Looking for the Unexpected

A Portrait of James Crump, Filmmaker
Antonio Lopez, Corey Tippin and Donna Jordan, Saint Tropez, 1970

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Words by Miss Rosen

For James Crump, art history is the foundation upon which all things are built. A purist with a penchant for discipline and rigor, the award-winning American film director, writer, and producer always strikes the perfect balance between aesthetics and content to create timeless stories of singular figures who transformed the landscape of contemporary art.

Crump’s recent films—Black White + Gray: A Portrait of Sam Wagstaff and Robert Mapplethorpe; Troublemakers: The Story of Land Art; and Antonio Lopez 1970: Sex Fashion & Disco—are mesmerizing epics of iconoclasts whose dedication and daring redefined art, fashion, and photography in their own lives and decades after their deaths. He is currently working on a new film about artist Jordan Wolfson.

In what follows, Crump shares insights into those who inspired and shaped his journey, alongside elements of his creative process that keep his work fresh, vibrant, and brimming with life.

How did 1960s and 1970s American art and culture inform your sensibilities?

When I was a young boy in the 60s, I got turned on fashion, visual arts, and culture by discovering the major photographers in my mother’s fashion magazines. Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, Horst, George Hoyningen-Huene, I still hold them in great esteem. As a teenager growing up in the ‘70s, I was inspired by Andy Warhol’s Interview magazine. It was a portal into a sexy, interesting, and vibrant world. I wanted to be in that realm and experience it: the films, actors, fashion, painters, photographers were really interesting to me then and now. My dream was to live in New York. I would study subway maps, and think, “Some day, I’m going to get there!”

Were there any defining moments you had paging through those magazines?

I loved Vogue. I remember seeing Robert Mapplethorpe in an advertisement for Rose’s Lime Juice. I didn’t know who he was at the time, but something stayed with me. Fast forward to 1988 when he has his career retrospective at the Whitney. The first time I saw the show, Mapplethorpe was in the corner of the gallery in his wheelchair. He was voyeuristically watching people view his work. The show was a revelation and became a reference point. Years later, I published two books on Mapplethorpe and made a documentary film about him. His work has this power and forcefulness that I can identify with. It still holds up.

What was your path to becoming a filmmaker and book publisher of art historical icons?

I went to Indiana University for a business degree. I felt a conformist urge to do something that seemed practical because I was the first person in my family to get an undergraduate degree. At that time, IU was completing a new I. M. Pei art museum and they had one of the best world-class libraries. I started going over there and spending time. I was a closeted art student.

What inspired you to start your own publishing house?

As a bibliophile, one of the first things that really turned me on was beautifully made books. When I was finishing my Masters, I knew I wasn’t going to be an academic. I began thinking of publishing. Art book publishing is not theoretical. It’s editing and producing an actual object.

In my work, I’m going for something that is timeless. I want it to outlast me. I think Minimalism is a big part of it. Order, discipline, purity—that’s an aesthetic that appeals to me, whether it’s in filmmaking, bookmaking, or in the way that one lives, the way you organize your library, the way you dress. They’re not separate things; they are part of a whole. People who know me well can tell you I tend very lightly on this earth. There is something to be said about being lite and being able to move, and not to have that heavy materialistic burden, that eventually seeps into your interior spaces, your psyche.

What kinds of stories are you driven to tell?

I’m drawn to stories about people who are really worthy but, for one reason or another, were overlooked, forgotten, or misunderstood. I am about discovery and the experience of finding something or someone that really appeals to me. Men like Mapplethorpe and Michael Unsworth have resonated for a long time. When the subjects keep bouncing around in your mind, there’s an obsession. Why are you so fascinated? Why do you keep going back? I can make these films but if they’re not going to be seen, what’s the point? — M.R.