

X: THE ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE COLLECTION

Fall/Winter 2024 brings Ludovic de Saint Sernin to New York City, where the brand presents its first runway show outside of Paris. A toast to one of the city's most emblematic artists, the runway becomes a forum for the exploration of the fertile common ground between the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and the label's founder. Charting a journey from seeming innocence to dark eroticism, the collection ponders the delicate tension between the two. As Mapplethorpe famously remarked of his flower photographs: "Beauty and the devil are the same thing."

ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

The collection is the proud result of a partnership with the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, founded by Mapplethorpe himself in 1988, a year before his death. An abiding figure of inspiration and a perennial reference point throughout de Saint Sernin's creative journey, this season's offering is conceived of as a collaboration between the designer and the late artist, bringing both select images from Mapplethorpe's archive and the characters within them to life. "In my own fantasy, this was a collaboration with him," de Saint Sernin says. "I imagined he was still alive today, and that we were creating silhouettes that he would want to photograph; clothes that he would love, and that feel as much him as they do me."

NEW YORK SQUALOR, NEW YORK GLAMOUR

In her biography of Mapplethorpe, Patricia Morrisroe writes of the sure footing the artist held in two oppositional New York spheres – "New York squalor" and "New York glamour". From his reputation as the eminent society and celebrity portrait photographer of his time to his status as an ambassador of New York's gay leather and BDSM scenes, the collection casts light on the full spectrum of Mapplethorpe's life, fleshing out his "tuxedo elegance and leather attitude", as Jack Fritscher wrote in a 2016 feature for The Guardian, in all its richness and complexity.

UPTOWN GIRLS

The decadence and severity of 80s power dressing is a key undercurrent, conjuring the era of Robert Mapplethorpe's greatest prominence. Cinched trench coats in inky calfskin, chocolate shearling, and glossy scarlet pony – as well as nipped wool tailoring with perpendicular shoulders and an in-built eyelet bustier construction – cut exaggerated hourglass forms. Asymmetrical leather shift dresses feature fine pinstripe embroideries, while tailored pants skim along thighs and calves; split seams at the ankle allow a gentle flare. 18k gold-plated and black enamel bangles, square plate earrings and quartz-studded chokers heighten the sense of ritzy excess – in a cheekily subversive turn, each piece features an 'X' motif, alluding to Mapplethorpe's seminal 1978 portfolio.

TOUS

This season's fine jewelry pieces are created in collaboration with esteemed Spanish fine jewelry house TOUS. Demonstrating their commitment to supporting progressive fashion creativity, they have supported Ludovic de Saint Sernin in bringing its first fine jewelry pieces to life for the brand's NYFW debut. "TOUS has such an incredible savoir-faire in the field of fine jewelry, which they've been cultivating for over a century, and we were fully immersed into their world," de Saint Sernin says. "Jewelry is an understated but incredibly important part of Mapplethorpe's work, so it was such a privilege to bring these pieces to life with them."

“TOUS, as a jewelry brand with a centuries-old legacy, always bets on creativity and talent,” Israel L. Roca, TOUS Design Director, says. “For this reason, we are happy to collaborate with Ludovic de Saint Sernin on its first show at NYFW, bringing to life the jewelry that accompanies the looks he presents at fashion week.”

FLOWERS

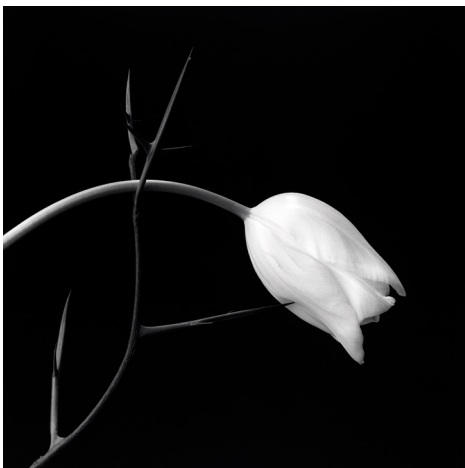
Highlighting the intrinsic delicacy of Mapplethorpe’s work and personality, hand-cut velvet and lacquered appliqués drawn from Mapplethorpe’s acclaimed images of flowers are fused onto gossamer vests, slip dresses and blouses in featherlight Japanese cotton organdy. A nude silhouette clutching a posy of lilies is rendered in shadowy silk devoré, while halterneck plastrons and gowns featuring spectres of fawning poppies, tulips and orchid branches are rendered in metal meshwork with encrusted crystals. Each pixel-like dot is arranged with geometric precision, with a single dress requiring over 100 hours of handwork. Framing shadows of blooming flowers against the illusion of bare skin, de Saint Sernin invokes a crucial tension in Mapplethorpe’s work – his ability to tease out the darkly erotic in the ostensibly innocent.

LEATHER

To invoke Mapplethorpe without making good use of the material most closely associated with his work would be nothing short of a cardinal sin. Black calfskin serves as the collection’s material baseline, from brand icons like the Cleavage bralette to the LdSS riff on a bumster – a butt-flashing pant with a lace-up bust-shaped cutout at the rear – and aviator jackets lifted from the artist’s self-portraits, featuring an intricate embossed interpretation of Mapplethorpe’s Heart and Dagger (1982) on the back panel. Elsewhere, eyelet studded leather bands are interlaced to create a body-skimming halterneck bandeau dress. A homage to Mapplethorpe’s penchant for shoes redolent of power and seduction, footwear for the collection is generously sponsored by Louboutin.

THE MINESHAFT

The collection’s denouement celebrates Mapplethorpe as a patron saint of New York’s gay demi-monde, presenting some of the most uncompromisingly carnal Ludovic de Saint Sernin looks to date. The brand’s inimitable codes are brought to BDSM gear, with gruff leather daddies and darkroom cruisers celebrated by way of eyelet-trimmed harnesses and pants with strategically removed rear panels, while dungeon-dwelling gimps and jockstrap-huffers inspire masks created in collaboration with Ukrainian milliner Ruslan Baginskiy. Elsewhere models in low-scooping leather aprons and diaphanous dresses carry raw white brass horns – the product of a repeat collaboration with Vagujhelyi, a brand founded by New York-based artist Diego Villarreal Vagujhelyi – evoking the satyric charge of Mapplethorpe’s Frank Diaz (1980).



Tulip and Thorn, 1985
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