society. He has been attacked by critics as an artist, who through the creation of particular images (mentioned previously in Chapter 1) reinforces negative stereotypes. Fixing the black man, as it were "in his place".

However, there is a much more positive element apparent in Mapplethorpe's representation of the black male. One that not only serves to enhance the artists own reputation, but which, infact, idealises the beautiful bodies of the Black, male nudes.

The exaltation of the body image in art history has a long and varied past. In the Christian faith the problem with representing the image of Christ was with trying to reconcile the spiritual and human aspects of Christ. The tasks created enormous difficulties for the artist. The scenario has changed little since. Early attacks on artists centred around the suitability of religious images commissioned by the church. During the Renaissance the attacks were centred in secular imagery for fear of seducing 'the faithful' to immoral thoughts or behaviour.

The issue at base

was - and is -

A question of who was

to exercise power and

control; control over

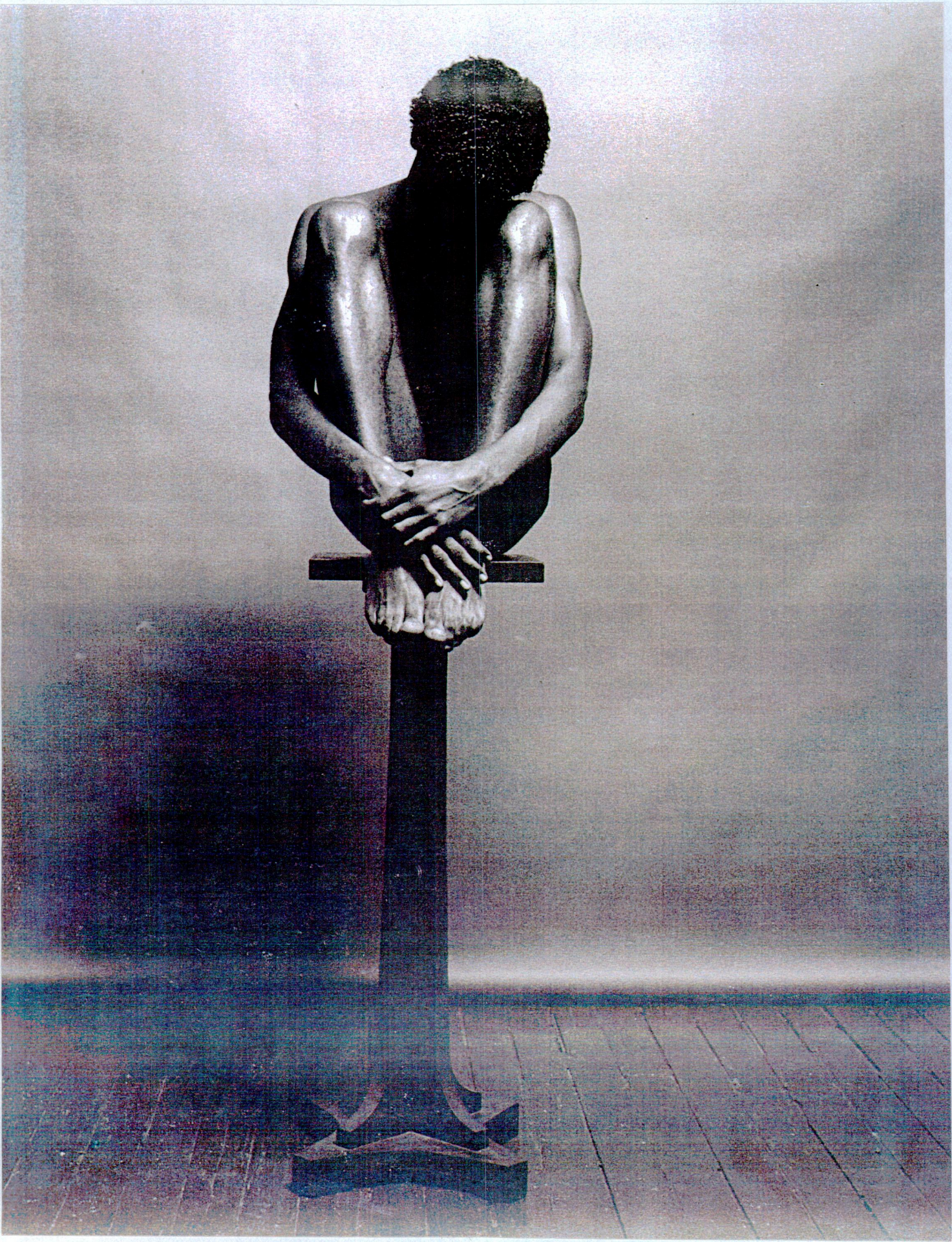
what could be seen

by whom, and in what form.

(Sokolowski, 1990)

In Greek art and society in general, the prevalent ideal was "to be beautiful in appearance and to be well thought of". This 'motto' forms the basis for Classical Greek ideals in both art and society. An analogy may be drawn between Robert Mapplethorpe's depiction of the black nudes and the portrayals, of Gods in Greco-Roman times.

Mapplethorpe's models have perfectly athletic bodies, who take on an air of divinity. This point is illustrated by the fact that some of the models heads are surrounded by halo-like appendages, while others are depicted in traditionally classical composites.





For, the people of Greek and Roman times, the image of such a perfect body would automatically imply to them, that the individual would act only in a God-like manner. In the context of the black man's sexuality the image becomes adolatrours.

The representation of the nude in the history of Western Art is one of the most important aspects of Western Art history. The nudes in Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs are often represented in the classical form however the context in which the depiction of these men exists is contemporary, urban, gay culture. In relation to cultural and society's norms, the combination of lower class, gay, Americans depicted within the realms of high art would constitute an ironic juxtaposition of elements. When one sees 'the Black Book' in this manner it becomes possible to see that Mapplethorpe's intentions are subversive. It becomes possible to reverse the reading of Mapplethorpe's work as blatant racist fetishism and to see the exhaltation of the black man's body in the imagery. 'The Black Book' serves as a deconstruction of common stereotypes rather than a reiteration of racist fantasies in the colonial mind. The paradox is that all the humanist ideals of the perfect model of human beauty which are apparent in Classical Greek sculpture are depicted in the 1980's via the bodies of promiscuous, homosexual black men who come from lower class, American society.

By combining the diverse notions Mapplethorpe deconstructs one's traditional image of both systems. He deconstructs what have become society's norms, by placing aspects of high culture and low culture within the same image, where they merge to become at one and the same. It is this combination and intermixing of elements from diverse spheres, one from the supreme realms of western society's, aesthetic ideals and one from the embodiment of the 'base' racist stereotypes which throws off balance the fixed ideas of the viewer. The psychological and indeed physical barriers which seperates high culture and low culture are broken down and crossed from one opposing side to the other. This is the scenario which throws the readers fixed opinions or indeed causes the ambivalence experienced by many critics and viewers of 'the Black Book'.

In Kobena Mercer's article 'Imaging the Black Man's Sex' he suggested that 'the regulative stereotype had the upper hand ... and helped to fix the spectator in the ideological subject position of the white male subject'. Mercer explains when revising the previous text that he is doing so not because

(Mercer, 1986, pg. 66)

those arguments were wrong,
but because I've changed my mind
about Mapplethorpe. I want to
suggest an approach to
ambivalence, not as something

that occurs 'inside' the text,
but as something that is
experienced across the relations
between authors texts, and readers -
in relations that are always
contingent context bound and
historically specific.

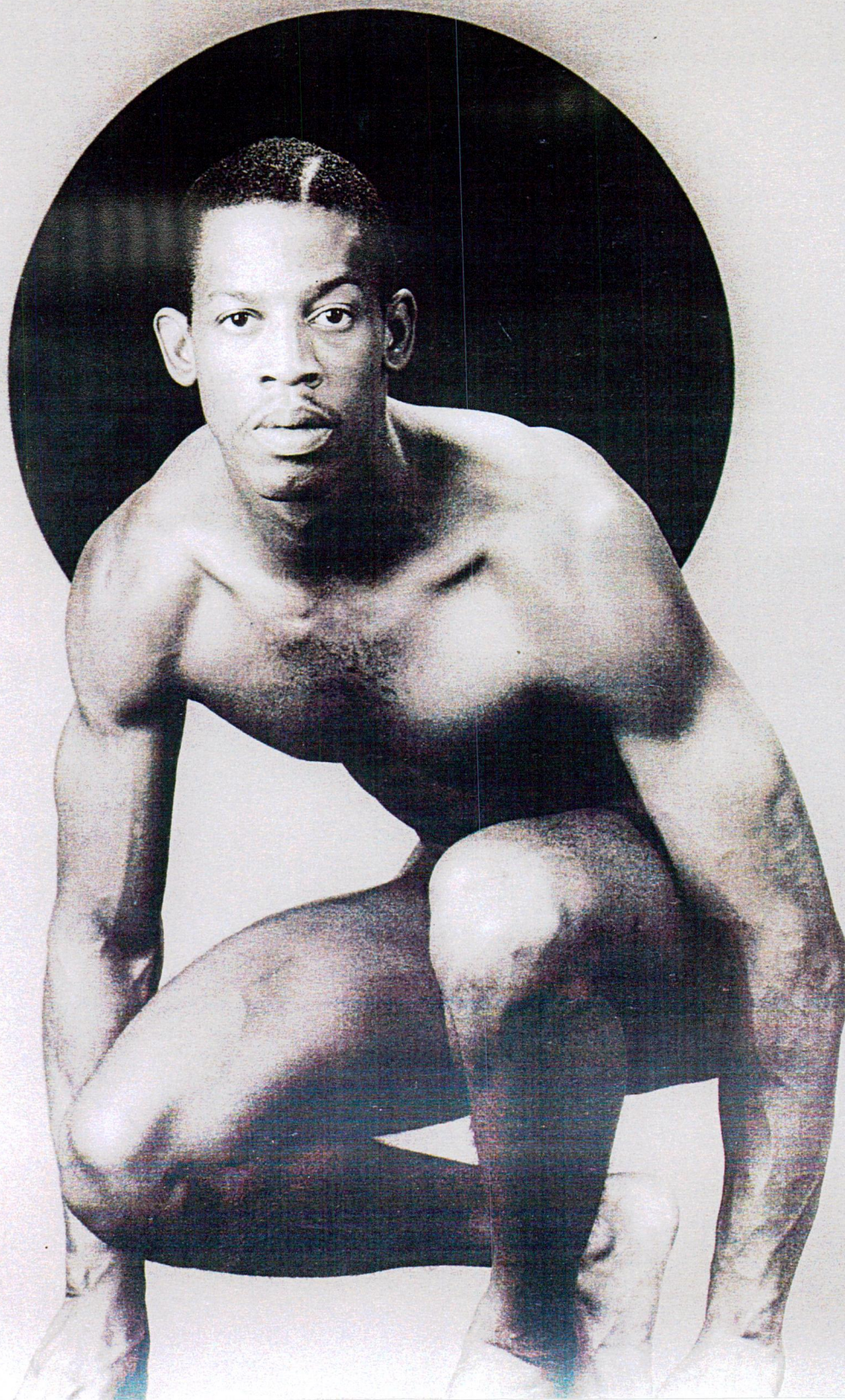
(Mercer, 1992, pg.9)

Mercer discusses the events which have occurred
in the intervenina period (between 'Imaging the
Black Man's Sex' and 'Skin Head Sex Thing')
which have altered his view of Mapplethorpe's work.
He cites Mapplethorpe's death in 1989 of A.I.D.S.
as one of the major factors in his change of view.
He quotes Mapplethorpe when he states in an
interview with

'If I go through my 'Black Book' half of them are
dead'.

It is ironic that Mapplethorpe 'the observer'
photographer cannot escape from this truism.
He died of A.I.D.S. in the same year. His work
becomes documentary evidence of a lifestyle
which cannot be recorded again the same manner.
Death has 'leveled' this lifestyle, taking with
it both the models and the white author.

Mercer also cites the political controversy
federal funding by the right wing in relation to
an exhibition organised by 'the Institute of
Contemporary Art in Philadelphia' as one of the
events which must change the manner in which we
perceive Mapplethorpe's work as a whole. The debate
which centred around Mapplethorpe's works as with the
work of Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle deals with
the problems inherent in representing the body in a
sexual manner. In the case of Mapplethorpe the black
bodies of men represented in a sexual manner. The
religious establishment and government converge in
their moralistic labelling of sexuality as a prelude
to their desire to control it. What results from
this kind of climate is control of an individuals
sexuality and freedom of expression on a grand scale.
In artistic terms an era of state controlled art
would evolve. One would usually associate this
scenario with the art of an authoritarian regime.
Featuring in the New York Times in an op-ed piece by
Robert Brustein, artistic director of the American
Repertory theatre, he stated



Once we allow lawmakers to become critics we take the first step into the world of the Ayatollah Khomeini whose murderous review the satanic verses still chills the heart of everyone committed to free expression.

(Brustein, New York, Times 1989)

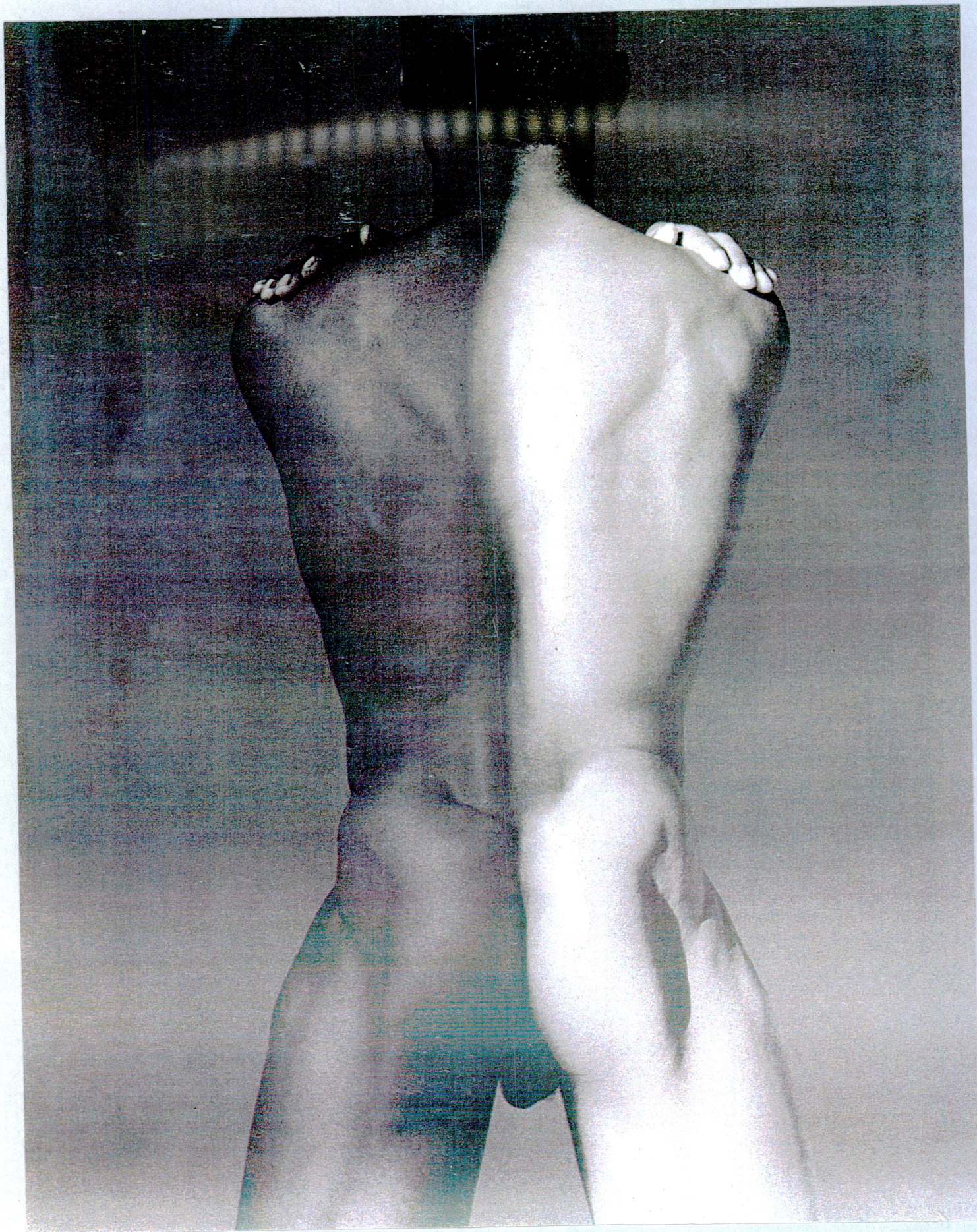
This repression materialised in June 1989 fearing her institution would become involved in a conflict involving federal arts funding, the director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington cancelled the scheduled Mapplethorpe exhibition. The exhibition included 'morally repugnant material of a sexual nature nude photographs of children, homo-erotic shots of men and a sado-masochistic self portrait of the artist'.

For Director Christina Orr-Cahall, the idea of members of congress 'trotting' down from nearby Capitol Hill, was a terrifying prospect. On the night of June 30 1989 'the perfect moment' Mapplethorpe's scheduled exhibition for the Corcoran Gallery was seen 'on' the Gallery of Art as opposed to in it. More than one thousand protestors viewed giant projected images of the photographs deemed too controversial to be hung inside the gallery walls. Camille Pagia describes this occasion as:

For me, one of the supreme moments in contemporary art.... there is Mapplethorpe's essence his spectral, dentity as a suffering romantic artist forever outside the pale Mapplethorpe the sexual outlaw an avante garde outsider. It dilutes him to enshrine him in a national landmark.

(Pagia, 1992, pg.38-41)

Although 'the Black Book Images' were not in this instance the images which attracted most criticism, they are however part of an artist's work who in each area of expression, flauts a fully developed sexuality shamelessly. His certainty of his position within these realms and his certainty for those,



he portrays is that which threaten's the viewers sense of morality. There is no hint of guilt, nothing accept the projection of a 'natural lifestyle for a particular marginal group'.

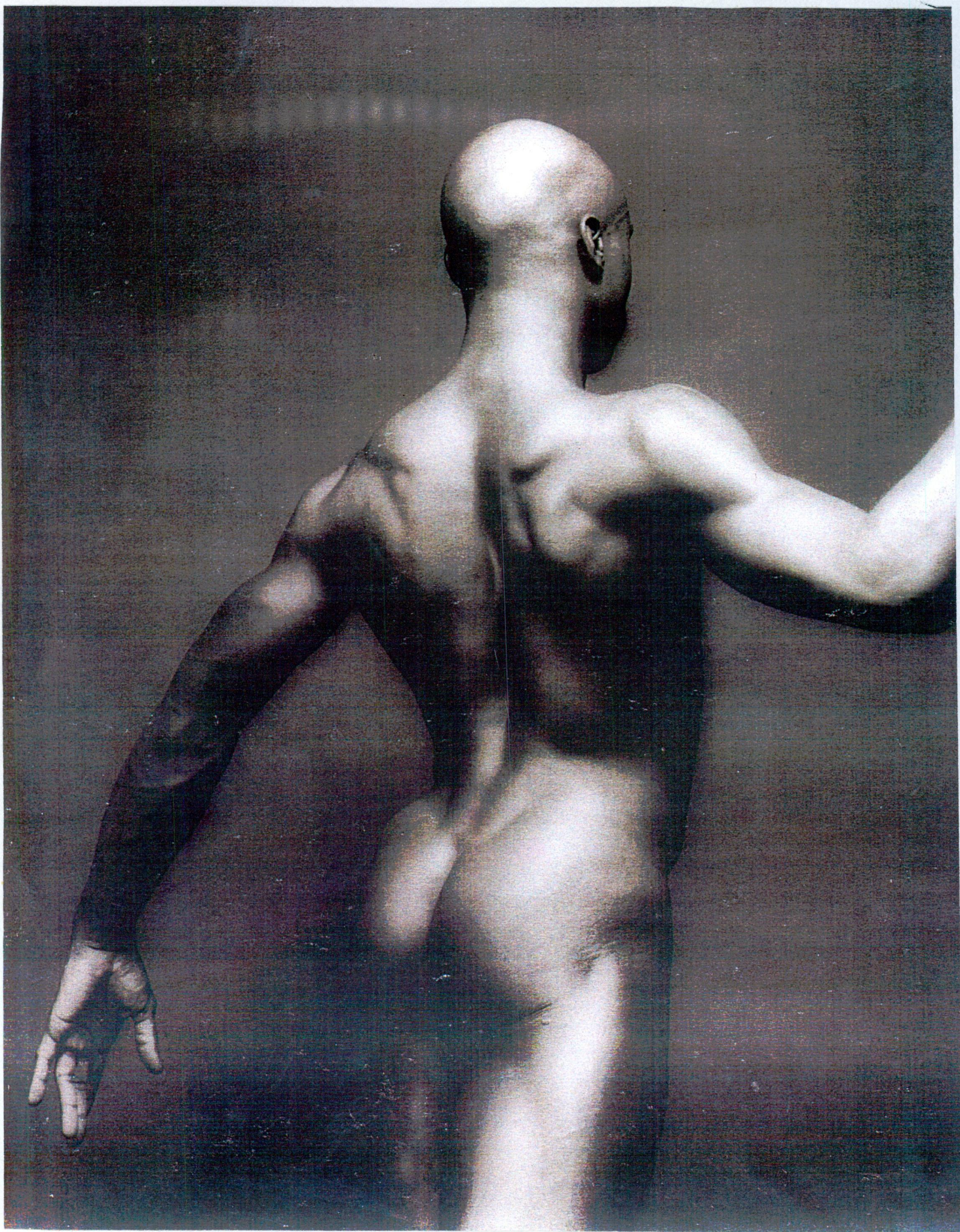
With the reintroduction of the body into High Art first through the return of figuration but more important through the medium of photography as it documented emergent performance art events. All the questions of the power plays of art were thrust to the foreground.

(Sokolowski, 1990)

The abstraction of post War Art was in many ways a very safe path to follow. Judgement could be made on the quality of the work, this judgement was reserved exclusively for the 'formalist art critic'. Figuration however allows law makers, feminists and others coming from non-art backgrounds to become ardent art-critics. The result is an extremely unhappy marriage, particularly when the imagery to be viewed seems to threaten the very structure of law and order that these censors 'appear' to protect.

In July 1987 Hilton Kramer in an article in the New York Times placed Mapplethorpe's works in the annals of photography, but certainly no where close to Edvard Monet's 'La Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe'. A painting which caused similiar controversy in a century past. Offense is a matter of time and custom. Those who seek the moral highground see themselves as the rightful keepers of society's standards. As a result however the age old mistake occurs, mystics and prophets have always been persecuted by the falsely pious.

In the meantime, as a result of the denial of federal funding for the 'Mapplethorpe Exhibition' 'the Perfect Moment' the exhibition travelled unsubsidised to the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. After a police raid on the premises, Director Dennis Barrie faced a \$2000 fine and a one year jail term if convicted. After a ten day trial the defense won the case the jurors, many who had not been to a gallery in years and whose initial reaction towards the work was that it was unacceptable had been transformed in attitude. Their realisation was that no individual or institution has the right to condemn an artist on the material that he/she creates, that free expression is a vital component of Human Existence.



The work of many of to-days artists has sought to redefine the image of the human body, the image of race and the image of the sex of the body. The most offensive kind of objectification is that which we absorb daily, the real devaluation of the body appears more often in the media, in advertising. It is a much more insidious kind, as it is something that we absorb daily almost without question. It is easy to accuse Robert Mapplethorpe's work of blatant objectification initially. It is however a complex method of representation one which is reliant on the context of to-days cultural climate.

This cultural climate has simultaneously altered in the 1980's, where there have been developments in the art practices of Black, Gay and Lesbian artists both in Britain and the United States. Across a broad spectrum of media, the change in aesthetic practices has changed the perceptions of identity in black culture. By black artists entering into the domain of race and class and their presentation sexually (All the areas which have been problematic to the understanding of Mapplethorpe's work) they are expressing their own personal experiences in the context of their own lives. This kind of involvement is more beneficial to the construction of a black identity and raises questions about established notions of their identity. It also questions the notion of the grand aesthetic and of political claims made in the name of 'cultural theory'.

The gay community has exercised a monopoly on Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic work. This monopoly is exercised by members of the gay culture regardless of an individual's race. The members of the community are gay and hence relate to more specific aspects of Mapplethorpe's work. Kobena Mercer is an American writer who by virtue of him being black and gay has a unique insight into Mapplethorpe's homo-erotic work. Mercer's insight is particularly important to this discussion because he is personally involved in the Gay American scene. His discussion on Mapplethorpe's homo-erotic work offers a unique insight into the gay cultural context of the work. He creates a hypothetical scenario where 'the man in Polyester Suit' is produced as a greeting card and marketed in a gay cultural arena. Mercer suggests that the black man in the polyester business suit would appear on the card with the caption. 'Everything you ever heard about black men is true'. The card would then unfold to reveal the large penis. The penis would simply serve as a joke. As the image would be authorless or anonymous the idea of whether the image is racist or indeed subversive is secondary to the context of where the card appears. That is within a gay community where it serves as a joke common to all members of the community without offense to the black members. Mercer's point is that in the context of the gay community, there are many readings of the imagery particular to the context in which they exist, which will evade other readers.

(Mercer, 1992)



CONCLUSION.

The thesis is a discussion of Robert Mapplethorpe's representation of power, class, black gay American males in 'the Black Book' which was published in 1986. Mapplethorpe has employed methods of representation which are utilised in the traditional representation of the nude in Western Nude history. These methods discussed in Chapter One combine to create a unique source of visual pleasure, in the embodiment of the black male.

Mapplethorpe's representation of the black male nudes have been highly criticised. Critics have found the work highly problematic on many different levels. One important factor is that the artist is a white photographer and the models are black men form a lower, class, American, gay subculture. Critics have related feminist theory to an interpretation of black males in 'the Black Book'. Feminist theory is relevant as it discusses the disempowerment of women in visual representation. The actual image of the woman says little about the female experience but simply shows the male viewer what he wants to see. Critics have related this system of analysis to Mapplethorpe's representation of 'the Black Book' as it reveals some of the power relations involved in the visual representation of the body. The thesis has discussed the limitations of using feminist film theory as a relevant critique.

One of the most important questions posed in the thesis is whether Robert Mapplethorpe has created blatantly racist images and whether or not he is guilty of reinforcing common stereotypes of the black man. The thesis has discussed these stereotypes dealing with images such as 'Man in Polyester Suit' and 'Untitled' which appear loaded with racist content. It questions if Mapplethorpe reiterates colonial ideas of the black man as a part man/part beast whose essential essence is his sexual prowess. It questions the ambiguities inherent in these images. It suggests that the ambiguities in 'Man in Polyester Suit' hidden/esposed and denuded/clothed play upon the binarisms nature/culture and savage/civilised. These binarisms may simply serve to reinforce negative stereotypes inherent Western Society's prejudice attitude toward the black man. The scenario discussed involves a white photographer who represents black, gay men from a Lower Class American Culture. The fact that these men are Lower Class Americans can be read as a strengthening of negative power relations in favour of Mapplethorpe, while disempowering the black models. Critics have suggested that the racial difference combined with the class difference emphasises Mapplethorpe's will to depict the black males in a subordinate manner.

Many critics believe that Mapplethorpe has depicted the black man in a disempowered manner. They see proof of this in the fact that Robert Mapplethorpe has concentrated on representing the textures of the skin and on the phallus as a means to the visualisation of difference in a subject/object context.

There is obvious room for this argument as the historical context in which this relationship exists is that these separate entities have master/slave implications. However, the thesis has found the following: that Mapplethorpe has created images which address racism as opposed to having racist content. Hence Mapplethorpe's photographs serve to deconstruct racist stereotypes as opposed to using fixed notions to reiterate the black man's disempowered position. The deconstruction of fixed stereotypes is possible if the viewer is aware of the traditional stereotype. If a viewer holds or believes in negative stereotype, the prejudiced mind will automatically interpret an image as blatantly racist. If, however, one is aware of the stereotypes then the image takes an another meaning. One can then view the image as deconstructive as it addresses racism by highlighting negative stereotypes.

The thesis has discovered that the use of feminist theory as a relevant method of criticism is not valid in this scenario. It is impetuous of critics to suggest that the feminisms subject/object which are transferred to male/female can be related to this situation. This power relation has been transferred from subject/object to black/white as both models and artists are of the same sex, but different race. The thesis has discussed that fact that within a metropolitan urban, gay, male culture, the gendered hierarchy of subject/object is not so rigidly/inherent in homosexual art because artists and models are of the same sex. This point has been illustrated by the fact that Robert Mapplethorpe is a participator in some of the images in (other areas of his work) as the object of the gaze as opposed to an empowered observer. The implication is that seeing Mapplethorpe as participator changes the apparent power relations from empowered/disempowered to relations which are beneficial to both photographer and models.

This discussion has delved into the traditional representation of the nude in art history and has related Mapplethorpe's representation of the black nude into this historical context. Mapplethorpe's 'Black Book' is a starting point for the inclusion of the black male nude in fine art realms. Hence, there is a sense of collaboration between models and artists. Mapplethorpe has portrayed the nude in the classical forms of representation. Therefore, by placing people who are viewed by to-days society as occupying among the lowest social classes, in a position which has been always inhabited by the white man, it ultimately empowers their position. The representation of the white male nude in the realms of fine art is one of the most important aspects of Western Art History. Mapplethorpe creates a starting point for the inclusion of the black male on this pedestal 'the Black Book' which contains images which address rascism. However, by juxtaposing these kind of images with the classical style of representation, one must take stock and examine the images which contain rascist material. If one analyses these images, realising their deconstructive powers it sets the scene for the classical images. Mapplethorpe simultaneously depicts two images of the black man which combined, serve to place the black nude on the pedestal which as been occupied by the white male.

The thesis discusses the climate of political repression and examines the point that offense is a matter of place and time. One cannot let society off the hook by suggesting that the rascism is in the image or the intent of the artist. If the society, into which the images are circulated is prejudice then the audience is complicit in the rasast overtones.

Kobem Mercer has illustrated this point when he suggests that if 'Man in Polyester Suit' was circulated, as a greeting card in a Gay Community. The author of the card would be anonymous therefore whether the intent in the image is rascist, or not, is secondary. The card simply serves then as a joke in a Gay Community. The point is that different readers will derive different readings from the 'Black Book'. One's interpretation of the 'Black Book' is specific to time and place and to its content in to-days society.

It is the finding of the thesis that Robert Mapplethorpe's representation is a highly complex method of representation open to many different interpretations which are historically specific.

Robert Mapplethorpe died of A.I.D.S. in 1989. He has left a legacy of photography from the 1970's and 1980's which can never be seen or recorded again in the same manner. He has placed black men on the highly prized pedestal of the fine art nude empowering them with a status which has eluded them for centuries.

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