

South Australian police raid bookshop and seize Mapplethorpe's Pictures

Richard Phillips
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In a serious attack on democratic rights, two South Australian plain-clothes detectives raided an Adelaide bookshop on January 7 and seized a copy of *Pictures*, a book by the internationally renowned photographer Robert Mapplethorpe.

Police told Penelope Curtin, the owner of Folio Foliage bookshop and a former literature officer for the state's Department of Arts, that they had received an anonymous telephone call to Crime Stoppers claiming that the shop was selling a book containing child pornography. Unable to find the alleged book—a collection of works by Jock Sturges published by the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt—the officers looked around the shop and decided to impound Mapplethorpe's *Pictures*.

As Curtin told the media: “I was trying to be helpful. Then they [the police] said: ‘What if a child was to see this?’ I explained that I have never had a child in the shop and the book was on the top shelf with only the spine showing.”

The detectives told Curtin they were impounding the book and would “seek advice” as to whether it breached Australian censorship laws. Senior Constable Rod Huppertz, one of the detectives involved in the raid, later admitted to the press that he had not heard of Mapplethorpe before but said the book was in a public place. “We need to determine whether it should or shouldn't be there.”

Mapplethorpe, who died in 1989 aged 43, is regarded by many as one of the most important American photographers to emerge in the 1970s. After studying at the Pratt Institute of Art in New York, he developed an interest in photography and held his first one-man show in 1977. He won notoriety for his homoerotic and sado-masochistic photographs in the late-1970s and held critically acclaimed exhibitions in Corcoran Gallery,

Washington D.C. (1978), the Musee National d'Art Moderne in Paris (1983), and the Whitney Museum in New York (1988). Generally favouring large format cameras, his range of work includes celebrity portraits, nudes and still life close-ups of flowers.

Mapplethorpe's photographs are freely available in Australian bookstores and can be viewed in extensive collections of his work at Australian art museums and galleries. The National Gallery of Australia in Canberra has more than 40 of his photographs, several state galleries have collections, and four exhibitions of his works have been held in Sydney over the last six years.

South Australian bookstore owners, artists and writers condemned the raid. Julie Robinson, Art Gallery of South Australia's curator of prints, drawings and photographs, described it as “petty” and an “over-reaction”. Samela Harris, whose father Max, was a well-known writer and campaigner against Australia's repressive censorship laws in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, described the raid as “scandalous” and a “regressive start to a new millennium” in a comment published in the *Adelaide Advertiser*. James Crump from Arena Editions in the US, the publisher of *Pictures*, told the press that South Australia's police had created a world first in seizing the book and described the raid as “an outrage” and “tantamount to fascism.”

John White, South Australia's assistant police commissioner responded to these statements by defending the police and stating that the book was confiscated because officers believed some of the photographs “could be within the ambit of a restricted publication”.

Rob Lucas, acting Attorney General for South Australia's conservative Liberal Party government, wrote to Curtin last Tuesday declaring that it was up to police when they returned the book and that he would

not interfere in their investigations. Lucas said police could hold the book for up to two years depending on whether they decided to prosecute the bookshop owner.

Police forwarded the book to the Office of Literature and Film Classification, Australia's censorship body, which resolved on Thursday that the book could be sold without restrictions. Despite this ruling, under South Australia's Summary Offences Act police can seize material they deem to be indecent or offensive. Those prosecuted under this law can be fined up to \$20,000 or face two years prison.

The Socialist Equality Party condemns this blatant act of censorship by the South Australian police. The police decision to seize the Mapplethorpe book and take upon themselves the role of moral guardians is an ominous development. It follows a series of attacks on freedom of artistic expression instigated by extreme rightwing elements over the last four years, demanding a stricter censorship code in Australia.

In October 1997, the National Gallery of Victoria closed down an exhibition by American photographer Andres Serrano, whose photograph "Piss Christ" became the target for physical and verbal attacks by Christian fundamentalists. In 1998 two films were banned—Pasolini's *Salo* and the documentary *Sick: The life and death of Bob Flanagan—Supermasochist*. And in 1999 Canberra's National Gallery of Australia cancelled *Sensation*, an exhibition of British artists, after management held discussions with federal Arts Minister Richard Alston.

While Adelaide is the home of many artists and writers and the site of one of Australia's most prestigious arts festivals, it is also the base of Trish Draper, Liberal federal MP and leading member of the Lyons Forum, a pro-censorship lobby group within the Howard government with links to Christian fundamentalist groupings.

In 1996 Draper campaigned to stop *Salo* being screened in Adelaide and in January 1997 called on the government to establish a Royal Commission into paedophile activity. In 1999 she attempted to have *Lolita*, Adrian Lyne's film adaptation of the Vladimir Nabakov novel, banned. She declared that the film encouraged paedophilia, even before she had seen the movie. Draper regards *Playboy* magazine as pornographic and has demanded the government stop all X-rated videos.



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