

Mapplethorpe as music: Bryce Dessner concert revives the 'Perfect Moment' culture war

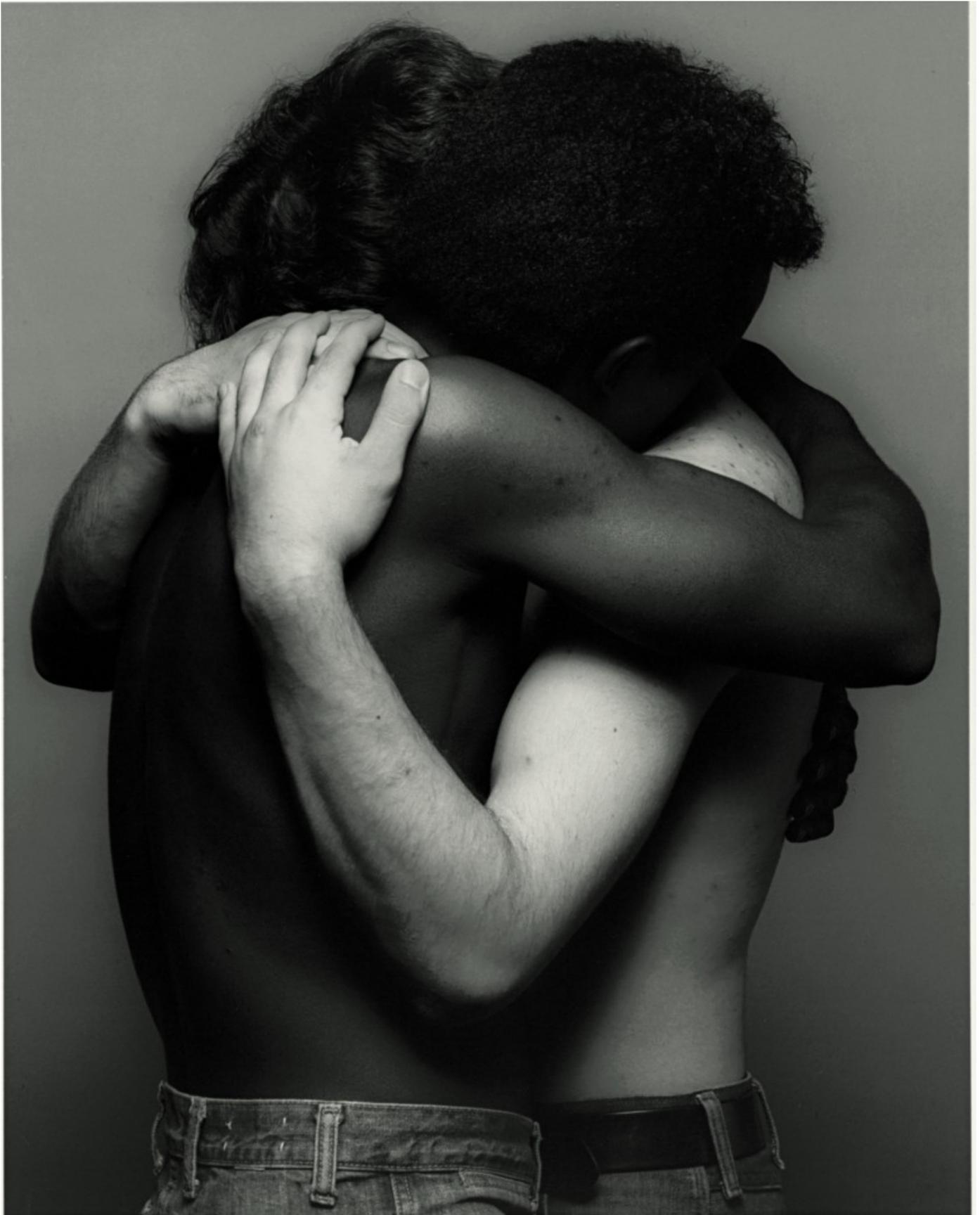
It was more like a perfect storm. In 1990 the director of the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati faced charges of obscenity over an exhibition titled "The Perfect Moment."

The show contained five graphic images of homosexual sadomasochism and two portraits of naked children with genitals exposed, among other nudes, floral still-lives and self-portraits — all representative of Robert Mapplethorpe's body of work, which provocatively merged classical form with graphic sexuality.

Bryce Dessner was 14, watching the brouhaha from his Cincinnati home.

"It became this kind of flashpoint or crucible of the culture wars and the NEA wars of the '80s and '90s," said Dessner, a fast-rising concert composer and a guitarist in the indie band the National. "They [put art on trial](#), basically. It was a huge, huge cultural event in the city. It kind of turned on a light for me about a lot of issues."

That moment has been gestating inside Dessner's mind ever since. On Tuesday he will premiere an oratorio in Los Angeles that's an explicit response to Mapplethorpe.



"Embrace" by Robert Mapplethorpe, 1982. The image is one of 100 in composer Bryce Dessner's oratorio "Triptych."

(Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation)

[MAPPLETHORPE: The one photo you haven't seen: The one he took of me »](#)

"Triptych (Eyes of One on Another)" was composed for Roomful of Teeth, the innovative vocal ensemble, and a 12-piece chamber orchestra. The concert version will premiere with members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic at Walt Disney Concert Hall, accompanied by 100 Mapplethorpe images. A larger-scale theatrical staging will travel to Michigan, Tennessee and New York.

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Korde Arrington Tuttle, a poet from North Carolina, wrote the libretto, taking inspiration for his three-movement structure partly from Mapplethorpe's XYZ Portfolios, so named for their components: gay sadomasochistic imagery (X), flowers (Y) and nude portraits of African American men (Z). Inspiration also came from the poetry of Mapplethorpe's close friend Patti Smith and of the late Essex Hemphill, who often wrote about the African American gay community during the AIDS epidemic.

"Thematically, it is kind of this journey of interiority," Tuttle said, "and just really interrogating the intimacy of looking

and being watched, or looking and being seen, or not being seen."

Mapplethorpe raised hackles not just with his depictions of sexuality but by celebrating the beauty of the black body. For Tuttle, Hemphill's poetry "has been a beautiful way for me to enter the work, you know, identifying as a black queer man who interfaces with, and has very complicated relationships to, what it means to exist and be seen and also behave within the confines of the white imagination."

The second movement takes language directly from the 1990 trial in Cincinnati, so questions about [public scrutiny and censorship](#) live in the work, Tuttle said.

The L.A. Phil proposed to Dessner that he write a work for voices when he was in town in 2015 to premiere "Quilting." He quickly landed on this idea of reclaiming something from his past.

"As a teenager, I was told I wasn't allowed to look at the photos," Dessner said. "Obviously, in recent years Mapplethorpe has just become more and [more famous and kind of ubiquitous](#) — also, the nature of what those images mean has changed. We see them differently now than we would have then."

Dessner set Tuttle's libretto to music that, like

Mapplethorpe's photography, marries old forms with a provocative new approach. It opens with a reimagining of an Italian madrigal by Monteverdi, but it also takes full advantage of the polyphonic techniques for which Roomful of Teeth is known — most famously "Partita for 8 Voices," which won composer and founding member Caroline Shaw [a Pulitzer Prize in 2013](#).

"They sing like no other ensemble," Dessner said. "They're like crazy virtuosos, but they also bring to the table just an unbelievable lexicon of different singing styles. And, in a way, the kind of grit and edge that's in Mapplethorpe's work is coming out more in some of the Roomful interpretation of my music than necessarily what I put in the score initially."

Dessner and director Kaneza Schaal, a New York theater artist, worked with the Mapplethorpe Foundation and the Getty Center, where the artist's archive is stored, to cull the images that will accompany the music. (The L.A. Phil website provides a disclaimer of "extreme sexually explicit content," so you have been warned.)

"Mapplethorpe stood at this precipice of self-image in culture, and the work ignited public imagination," said Schaal, who replaced the original director, Daniel Fish. "With 'Triptych,' we have many different artists coming together who come to this piece with many different interests, and repulsions, and admirations and questions

around Mapplethorpe's work."



"Alistair Butler" by Robert Mapplethorpe, 1980

(Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation)

[L.A. Phil's 2019-20: social justice, gender parity and a little Sondheim »](#)

Schaal laughed when she used the word "repulsion," and

admitted her own feelings about Mapplethorpe are complicated.

"In contemporary culture, in mass media, depictions of the erotic are so often tied to blurry consent lines," she said.

"Real talk! That is part of how what is 'sexy' gets imaged. And when we now live in this world where graphic sexual imagery is one click away, I'm very curious about human intimacy in this landscape, about vulnerability to another, about sharing of oneself."

Still, all the more reason to grapple with the work.

"As of late, I feel like when we're confronted with controversial or problematic bodies of work, our tendency as a society has been to try and erase them," Schaal said.

"My own feeling, as an artist, is that these are the works I'm interested to address. I see Mapplethorpe's work in all its problematic glory, and I'm interested in how a new generation of artists — how black artists, how women artists, how queer artists — can rethink that classical language of his photography."

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As a composer, Dessner has never been busier. He recently finished scoring "The Pope," a film about Pope Francis starring Jonathan Pryce and Anthony Hopkins, which will

premiere on Netflix this fall. It was directed by Fernando Meirelles, a close friend of Alejandro G. Iñárritu, who collaborated with Dessner on "The Revenant" in 2015.

Some of Dessner's music used in "The Revenant" came from a piano duo called "El Chan," which will be released on Deutsche Grammophon on April 7 — along with a new double piano concerto, all of it performed by Katia and Marielle Labéque. (The album cover was designed by Iñárritu.)

In April the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra will premiere "Voy a Dormir," a song cycle he wrote for mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor.

Dessner was recently named a collaborative partner to San Francisco Symphony by its [new music director](#), Esa-Pekka Salonen. Dessner will join other composers and artists to shape the orchestra's programming and community engagement.

He cited L.A. as an inspiration, "where there is a sense that an orchestra can be the center of a cultural energy in a city."

Perhaps, like Mapplethorpe, he'll find new ways to provoke.



'Triptych (Eyes of One on Another)'

Where: Walt Disney Concert Hall, 111 S. Grand Ave.

When: 8 p.m. Tuesday

Tickets: \$32-\$60 (subject to change)

Information: (323) 850-2000, www.laphil.com

On tour: Theatrical production runs March 15-16 at the University Musical Society of the University of Michigan (co-commissioner of the work); March 21 at the Big Ears Festival in Knoxville, Tenn.; April 6 at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.; and June 6-8 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York.

"Self Portrait" by Robert Mapplethorpe, 1988.

(Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation)

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