Tribeca

Black White + Gray: A Portrait of Sam Wagstaff and Robert Mapplethorpe
(Documentary)

By JAY WEISSBERG


Narrator: Joan Juliet Buck.

Novice helmer James Crump explores the complex relationship between two major forces in the photography world in "Black White + Gray: A Portrait of Sam Wagstaff and Robert Mapplethorpe." Seeking to restore Wagstaff's significance not just to Mapplethorpe's career but to the art market in general, Crump gathers an impressive roster of commentators and friends, though his narrowed focus means certain elements get passed over or misinterpreted. Still, he succeeds in capturing multiple aspects of a complex, charismatic man, ensuring play in art centers and fests before likely PBS broadcast.

Born into privilege and groomed for a life of conservative ease, Wagstaff chucked off his reputation as "the debs' darling" and dove into the art scene, making his mark as an iconoclastic curator with exhibitions celebrating late-flowering Abstract Expressionism and burgeoning Minimalism. By the early '70s, his interest in photography brought him together with the young Mapplethorpe, whose tastes were just beginning to form.

Their relationship, both sexual and professional, became a major force in the art world, propelling Mapplethorpe onto the international stage and providing Wagstaff with a co-participant in the liberating post-Stonewall gay scene. Integral to their partnership was Patti Smith, already Mapplethorpe's muse and herself on the brink of stardom during this heady period.

A noticeable fixture on the auction circuit, Wagstaff championed anonymous photos before anyone else appreciated their value, and sought out works that challenged the viewer with a mixture of beauty and, at times, perversity. Crump and the talking heads he gathers (Philippe Garner is particularly incisive) make clear how formative Wagstaff's collection was on Mapplethorpe's own work, all agreeing that the collection itself, sold to the Getty Museum, should be seen as a form of self-portraiture.

Problems, however, arise in the over-analysis. Too much is made of a disconnect between Wagstaff's patrician background and his attraction to sexual excess and drug culture, as if one is exclusive of the other. Art historian Eugenia Parry in particular delights in the nasty, over-interpretive soundbite, and everyone misses the boat in dismissing Wagstaff's switch from photography to American silver. Wagstaff brought an appreciation of quality and beauty to everything he touched, but the commentators here all treat his world-class silver collection as a regressive aristocratic fantasy.

Crump rushes over Wagstaff's work as museum curator, painting Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum as a staid institution while ignoring the avant-garde groundwork of earlier curator Chick Austin. In the first quarter he has a tendency to toss too much into the mix, piling up stock footage from debutante balls to 1950s suburbia in the cinematic equivalent of footnote overload, but later on he finds his rhythm and does a fine job guiding the viewer toward Wagstaff's untimely AIDS-related death in 1987.
With four credited lensers, tech credits inevitably vary and HD quality jumps from top-notch to adequate. The photographs themselves all sing from the screen, reinforcing Wagstaff’s seminal role in how these masterworks are appreciated today.

Camera (color/B&W, HD), Christopher Felver, Harry Geller, Paul Landahl, Eric Koziol; editors, Dave Giles, William Davis; music, J. Ralph. Reviewed at Tribeca Film Festival (Encounters), May 5, 2007. Running time: 70 MIN.

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