

Ludovic de Saint Sernin's New York Show Will Be in Collaboration With the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

February 8, 2024 | By Mark Holgate

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Photographed by Diego Villarreal

Ludovic de Saint Sernin's show on Sunday will not only be the Parisian's New York debut—it will also pay homage to Robert Mapplethorpe, one of the city's most famous artists, with de Saint Sernin collaborating with the late photographer's foundation. As Mapplethorpe has been an abiding inspiration to the designer—whose own work has often pushed the boundaries of sex, gender, and desire—the collection is intended to go deeper than simply name-checking an artist famed for images which brought together exquisite chiaroscuro lighting with often explicit (and controversial) depictions of nudity and sex. (He would draw ire from the malignant moral majority back in the day, and his work was also criticized—most notably by the poet and activist Essex Hemphill—for fetishizing and sexually objectifying Black men.)

Mapplethorpe's photography was, however, about more than sex, about more than representations of the era of the Mineshaft, the notorious BDSM club in the Meatpacking district of the type that was immortalized in the 1980 film *Cruising*. He also produced stately flower studies; abstractions of neoclassical sculpture; portraits of such luminaries as Sigourney Weaver, Grace Jones, and his great friend and ally Patti Smith, among others; and images of himself, which became ever more poignant and harrowing as he battled AIDS, before his death in 1989.



A Robert Mapplethorpe self-portrait taken in 1980. Photo: Courtesy of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation



Tulip, 1985 by Robert Mapplethorpe. Photo: Courtesy of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

"Mapplethorpe has always been my hero," de Saint Sernin told me last week via Zoom. "I read [Smith's memoir of her time with Mapplethorpe] *Just Kids* in my early twenties, and it changed my life. It touched me not only because of who he was as a person, but as an artist—discovering his identity, and what he wanted to stand for and represent as a gay man, as a queer man, in the world." Reading Smith's rightly acclaimed remembrance of youth, love, friendship, and fame caused de Saint Sernin, who's now 33, to reevaluate everything—and to pivot. "I was a young designer working in the studio of a fashion house and chasing the dream of one day becoming a creative director," he said. "But I realized that Robert Mapplethorpe only had his own voice, and he was such a unique voice; he was one of one. I had been feeling there was something missing in the industry—there wasn't a brand I could totally relate to. I wanted to express myself and see if what I did would resonate with my community. So I quit my job."

That job was with Olivier Rousteing at Balmain. "It was heartbreaking to leave Olivier," said de Saint Sernin, "because he was the first to give me a chance. But there was this little voice in me that wanted to do something for myself." His first collection in 2017 set the blueprint for who he is as a designer: the leather, the eyelet lacing, the tailoring scissored close to the body—an oscillation between masculinity and femininity that simultaneously questions the validity of those binary terms in the first place.

That collection also included the first of many references to Mapplethorpe, though in the end only he and a few others clapped eyes on it. "We had a secret look that I didn't dare show during the presentation," he recalled, of a leather jock strap inspired by a Mapplethorpe image of a man wearing one similar, set off by the little star tattooed on his thigh. "It was a bit much for a Sunday afternoon, what with my family coming and the industry discovering me for the first time. Since then, though," he went on to say, "I've referenced him multiple times: In *Mirage*, the summer 2023 collection, for instance: The first look was a boy in a white shirt, black leather pants, and boots, and with an anthurium flower at his waist." (An image redolent of the photographer himself in his early '70s punkish Arthur Rimbaud phase.)



Ludovic de Saint Sernin, spring 2023 ready-to-wear Photo: Daniele Oberrauch / Gorunway.com

The idea to work with the Mapplethorpe Foundation had been percolating for him for some time. Last June, two days after he'd shown his summer 2024 collection, de Saint Sernin reached out and asked if they would be interested in collaborating. Yes, they would, as it turned out. "I started working on the collection right away," he said. "Usually it takes a minute or two for me to finish one collection and then start the next, but I was like, *Let's go!* I wanted to spend as much time on it as I could." (Incidentally, this isn't the foundation's first fashion collaboration; it has also worked with Raf Simons in 2016 and last year with the DJ and utter icon Honey Dijon.)

Part of de Saint Sernin's research involved seeing Mapplethorpe's work at the foundation's Chelsea headquarters in Manhattan. This was work that was nakedly unframed, a visceral and emotional experience—in particular, he looked at the X, Y, and Z portfolios (the first two published in 1978, the latter in 1981), which include some of the photographer's more explicit works. For that reason, he isn't replicating imagery onto his clothing—but for de Saint Sernin to do that would be, he says, too first-degree, too surface anyway. "My biggest goal was to be able to show all the different facets of his work," said the designer. "To celebrate the man as much for his beautiful flower photographs as the portraits of fisting; to honor that, and be as comfortable talking about the flowers as I am talking about the sex."



Ludovic de Saint Sernin at work in the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Photographed by Diego Villarreal



Mapplethorpe's image *Melody* (Shoe), 1987 at the foundation.
Photographed by Diego Villarreal

"My approach with this collection is to bring his world and the people who were in it to the runway," he continued. "So I am thinking about that time in the '80s when Mapplethorpe was in all his glory, but I am also thinking about what those people would have looked like today, and who they would be hanging out with. I am also interpreting some of the artworks, and using techniques which are new to me and to my brand. The flower images, for instance: I am turning those into garments. I've enjoyed the artisanal processes behind it all." Elsewhere, he's reimagining such de Saint Sernin hallmarks as crystal mesh and transparency with devoré velvet. There are masks too, derived from both a Mapplethorpe image of a man wearing a pouch over his face (*Scott (Jockstrap)*, 1978) as well as a follower of de Saint Sernin on Instagram who had posted an image of themselves with underwear on their head.

De Saint Sernin—and his community—have long been comfortable with conversations around the intersection of fashion, sex positivity, and the freedom to self-present one’s gender and sexuality as one sees fit. Some years ago, over dinner in Brooklyn, de Saint Sernin told me he had launched a second Instagram account (now defunct) for his community, where people could submit images of themselves wearing his label while simultaneously speaking to their own particular gender and sexual identities. That generational openness and honesty was something which also resonated with de Saint Sernin when he read *Just Kids*.

“This might sound like a cliché,” he said, “but until I read that book, I wasn’t a hundred percent sure of my sexuality. After that I met my first boyfriend, and throughout my twenties, I was exploring who I was, and that has made me who I am. My brand is quite autobiographical, and I obviously felt that in Robert’s work, too. He gave me the confidence to own who I was, to be unapologetic about who I was. I have to thank Mapplethorpe for being who he was, because it allowed me to be my true self. This whole collaboration means so much more beyond the collection—it’s a dream I get to live.” Moreover, he gets to show that collection in a city that has long been part of his creative longings and desires. “New York has always been a dream of mine,” he said. “What better way to do a show in the city than to make it about an icon who is still influencing and inspiring people all over the world?”