Triptych (Eyes of One on Another)

Genre-bending musical performance exploring beauty and aesthetics in Mapplethorpe’s photography to show at Stanford Live

Stanford, CA, September 10, 2019 — Marking 30 years since the death of groundbreaking photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, *Triptych (Eyes of One on Another)* explores the origins and impact of Mapplethorpe’s controversial photography. This staged musical work, produced by Arktype / Thomas O. Kriegsmann, combines orchestra, vocal ensembles, theater, poetry, and photography to re-examine notions of obscenity, race, and aesthetics that Mapplethorpe himself challenged during the Culture Wars of the 80s and 90s.

"In a season that examines the relationship between art and politics, Mapplethorpe is an obvious figure to investigate," said Chris Lorway, Stanford Live’s Executive Director. "And using a contemporary lens to examine his work adds an additional layer of complexity to his legacy in the art world."

Composed by classically trained composer and The National band member Bryce Dessner and directed by award-winning theater artist Kaneza Schaal, *Triptych* offers a contemporary response to the work of Mapplethorpe. Musical and theater pieces from librettist korde arrington tuttle, the vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth, and the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players are set against large-scale projections of Mapplethorpe photographs and poetry from his contemporaries Patti Smith and Essex Hemphill.

The collaborations comprising *Triptych* are unusual. Yet the piece’s theatrical experimentation would not be as complex if it weren’t for the multi-genre and cross-cultural artists bringing to the 3-part piece a variety of perspectives and questions about Mapplethorpe’s body of work.

“Some of our curiosities and desires overlap, some diverge,” said Schaal. “As the director, I am arranging this tapestry, seeing to it that it doesn’t tear. What better materials from which to address a figure like Robert Mapplethorpe.”

Each section of *Triptych* offers a way of seeing Mapplethorpe photographs. In section one, Dessner interprets the photographs from a compositional lens, focusing on influences from Italian Mannerism, the late Renaissance style that informed Mapplethorpe’s approach to photography.

The choice itself of Dessner to compose *Triptych* poses a challenging artistic conflict—to create a score that addresses a body of work’s homosexual and racial frames. However, Dessner carries a historical and personal perspective. As a teenager in Cincinnati, he witnessed the obscenity trial that took the national stage over the Contemporary Arts Center’s
exhibition of Mapplethorpe photographs. Dessner revisits the trial to compose the second
section, contemplating the larger implications of art under government scrutiny.

Schaal, who grew up in San Francisco in the 80s, also brings a personal connection to
Triptych. While she and her mother were living at her aunt’s home, Schaal recalls a social
group around her aunt and her partner. In that group were ten gay men. By the time Schaal
was six years old, eight were dead.

“I remember the smell of bodies dying, the quilt, the sweetness, and fear, and pounding grief,”
Schaal said. “We are holding a lot of ghosts in Triptych. We all bring our own ghosts to this
work. Ghosts whose names made it into archives and many whose didn’t. I am always drawn
to projects which address the presence of the absent.”

tuttle’s decision to include Hemphill’s poetry in the third section of Triptych places
Mapplethorpe’s work under another gaze. Hemphill, a crucial voice on race and sexual identity
in American poetry, criticized Mapplethorpe’s work, arguing that the photos perpetuated the
centuries-long exploitation and objectification of black bodies.

This is the purpose of Triptych, to invite public dialogue about the multiple gazes that can
coexist with the pull of beauty in Mapplethorpe’s work—to push on what constitutes beauty,
who defines it, and who is alienated in the process.

This is one of only five performances of Triptych (Eyes of One on Another) this fall. The
production also appears at Cal Performances on Saturday, September 28.

For more information visit live.stanford.edu.

Triptych (Eyes of One on Another)
Thursday, Oct. 3, 7:30 pm
Memorial Auditorium, 551 Serra Mall Stanford, CA 94305
$32-$63

Composed by Bryce Dessner
Libretto by korde arrington tuttle, featuring words by Essex Hemphill & Patti Smith
Directed by Kaneza Schaal
Roomful of Teeth with special guests Alicia Hall Moran & Isaiah Robinson
San Francisco Contemporary Music Players
Music direction & conducting by Brad Wells
Produced by ArKtype / Thomas O. Kriegsmann in cooperation with the Mapplethorpe
Foundation
**Tickets and More Information**
Tickets are now on sale and can be purchased at live.stanford.edu or by phone at 650.724.2464.

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