

**ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE**

American, born New York, NY, 1946, died New York, NY, 1989

*Patti Smith*, late 1986

Gelatin silver print, 19 x 22 3/4 inches

Gift of Jeffrey H. Loria, 2015.7.3

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The deep friendship and creative collaboration of Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe began with three chance encounters of the hungry twenty-year-olds in New York City in 1967. “You drew me from the darkest period of my young life, sharing with me the sacred mystery of what it is to be an artist,” Smith later wrote.<sup>1</sup> By 1979, they had made their names—Patti Smith as poet, rock musician, and performer; Mapplethorpe as a studio photographer of artists, celebrities, still lifes, and daring erotic subjects. In 1980 Smith married Fred “Sonic” Smith and moved to Detroit. In September 1986, pregnant with the Smiths’ second child, she learned that Mapplethorpe had been hospitalized with AIDS.

Mapplethorpe’s first and most photographed model, Smith sat for him several times over the thirty months left to him. “I don’t know how he does it, but all his photographs of you look like him,” remarked Fred Smith.<sup>2</sup> In Mapplethorpe’s cover photograph for Smith’s 1988 album, *Dream of Life*, the gazes of artist and subject merge: “He was carrying death within him and I was carrying life. We were both aware of that .... And I am looking at Robert and he is alive.”<sup>3</sup>

The profound solemnity and sadness that emanate from the formal portrait of late 1986 memorialize this cruel moment in the artists’ lives and in the early history of a ravaging, often deadly disease. Mapplethorpe poses Smith as a gravid Madonna in mourning, her left hand with its wedding band placed near her heart on her dark sweater, touching a strand of her flowing hair—bright signs of fruitfulness against the velvet ground. Echoing Albrecht Dürer’s Christlike self-portrait of 1500 and Julia Margaret Cameron’s 1874 photograph of the widowed Julia Jackson Duckworth (later Virginia Stephen Woolf’s mother), Mapplethorpe’s expectant Madonna is also a *mater dolorosa*, a mother of sorrows, bound to life, destined for grief. In this study in blacks at the edges of light, Smith’s grave, stricken gaze reaches through space to the world. Still “holding hands with God,” artist and subject together make of chance something timeless.<sup>4</sup>

—Christine Froula

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1 Patti Smith, *Just Kids* (New York: Ecco, 2010), 276.

2 Smith, *Just Kids*, 273.

3 Smith, *Just Kids*, 271.

4 Smith, *Just Kids*, 276.