



Joel-Peter Witkin

by Eugenio Parry

PHAIDON

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*Such is the power of the image: It heals only those who know what it is.
For everybody else, it is an illness.* Roberto Calasso

The astounding photographs of Joel-Peter Witkin hurl us into the realm of myth, where gods bewilder and horrify with a tangled chain of crimes: the arm of a screaming man penetrates, to the biceps, the anus of another; a rabid 'wolf'-dog mounts a 'eunuch'; an ecstatic victim of his own desire swoons in autoerotic death; a masked human skeleton weighs a penis; a masked woman suckles an eel. The acts are horrific, and Witkin's gods are not the usual ones. He has contrived a whole new pantheon of supernaturals from real human afflictions.

As a young man, Witkin traced the predicaments of others in newspaper stories, and copied them into his 'Blue Dog' journal: 'Lady with left leg amputated wishes to swap shoes with lady with right leg amputated, 7½B.' Later, he invited these sufferers – contortionists, dwarfs, anorexics, pre- and post-op transsexuals, narcissists, exhibitionists, the obese, the physically and mentally disabled, the congenitally ill or conjoined, sideshow curiosities and the dying – to his studio, to pose and be directed in timeless theatricals of obscure, symbolic gestures.

If Witkin's excess engenders revulsion, even among sophisticates, it also serves a purpose. Veiled in dry, saturnine light, the ghastly emblems are best understood as moral cryptograms. They catalogue an underworld of humours out of balance. Transcending the particulars of studio artifice, they intimate the vast complexities of the human psyche. As ineffable dream

fragments of collective memory, they are meant to mirror our own unfathomed darkness.

The sideshow performer Melvin Burkhardt (the 'Human Blockhead') was famous for hammering into his nostril a huge nail that would successfully miss the brain case. Witkin recorded this feat against torn, festooned bunting. Real risk becomes Herculean travesty. Frozen by the camera to seem perpetual, Burkhardt's compulsion recalls that of cruel Sisyphus, banished to Hades and forced to roll up a mountain a rock that forever returns to its starting place. The human oddity battering his own face also seems to be paying for undisclosed transgressions.

Taking on traditional myths, where the sexual co-mingling of gods and humans was essential to the celebration of Olympian egoism, Witkin re-enchanted them to suggest current distortions of the soul. In *Amour* (no. 25) a lethargic beast (Venus) sends a stream of breast milk towards the mouth of a dead monkey (Cupid); above her, a man masturbates. So much for modern love's passionless self-pleasuring. In *Leda* (no. 16) the object of Zeus' hunger is played by a drag queen with rickets who caresses a swan. Two winged infants, vibrant issues from the giant egg of this union, appear to swim like amphibians at their parents' feet. If Leda, brittle-boned and chalky, resembles a Holocaust survivor, almighty Zeus, disguised, is mere taxidermy. Physical desire reduces to amnesia.

All amazing physical specimens are candidates for Witkin's moral theatre. A Russian beauty he met in Berlin inspired him to conjure a kind of Phidian Athena, for her frame rises like a statue from feet that might have been carved of Pentelic marble (no. 43). But surrounding pebbles suggest an earthly dwelling place. And she is mortally preoccupied. Ignoring the gossamer cloth of modesty that has slipped absentmindedly from one hand to reveal her sex, this living ideal focuses on the dagger she points toward her breast with implacable calm. Symbols

represent the inner conflict: a miniature warship battles for survival on the stormy waves of her hair; a tiny ladder of spiritual aspiration departs like a dismissed notion into infinite blackness. Confused, self-destroying Beauty hardly deserves the name. Witkin stresses the point by giving his paragon a third nipple, guaranteeing her ejection from the Olympian elect and marking this deity as one of his own.

‘A life in which the gods are not invited isn’t worth living,’ Roberto Calasso wrote in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (1993), as if to imply that before modern psychoanalysis probed the unconscious mind, we counted on the gods to accomplish this work for us. Witkin would agree, jotting in his journal: ‘The artist is a shaman, priest, and mystic, capable of taking on the higher order of dialogue between the invisible and the visible ... I’m a conduit ... Ideas come ... through me.’ Art that doesn’t ‘point toward some ideal forever beyond the senses isn’t art at all. He added: ‘[If my work] is theatre, contrivance, voyeurism, darkness, anger, love, it is all these things and more – it’s me, for better or worse – the marriage of the body to the spirit, the eye of flesh to the glass eye of the camera.’

Such psychic ambition may seem out of joint for photography. The little box, instrument of metaphysical shrinkage, wasn’t intended to witness the intrusion of ultimate realities. Photographers have rarely asked their medium to betray its ultimate bargain with fact. Over time, the earliest camera pictures may have acquired an antiquated look of this-has-been, forever captured, but this is ‘otherness’ by default. To celebrants of materialist progress, photography’s attachment to here-and-now spelled freedom from the ghosts of never-has-been and never-will-be. To Witkin, this freedom is delusion.

In the long, complicated history of art before modernism, it was the picture-maker’s imperative to give visual form to assaults on the reasoning mind. The ever-plentiful game, painted on

cave walls at Lascaux, were hallucinatory projections. The twelfth-century mystic Hildegard von Bingen depicted the cosmos as a red sphere of the soul, ablaze with purple lightning and countless eyes. Hieronymus Bosch administered grotesque punishments to those he regarded as a race of fools. Michelangelo showed the damned, and the saved, under a black sun.

William Blake cloaked his god Urizen (the embodiment of reason) in a pall of leaden night to show him perpetually doomed to petrifying intelligence, compared to the free-flowing energies of eternity. Witkin belongs to this psychic community – ‘Now I understand! The next egg found on the Moon will be me!’, he exclaims. And he is not afraid ‘to laugh at the disturbance of being in the world’. Copying from an article in *Harper’s* magazine, he wrote in his journal: ‘Milton’s Samson cries out in his blindness that vision is too important to be governed by two small openings in one’s head.’

Nor is Witkin the first to use the camera’s eye paradoxically to verify the unknown and unseen. These forays have largely been made in the work of nineteenth-century amateurs. In the late 1890s, the French Commandant Louis Darget belonged to a group of believers in ‘magnetic effluvia’ – emanations of psychic heat from objects, including the human body. He wrote in defence of those who claimed to have photographically captured these forces. Among the examples, extra-physical flow patterns of hot, white light interfere with photographic chemistry to suggest ‘thought’ issuing from two glass bottles. A walking stick expresses its psyche similarly, as does a group of male swimmers. The magnetic cloud of their body hair all but obliterates them.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a staunch defender of the existence of fairies, was also unusually knowledgeable about photographic chemistry. Devoted to the investigation of paranormality, the creator of Sherlock Holmes made and collected ‘spirit’ photographs, which, in his illustrated lectures, staggered audiences

with 'miracle after palpable miracle' of disembodying light. Doyle observed in *The Wanderings of a Spiritualist* (1921), 'I have had so many personal proofs of the intervention of supernatural agencies ... that I am prepared to accept the appearance of this aura as being an assurance of the presence of those greater forces for whom I act as a humble interpreter.'

Histories of art and photography mostly ignore such extra-factual explorations, except as novelties of spectres in bedsheets that usually sprang to life through failed technique or clumsy combination printing. For instance, Doyle's fogged negative of 'Naulakha', Rudyard Kipling's house in Vermont, shows banal real estate, swathed in 'spiritistical' smoke. Visual muddlement was imperative, as were the accompanying commentaries directed at sceptics. The enterprise recalls the psychoanalyst Carl Jung's study of unidentified foreign objects. Less interested in whether UFOs actually existed, he was more astonished by the unusual numbers of believers, not to mention the richly nuanced content of their testimonies.

Whether such pictures convince is not important to Witkin. But all claims of encounters with other worlds are. They stand for an attitude to which he has dedicated over forty years of photography, and which implicitly challenges all camera work satisfied only to justify 'the thing itself'. As a devout Catholic, Witkin is particularly attracted to the work of F. Holland Day. With photography, this leather merchant's son from Massachusetts created his own theatrical equivalents of the numinous, and in the 1890s satisfied a longing to play Christ in a well-known series of self-portraits. Quoting historian Marc Bloch, Witkin wrote: 'Clouds have not changed their shapes since the Middle Ages, yet we no longer see in them either magical swords or miraculous crosses.' Re-enacting the Crucifixion, Day strapped himself to the miraculous cross, like a hunger artist, to become the principal comedian in a New Testament farce.

For Witkin, on whom humour, inadvertent or otherwise, is never lost, the beauty of Day's pictures lies in their zealous sincerity. He considers the photographer's self-portrait enactment of *The Seven Last Words of Christ* (1898–1912) one of the greatest contributions to the medium: 'The Mystical Body of Christ is "Us" ... We, more glorious than the Stars. The Earth. The Moon. The Sun. Why aren't we *radiantly* alive, not just alive?', he exclaimed in his journal.

Meditating on current ignorance of transcendent Christian grace, Witkin proposed in a 1975 image (no. 04) that a masked male nude wearing high heels was the 'Ecce Homo' we deserved. Bodies of 'queer' and 'obscure' saints (nos 48 and 27) are wretched enigmas needful of atonement. Witkin's new Redeemer, crucified, is a masochistic penitent (no. 11), or the bloated corpse of a horse (no. 52). The pathologies of these passion plays supersede Doyle's eeriness and Day's holy narcissism. As philosopher Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* (1917) cautions, horror that merely makes us shudder is a primitive form of divine awareness. This does not invalidate Witkin's sacred purpose. Savagely re-enacting Christ's original sacrifice with an animal he adores, he replaces our amnesia with awe, and successfully invokes what Otto called the 'mysterium tremendum' of 'the wholly other'.

Witkin, a city child, believes that nothing is stranger and more suggestive of realms beyond our own than the radiant life of the street. In New York's Chinatown, well before he began to make his greatest images, certain events unfolded as a series of signs that he decided were specifically directed at him. 'A white woman, seated in a doorway, said something ... in my direction. I stopped and turned. She spoke as though she had a broken throat. I understood her to have asked if I had lost something. I ... checked my pockets and replied, "No!" But before I could walk away, she was pointing to the gutter. I walked over ... and saw, among the cigarette ends

and litter, only a boy's cap. I ... was about to place it on a coin meter ... when the woman ... made some new sounds with her throat. I knew from her waving that she wanted the cap. As I took it from the meter and turned in her direction, I noticed a small blonde girl sitting on the woman's lap. She was staring into the shadow which half-covered her and the woman ... I placed the cap in the woman's hand and saw, in that shadow a tiny, albino, Asian boy with half a face. He stepped forward into the light of the doorway, touching the cap in the woman's hand. He stood in the ... light, great amounts of blinding light. I noticed that people walking between me and the child didn't seem to notice him, but became stick figures as they passed between me and the "light". A hand on my back shoved me forward. I realized I'd been blocking the passersby ... I walked away and didn't look back. Only after I sat in a small park ... (thinking of what I'd experienced), did the idea of returning to the storefront come to me. I walked there, as quickly as I could. I saw not the broken-throated woman and the two children, but a tiny room, filled with foul-smelling things from the streets and gutters. In the corner slept an emaciated Chinaman. He faced a small altar made of stones. On it was a lighted candle, a plastic flower, and a small boy's cap.'

Witkin was an aspiring poet when he recorded this story in the early 1970s. Galway Kinnell, a writer Witkin admired, had just published *The Book of Nightmares* (1971): ' ... it must be the wound, the wound itself,/ which lets us know and love,/ which forces us to reach out to our misfit/ and by a kind/ of poetry of the soul, accomplish for a moment ... / that purest,/ most tragic concubence, strangers/ clasped into one, a moment, of their moment on earth.' Reaching toward his own 'misfit', Witkin would make a visual art with covert deities and wounded strangers, like the damaged boy in a doorway whose radiant touch had the power to consecrate a discarded cap.

The work of two New York street photographers, Weegee and Diane Arbus, confirmed Witkin's dedication to hidden soul-life in random encounters. Armed with a police radio, Weegee chased ambulances. He butted in on arrests, murders and fires to obtain pure records of human misery for the tabloid press. Yet there isn't a picture that doesn't betray his innocent amazement at powers that magically emerged from the ordinary: inflamed young people witnessing 'their first murder' resemble a bestial feeding frenzy; the girlfriend of a Coney Island drowning victim turns from the tragedy to smile seductively at the photographer, as if he were a talent scout. In Weegee's stunned innocence, Witkin sees his own. Some of his 'Blue Dog' journal writing even resembles a Weegee photograph: 'I found out how my father died. He was shocked to death with a knife ... Two Puerto Ricans followed him out to Coney Island to take his money. Instead, they took his heart by showing him their knives and their faces under the boardwalk! His heart must have crumbled like a sand heart falling. His face was red and exploding; a detail of a left hook in a prize fight film. But perhaps what killed him was his heart really being cut open. He stumbled with it onto the beach. But was too slow to cover it with sunglasses. He died there. Another drunk in the sand.'

Arbus's affinity with dwarfs, transsexuals and other social pariahs during the 1960s, preceded and inspired Witkin's. To her, 'freaks' were not to be despised. They were instruments of spirit. She felt that already having received their life-sentences, they bore their 'traumas' like aristocrats. Arbus brought her camera so close that a portrait became a dialogue of opposites between what the subject thought he was showing and the picture's revelation of what she called 'the flaw'. Thus, portraiture, an art of resemblance, became an arena for exploring perpetual combat within the Self. Baby beauty contests, conventions of identical twins and triplets, allowed her to study similar dissonances.

Witkin and his identical twin, Jerome, are survivors of triplets. The third infant, a female who died, has haunted him all his life. A poem in his notebook asks: 'Did my brother and I in that womb-world, in that black water distance/ Hear the scream among the stars?/ Did we see the hand that swirled our waters?/ Ripping the space that took her?' Many pre-natal or infant cadavers that he finds in the morgues appear in his work as symbolic retrievals of the lost sister.

Witkin finds astro-magic in the dead. In 1982 he had permission to photograph the body of an old man, the head of which medical-school anatomists had removed and laterally bisected. Ignorant of the splitting, Witkin lifted the head. It fell into two identical profiles. Turning each to face the other, he imagined two psychic aspects of one being. Separated for an eternity as in a myth, they would celebrate their reunion with a passionate kiss. With this bold act of hermetic, mystical conjoinment, 'glimpsed by corpse-light', as Kinnell would have it, the artist achieved a level of imagination never before seen in photography. It also earned him a reputation among the uncomprehending as a manipulating ghoul, whose use of cadavers stands for art's current decadence. Instead of considering his practices aberrant, we may regard them as the latest versions of the spiritual machinations of alchemy. Early photography was considered alchemical: its instrument was a magic box; pictures were framed under a dark cloth and processed in darkrooms; silver salts blackened; potassium iodide, paper and other materials held unsuspected impurities; one seeker's recipe was another's catastrophic failure. Witkin is a master photographic technician and printer. As a photographer, he never refers to alchemy. But as a younger man, scribbling in his journal, he jotted titles for a book of poems: 'Alchemy. The Book of Alchemy. Alchemist's Journal'.

Witkin's photographic alchemy is philosophical. He is not unlike many ancient practitioners of the occult arts who regarded

the entire world as a network of secret correspondences. For them, external human beauty or ugliness became a subtle map to be read. Studying the moles on a human face was to locate there signs of the zodiac. In the heavenly geography of human skin, scars and other markings equalled the body's stars and constellations, which could be interpreted to explain the soul's internal state. The hand was a little world, reflecting macrocosmic harmony or its opposite; lines on the palm were a microcosmic web of destiny. For Witkin, a cadaver's physiognomy is always a psychic geography.

Saturn, patron of alchemists, could be viewed as Witkin's own guide. The god's presence accounted for silent contemplation. Assigned to stones, earth, lead, the lowest, coarsest sediment of the world structure, Saturn discovered and harboured mysteries. His planetary influence was responsible for all sorts of poverty and misery.

Witkin asks his players to suffer Saturn's black gall of melancholy. The obese and lethargic are saturnine in their leaden gravity. Here lies the irony in *Alternates for Muybridge* (no. 13) – locomotion is meaningless when the participants can't move. Nearly all display Saturn's stinging, physical astringency. By painting many of his models white, the photographer covers the skin of even those meant to seduce through physical beauty: Venus preferred to Christ is without lustre of any kind. Rejecting such atmospheres of dryness, certain women in his pictures are 'collectors of fluids' or inventors of milk (no. 25).

Witkin's assemblages of props: stuffed animals, harnesses or leather straps for sado-masochistic games, endless varieties of masks, skull caps, gloves, codpieces, pedestals, the chairs of the torturer's inquisition – all allude to the alchemist's laboratory chaos of utensils and ingredients. His constricted spaces suggest cellars in houses of sorrow, locked wards, asylums, sanitoriums. These dark places, like the deepest recessions at

the centre of the earth, become equivalents of unconscious mental space. As sites of covert experiments, they may be equated with the alchemist's smouldering oven, or retort, in which paradoxes are conjoined and psychically heated up to prompt flights of fancy, which, through meditation, yield profound insight.

'Nigredo' is the black putrefaction that is symbolized by the planet Saturn, and is to alchemists the initial phase of matter, immature and poisonous. Physical corruption always implied the birth of its opposite. Decay would erupt into the lovely dew of consciousness and divine redemption. In *On Jung* (1990), Anthony Stevens observes that the psychoanalyst's ten-year digression into alchemy taught him that its dialogue of matter, in experiments always failing to reach the goal of spiritual freshness, were more important to modern consciousness through inspiring an inner dialogue, a living relationship to the answering voice of the 'other' in ourselves.

Jung's understanding is implicit in Witkin's search for cadavers and corpse fragments in hospitals and morgues throughout Europe and the New World. Ghastly remains in his pictures are never gratuitous. He transforms forgotten refuse, often lacking the scientific assurance of the coroner's report, into icons of mystical contemplation, which continually refer to alchemy's dialogue of opposites. With the fragment of a woman's arm draped over a clock in *Anna Akhmatova* (no. 46), Witkin restored from lost time the memory of the great Russian poet. Other cadaver parts are 'ornaments' or sacred 'relics'.

The photographer often surrounds animal and human remains with edible fruits and vegetables. The arm in *Anna Akhmatova* rests near fresh green grapes. Many such arrangements are entitled *Harvest*, *Cornucopia*, or *Feast of Fools*. They may horrify, but alchemically, the bitter conjoinments promise change into mercurial mobility and sensuality. In the retort

of the still-life table, Witkin psychically cooks them. They combust into vital meanings exceeding their ingredients. In *Story from a Book* (no. 51) a blindfolded cadaver's head bearing a plate of apples rests on a leather-bound volume. Like a magnetic vapour, perhaps the head escaped the text. But it weighs heavily, dominating with its co-minglings of decay and freshness. Alive with 'story', the head is immortal. The book is what belongs to the dearly departed. Thus, Witkin redeems the despised dead. In the afterlife of his icons, they speak and teach.

Like the signing body parts of occult thinking, the heraldic simplicity of certain images calls to mind vices, virtues and forces in tarot cards. *Prudence* (no. 36) is an equation of caution: the slender beauty in serpentine black gloves appears like a fashion model until we notice the profile of a cadaver's head emerging from her elaborate coif. In *Abundance* (no. 41), a legless woman with withered arms carries a sumptuous bouquet on her head: riches come with a price. Witkin ties miniature variants of these signifiers to the bodies of transsexual beauties. As talismans, they seem to protect those whose need to manifest their 'other' puts them at risk. In *Gambler* (no. 18), a man missing part of a leg peers at us through a mask made of a playing-card hand. He is a warrior-gentleman in a fatal game of chance.

As Kinnell wrote in *The Book of Nightmares*: '... I could read the cosmos spelling itself/ the huge broken letters/ shuddering across the black sky and vanishing.' The huge broken letters are Witkin's pictures, beautiful products of his meticulous darkroom work. The images, like the ideas they hold, feel ancient. Witkin is like a demiurge with a tragic sense of life, determined to heal the sick organism of the world.

After a career of pictorial complexity, it is surprising to examine a recent work, *Corpus Medius* (no. 55). The lower torso of a

young man lies on a draped table. Raked by dramatic light against a black background, it also reads like a huge broken letter. Lustrous and white, the limbs and feet seem more physically perfect than those of a Michelangelo *pietà*. But we can't take our eyes off the place where he was severed. The wound speaks: 'The self is the least of it/ Let our scars fall in love,' Kinnell wrote. If one wonders how Witkin has been able to sustain his long career of dark work, *Corpus Medius* helps to explain. We must stop to contemplate, even adore, the wound of the dear stranger. Witkin would go further and allow that the model guided him to shape the image. More than a specimen, the corpse was already a god, and the artist merely his humble servant.

01

1956

Dancer, Coney Island.

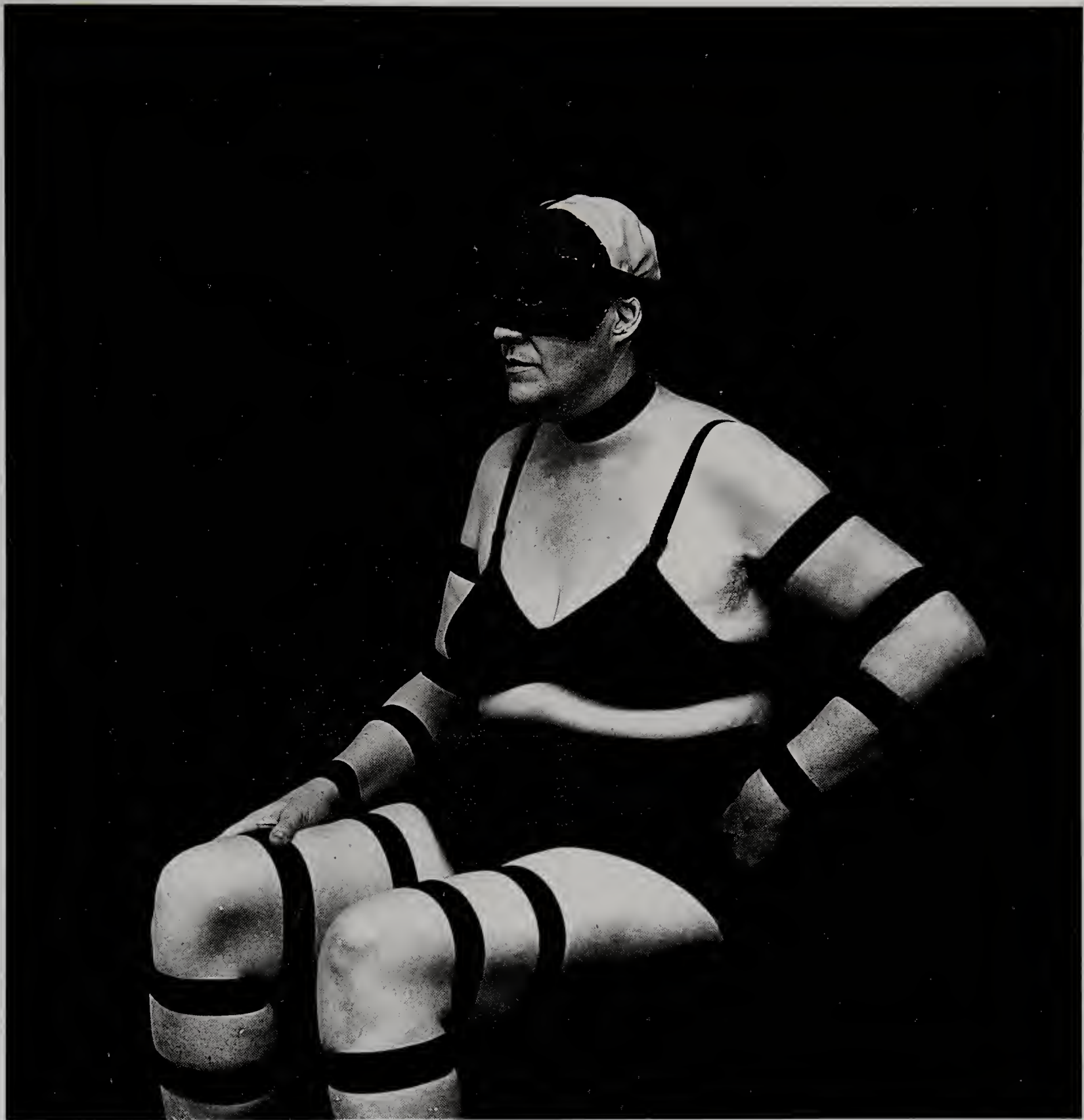
Witkin's brother sent him to photograph sideshow performers for his painting *Genesis*. At seventeen, Witkin was new to photography. The colour film was too slow and he captured something different from what he saw on stage. However, it resembled the energy he loved in Italian Futurism. The image taught him that the pictures he wanted would never be literal ones. He would later abandon the street and bring the world to his studio.



She was an art school friend who drew beautifully. Her parents were Czech survivors of the Holocaust, but this was less important to Witkin than what she could stand for: Woman, fountain of life; the mystery of birth. He painted her body white and attached a reproduction of a photograph by Brassai of Picasso's sculpture of a skull. Here began his complex dialogue of opposites: Woman as artist with hands bound, destined to bring death to the birthing place.



She was another friend from The Cooper Union where Witkin studied sculpture. With straps, he broke her huge frame into pieces. He started using masks, which allowed him to suggest the ineffable origins of the Self without dealing with the model's individuality. He wanted to show her mystical origins. Masked, she became the desired abstraction, part of the series *Contemporary Images of Woman* (1970–74).



The model, a gay Greenwich Village gadabout, enjoyed introducing Witkin to drag queens and homosexuals. Witkin called this 'cute-assed narcissist' 'an emotional, kamikaze pilot' in goggles, 'a homosexual Christ'. Would gays, in particular, worship this construct? It was blasphemy, but this look-at-me persona became another kind of 'Ecce Homo', part of the series *Contemporary Images of Christ* (1974–75).







05 *previous page*

1978

Untitled, from series *Objects Held and Thrown*.

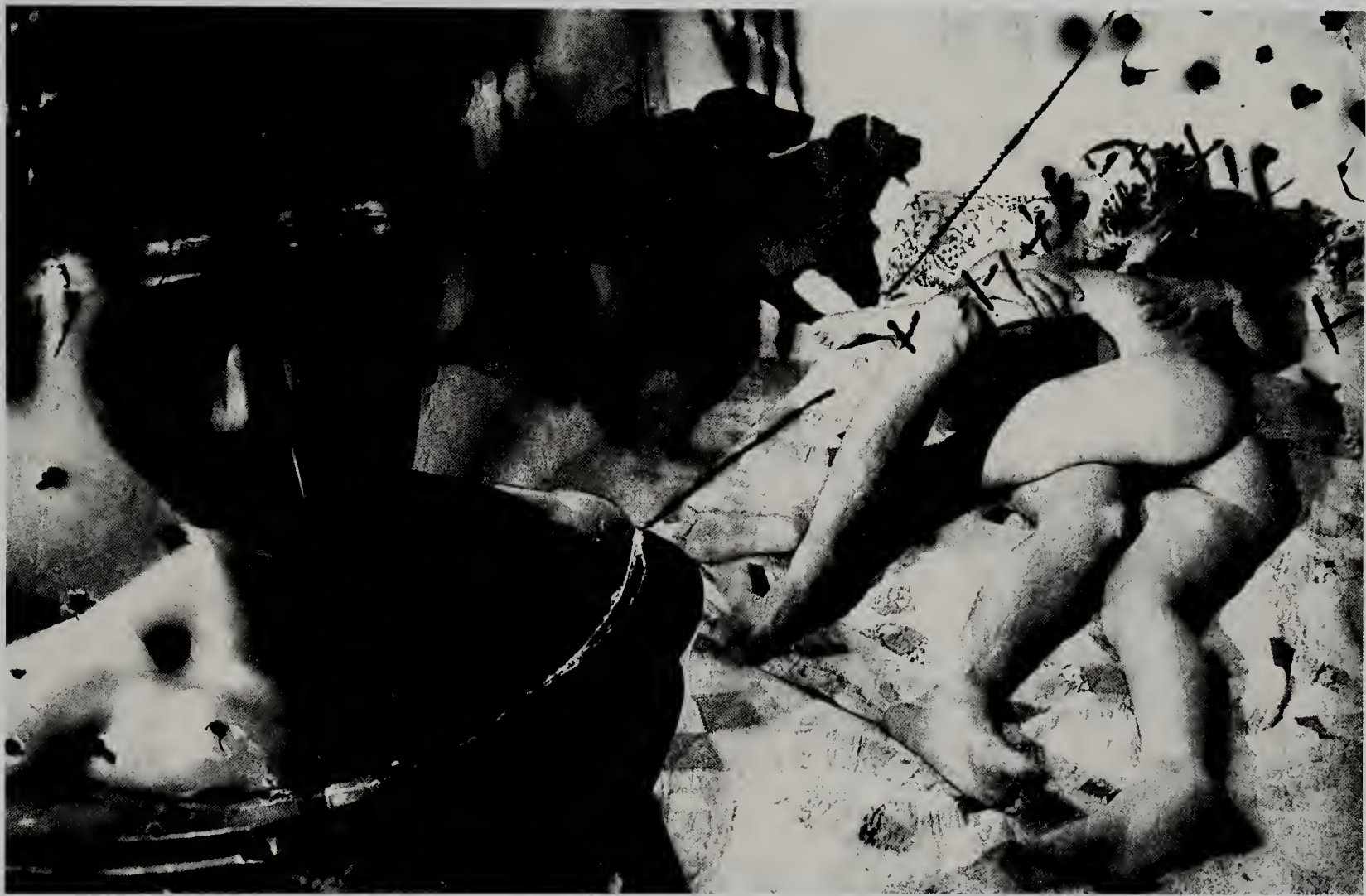
Through primal therapy – physically brutal psychological work – Witkin found interesting subjects. Exploring intimacy, he used a Nikon with a wide-angle lens and red filter, which gave the suspended medical-illustration cut-outs a gigantic scale in the image. The model, an exhibitionist, masturbated for the camera. Witkin placed him near the cardboard figure of Dolly Parton: both were dummies, players in a larger drama of the body's loneliness.

06

1978

Hetero-Couple with Dog, from series *Objects Held and Thrown*.

Still exploring intimacy and confused love, Witkin paid a grass-smoking biker couple twenty-five dollars to pose. He hoisted their dog to the ceiling. Extreme contrast from the red filter on panchromatic film made the image look old. Using a loupe, he scratched lines and poked pinholes into the 35mm negative, then misted water over tissue paper while printing. He was finding a way to personalize his vision.



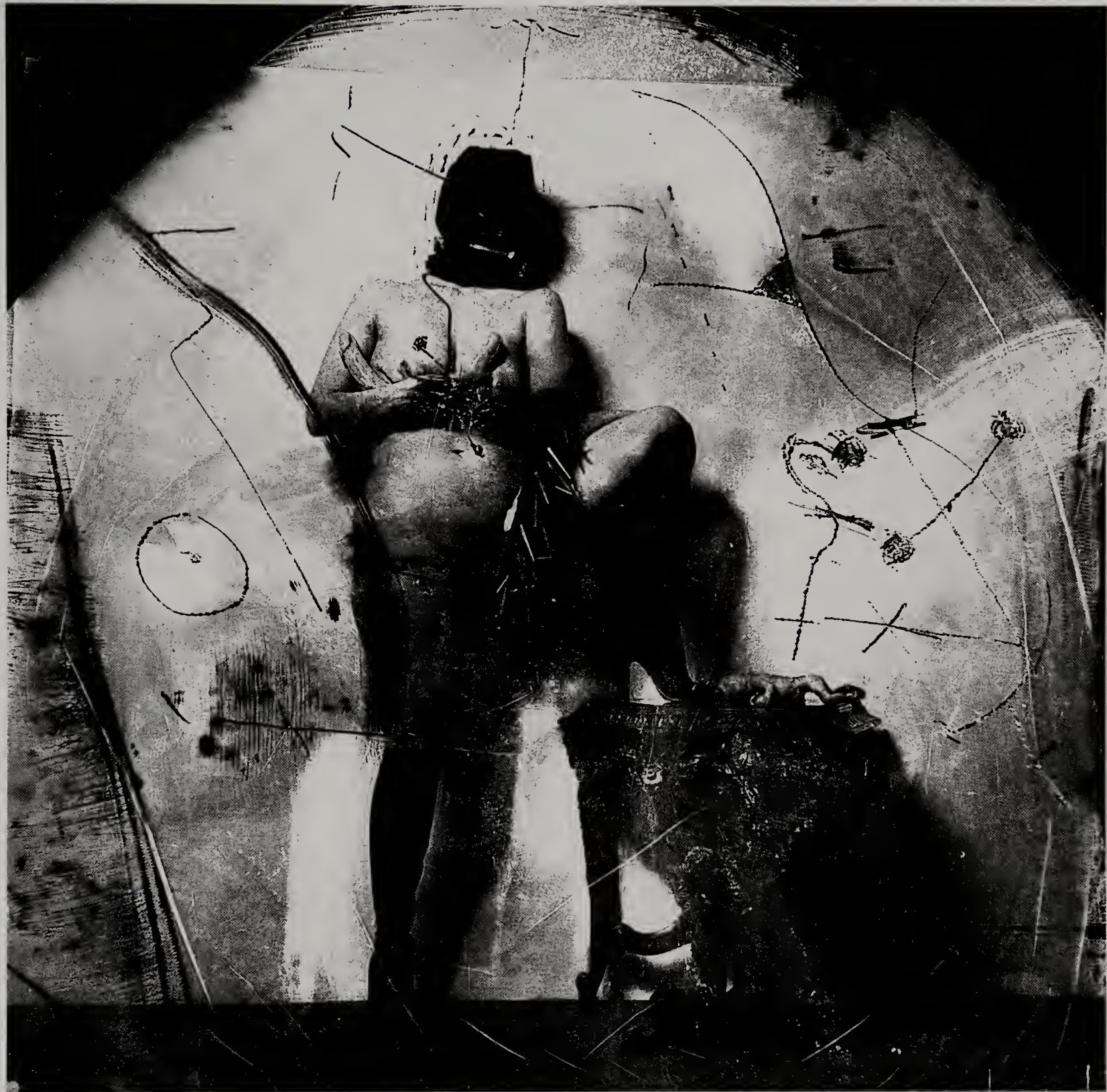
She worked in a university medical department. Witkin liked her sweetness and asked her to pose in a mask and a little orange outfit he'd bought at a thrift shop. 'Topeka', lettered on the outfit, was another 'mask' that lent her the mystery he wanted. Women intrigued him, as did the ways in which they have been represented throughout the history of art. Witkin would add his own set of symbols to that history.



With the birth of his son, Witkin pondered the stranger, his own flesh and blood, and the sacred process of mother and child learning to know one another. The model, wearing a dental retractor, is ferocious, her baby relaxed. The image expresses the awe he felt and making these pictures was a passionate exercise in faith. Using a selective depth-of-field and tissue over the printing paper, he enjoyed the suspense of what would result.



The model was a habitu   of New York's Hellfire Club, where, upon entering, one checked in one's clothes. Here, she stands for exhausted, give-away love. For Witkin, Mir   was the purest of artists and, here as the foetus, he is a messenger of real sensuality, whose purity disables him where warriors reign. Witkin likes the fact that Mir   and Hemingway used to box together.



Through fatherhood, Witkin saw breast-feeding as a mysterious dialogue between mother and child. Here, he used a sexy bartender, who reminded him of one of Julia Margaret Cameron's Victorian sitters, and made plaster casts of her breasts, adding the second set to suggest a mother's inexpressible joy. The many-breasted totem is her demonic opposite. In her belly, punished in stocks, is the immaculate, unborn child whose physical birth would also be a spiritual expulsion from bondage.



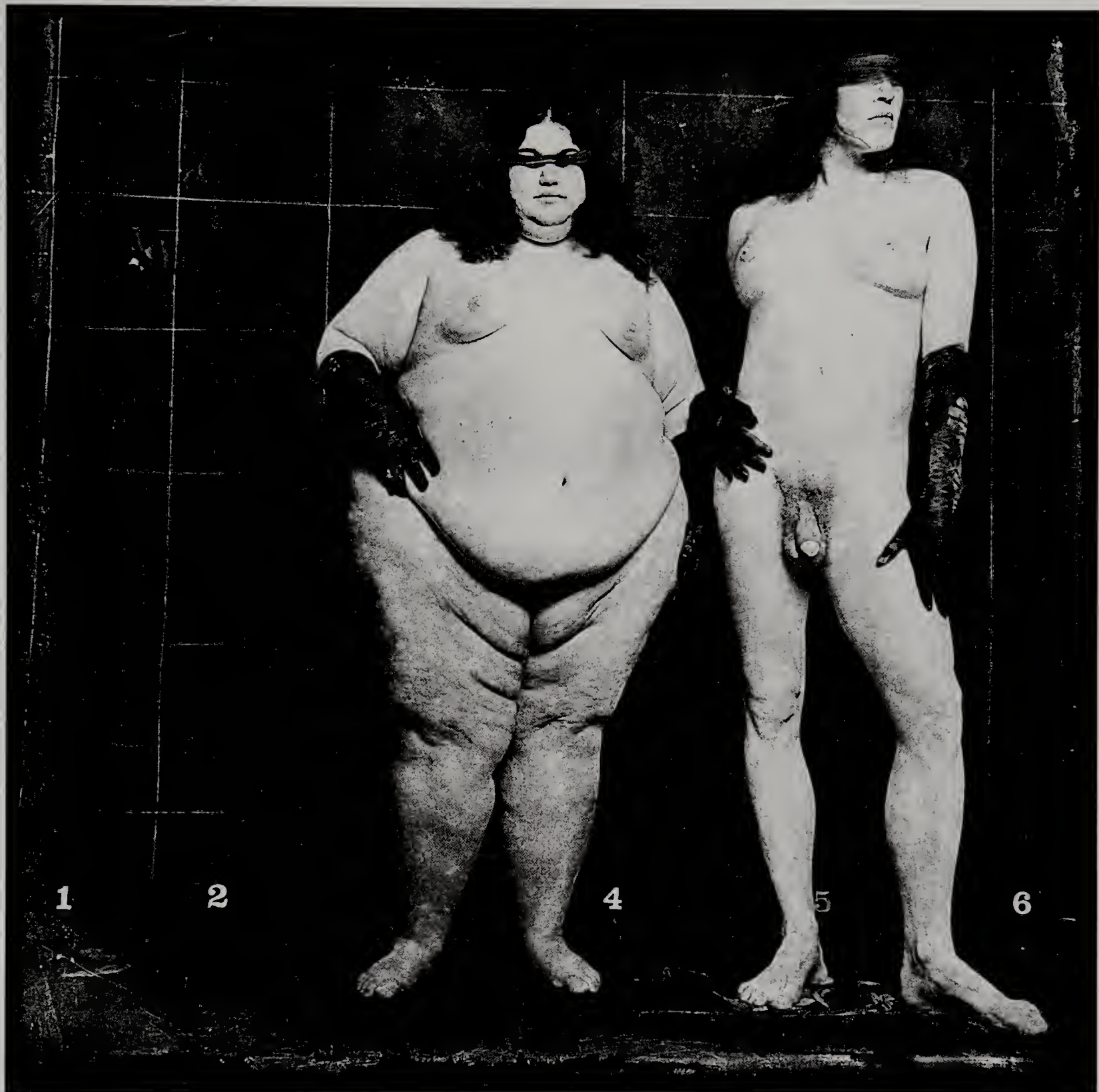
In New Mexico, secret societies of men scourge themselves in imitation of Christ. The practice inspired Witkin to build a huge wooden cross and two smaller ones. In a rubber skull mask, Christ's gagged mouth becomes a scream. The thieves were embalmed monkeys that he had hired and the catalogue numbers on their bodies inspired him to add numbers to the Redeemer's torso. Thus, in branding his New Mexican imitation of Christ, Witkin produced an alternative memorial to Jewish Holocaust victims.



People's proclivities gave Witkin ideas for his pictures. Someone he met liked setting fires; his dream life also included being penetrated by an animal. Someone else, who owned a German shepherd, liked to watch. Witkin scratched the negative, transforming him into the shadow on the right. He made an aluminium dildo for the dog and directed the inevitable. Controlling everything, Witkin wondered what controlled him and decided it was the need to transform, his underlying desire for goodness.

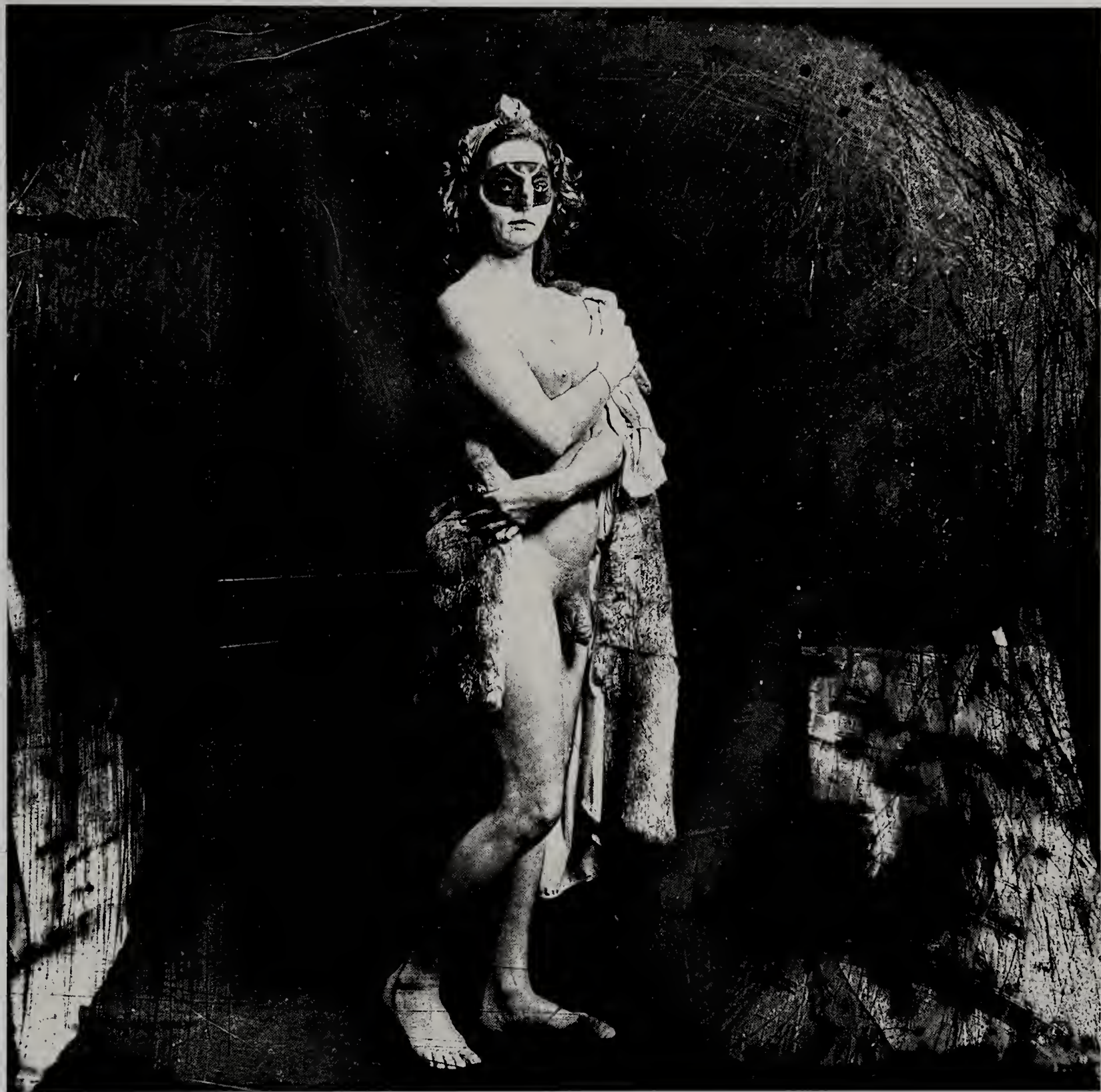


Muybridge was famous for his studies of human and animal locomotion. He even photographed an obese woman rising from a chair in order to capture the painful stages of her exertion. Witkin's obese 'alternate' belonged to a 'pride in being fat' club. Her partner, a pre-op transsexual, is too lethargic for any motion study. Both are social outsiders, souls joined in limbo who will wait forever for the call to action.



14	1984	Journeys of the Mask: Helena Fourment.
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Witkin often parodies historical paintings and Rubens's erotic portrait of his wife, Helena Fourment, wrapped in fur (c. 1630s), seemed fair game. His 'Helena', a pre-op transsexual with huge feet, wears a plastic mask. Her breasts imitate Helena's perfectly, though she grasps the fur as if it were a phallus. In Witkin's work, such changelings demand contemplation of polarities. Rubens's Helena describes one kind of sexuality; journeying through the mask, Witkin proposed others.



Witkin read in the *New York Times* about an epidemic: boys dying in botched sexual experiments. At a party, he met a gangling man, wearing only a slip with false breasts inside it, and asked him to pose as one of these ecstasies. He felt it was important to turn a current atrocity into something distant in time, so he imitated the scratched surface and shape of an old daguerreotype. The result suggests both intimacy and the terrible strangeness of the drama.



In Los Angeles, Witkin rented a live swan and paid two mothers fifty dollars each for the use of their children. Their babies would be posing with an unusual model, he admitted, but it would not be a damaging experience. 'Leda' was an LA drag queen with rickets – possibly caused by polio – who performed in homoerotic films. The infants didn't care. They covered the floor with urine. Using a strobe, Witkin created the picture in a single shot.



Here, Witkin updates Dante's *Inferno* by cataloguing modern agonies of the damned. The man in the foreground had invented a pump that, attached to his penis, enlarged the blood vessels, making it huge and rubbery. He holds a pair of eyes, Saint Lucy's attribute. The word VIVANT (Alive) designates what is clearly moribund. Witkin liked the fact that the woman was an Egyptologist and professional embalmer.



This – the first photograph that Witkin made in Europe – originated with a deck of oversized playing cards, discovered in a Berlin shop. With the Wall still standing, the city seemed dreary and the photographer recalled the world of painter Max Beckmann, whose artful pessimism had always inspired him. Witkin rented a Beckmann-like tuxedo for a one-legged model, placed him against the Art Deco fabric, and made an emblem of loss resembling a tarot card.



Witkin lives in Albuquerque's largely Hispanic South Valley, where flayed sheep heads often appear on butchers' counters to be eaten, but also as objects of beauty. Cutting and rearranging some of these, Witkin discovered a grotesque similarity between the flesh and bones and Picasso's painted warrior in *Guernica* (1937). Shooting from above, he rendered the assemblage a target. Photographically printed, it has a timeless quality, conjoining the Spanish tragic sense of life to Witkin's own.



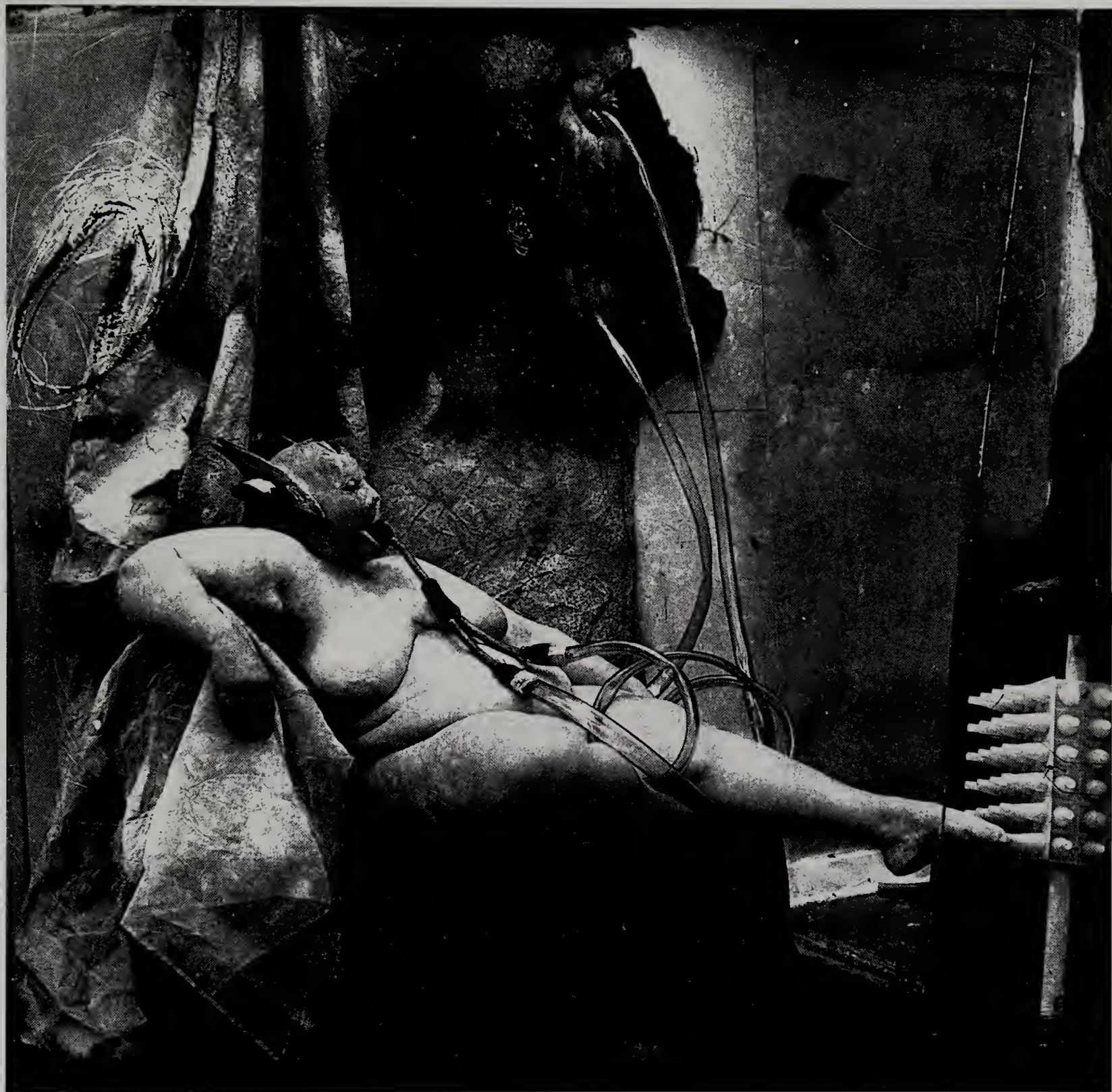
The model was an English rare-book dealer who never lacked lovers. Her translucent skin and beating heart, clearly visible through her deformed back, excited them. Meeting her at a Florida tattoo convention, Witkin also found her beautiful and flew her to New Mexico to pose. By presenting her as a lamp, Witkin did not demean her; she had earned the photographer's ardent admiration.



Witkin's brother had given him the Japanese Noh mask, and the bronze skulls were made by the sculptor Michael McCormick. The preserved genitals, from a university pathology department, resemble a huge snail. The photographer calls them a *netsuke*, a small toggle for attaching a purse to a kimono. Each object functions as a non sequitur; assembled, they defy interpretation. For Witkin, the encounter was a comic, incomprehensible dialogue in an Asian dream.



A discarded, high-powered, three-way electrical connector led Witkin to imagine a water pipe, or hookah, smoked by this deliciously fat and sensuous woman who could have been a model for sculptor Gaston Lachaise. He imagined what it would be like to stumble into a room in a sanatorium, picturing strange goings-on: a woman sucking in corruption, surrounded by instruments of torture (represented by the hair-curler holder). But ultimately, he was less interested in evoking the physical, than in creating an atmosphere, the vaporous genie of her mind.



Witkin watches traffic from the window of the Frontier Restaurant in Albuquerque. A man without hands pounds the glass – someone stole his cigarettes. Witkin invites him to play Picasso in a drama where the painter enters an etching from a series by Goya, *Los Disparates* (1816–23). Picasso loved Goya and Witkin loves Picasso's *Vollard Suite* (1930–37) on which this photograph is based. Printing using the Sabatier method of reversed dark and light, Witkin renders the shadows luminous. After eighteen attempts, he got a perfect print.



Travelling with her mother, she entertained children at shopping malls. She was also the human presence under ET's costume in Spielberg's film. Witkin loved buying her the children's clothes and bridal veil. The seven-foot man on the right, and the plaster bust (artificially 'smashed' through combination printing), enhance her miniature scale. This is the kingdom of American enchantment, of 'Barnum's midgets' – General Tom Thumb and his wife, Lavinia Warren. Never viewed as monsters, they stood for eternal childhood.



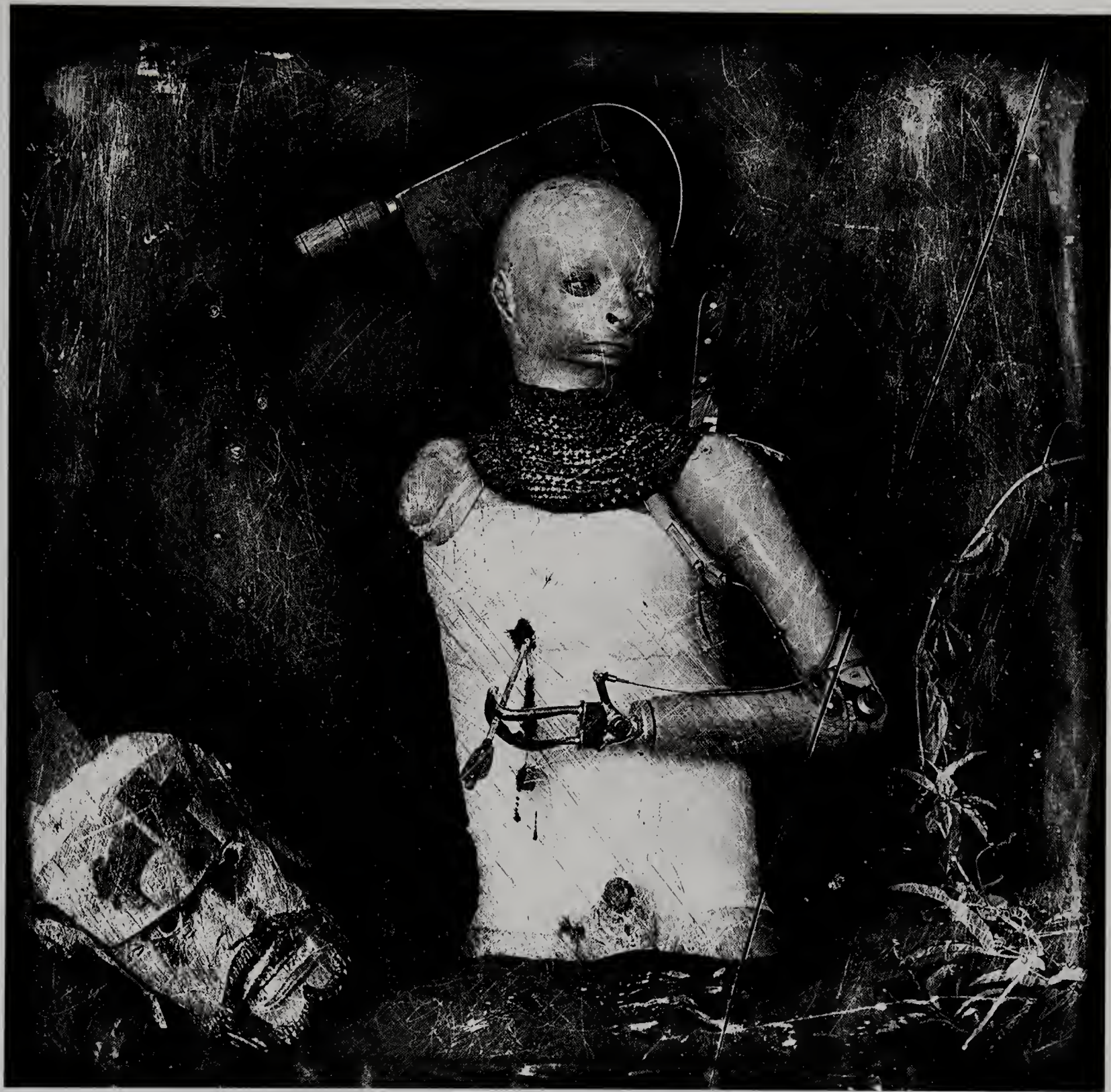
Witkin was interested to learn that Titian used the nude to represent spiritual love. Here, the demonic 'Tibetan' mask, fashioned from two sheep's heads, signifies love 'out of range'. According to Witkin, this image is about wasted energy: of ejaculated semen, and of mother's milk (sprayed toward the dead monkey). Genuine love may be alluded to by the Titian nude on the model's arm, worn like a badge of legitimacy, but everything else spells deceit.



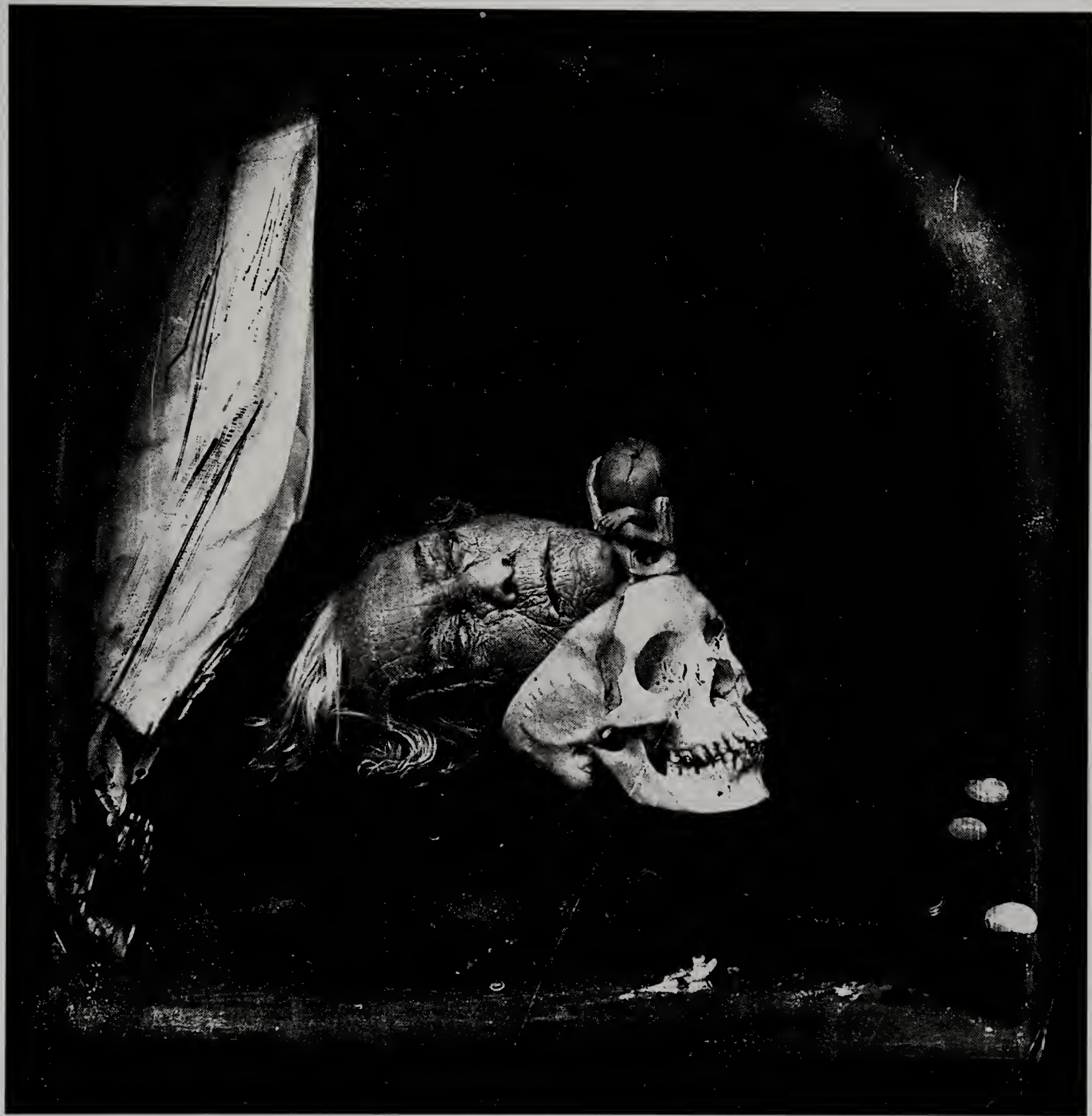
For his Madrid retrospective at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, the Ministry of Culture commissioned Witkin to make a photograph based on his favourite Spanish painting, *Las Meninas* by Velázquez (1656). As the painter, he wore a t-shirt bearing the logo of Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine (his fifteen minutes of fame). His hound played the mastiff. 'Christ' in the doorway, played the court bookkeeper of the original. A 'Miró' construction represented court society, and the powerless Infanta was a girl without legs from Detroit. This performance reawakened Witkin's 'Spanish' love of tragedy without morbidity.



During her pregnancy, the model's mother took the drug thalidomide. He was born armless, legless, without eyelids, and lived in constant pain. Two Hawaiian caretakers used to steal his painkillers. His 'skin' resembled varnished papier mâché. Witkin was familiar with Spanish paintings in which egotistical clerics had themselves depicted as 'martyrs'. For his martyr, he borrowed his wife's cleaver, and gave him a chainmail collar. No one believed the model was real. To Witkin, his agony encapsulated modern suffering.



This theatrical Trinity represents the three stages of life – youth, maturity, old age – even though all the parts, a foetus (obtained from a San Francisco podiatrist), a cadaver's head and a skull, are variants of morbidity. Witkin aimed to achieve the timeless, airless stagings of early photographic images. Basing this picture on the daguerreotype, he simulated an aureole of dried chemicals on the picture's surface. He also wanted it to seem as if it were being viewed under glass.



A torso with a head, the man in this image played shamans in Spanish conquistador films. Witkin went to Mexico City to convince him to pose. There, he bought the two crowns of thorns (Jerusalem is the only other place in which they are sold). The actor was carried to a field on a stormy day. Witkin paid a shepherd not to lead away his sheep. 'And my expression?' asked the actor. 'Imagine you're a god who wants to look human,' Witkin instructed.







In this picture, Witkin, who is fascinated by cultural layerings, 'Mexicanized' Georges Seurat's painting *The Models* (1887–88). The high-fashion model in the centre travels between Mexico City and Paris. The background simulates a painting by the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. The English 'scold's bridle' – a torture device from the Middle Ages – also appears 'Rivera-like' when placed in profile opposite the mural. Glass protected the printing paper as Witkin 'drew' with chemicals to alter the forms.

The equestrian 'fool' in this historical parody represents pompous European monarchs, stand-ins for the real power behind the scenes. This picture also refers to *Max Kolody*, a short story about a ventriloquist and his dummy that Witkin admired in the 1950s, when it was dramatized on Rod Serling's popular television show, *The Twilight Zone*. The ventriloquist's lips never move; the dummy is a delightful wisecracker; the audience is spellbound. When the curtain falls, the dummy jumps down and orders his assistants to carry the ventriloquist off stage.



Witkin likes dislocations. He once made a portrait of a seated nude cadaver without a head. Here, in Marseille, a migrant human head turns up as that of a dead dog. Joining the two and placing them comfortably on a pillow, Witkin created a new sideshow monster. What seems hideous, even blasphemous, in his work, however, is always directed towards raising awareness about different kinds of suffering.



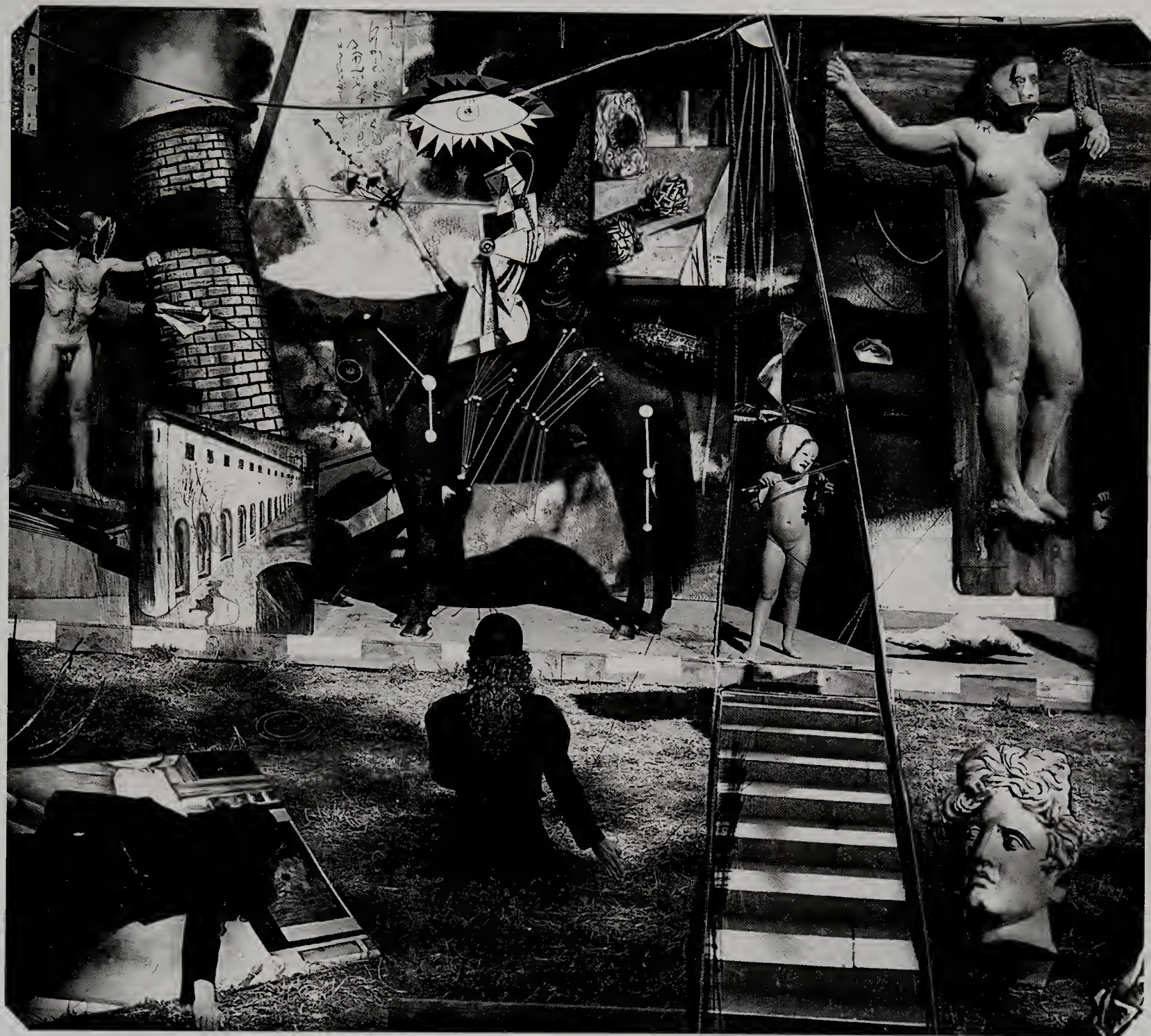
During a residency in Paris, Witkin invited a contortionist to pose for him. To a country-house bedroom, he brought magic attributes such as a bird's wing and a mask made from a photographic enlargement of a Classical sculpture of Venus in the Louvre. Balancing a fabulous dildo on her pubis, the contortionist seems to lift with a wand the skirts of a small sculpted Virgin. This act of desecration is natural to twisted beings, for whom everything is upside down.



Witkin adores an 1850s daguerreotype by Charles Winter that shows a studio jammed with artists' paraphernalia. To reinterpret it, Witkin spent months assembling the materials: plaster casts, fabric, paintings, furniture. The crowning touch was a nude model with a scoliotic spine. She walked into the arrangement and Witkin fell in love. This caused him to wonder whether Winter had loved and lost someone of disconcerting beauty and made his image as compensation.



In this afterlife fantasy about the artists whom Witkin admires, De Chirico, Picasso, Balthus and motion-photographer Étienne-Jules Marey are presented as 'creative sinners' like himself. Witkin explains: 'Life was their kindergarten. Purgatory is their spiritual college', where they will redeem themselves by re-making their work with more acute awareness. Uncharacteristically, Witkin made a collage of negatives, combination-printed. This allowed him to quote liberally from the artists' imagery and reinvent it on his own terms.



A stylish Russian woman who worked for Witkin's Paris dealer became his *Prudence* by removing her clothes, donning black gloves, and supporting a headdress that would make most people scream with horror: two dead bats, flowers and a cadaver's-head gargoyle. Like a tarot card, this figure acts as a sign. In the equation, youthful beauty equals spiritual determination, opposing the dark forces of the unconscious. The background derives from Mantegna's *Saint Sebastian* of the Louvre (c. 1480).



The background paintings, imitating works by the eighteenth-century artist Pietro Longhi, and representing signs of the zodiac, signify myths we do not understand. Nor do we comprehend the significance of the players in their primordial, futuristic headdress masks, the lolling Dalmatian or the fish-leg being. Witkin's associations are sensory and poetic. If he is an amnesiac, this nightmare gives us the eggs that hatched his confusion.



Nineteenth-century natural history photographs usually contemplated the specimen. Here, the specimen is doing the contemplating. Supported by a stand, the skeleton wears a plague mask – belatedly, it would seem. He weighs a penis on a scale placed on a sculptor’s pedestal. How touching is the gesture; his hand pressed to where his heart once was, he seems to sigh. Pompeian artists painted gods weighing their colossal penises. This meditation signifies the opposite.



Witkin gessoed the background white for this preparatory sketch. Adam, with his Mexican-mask head, would eventually become a flayed corpse of Vesalius; Balinese Eve would imitate a Venus by Cranach. Adam, looking goofy, reaches toward her sex. She is confident, smarter than he is, though he doesn't realize it. Witkin, who often worked with these simplified stick figures, never made the photograph for which they were only an idea. The idea, an Edenic comedy, became the image.



Witkin rarely photographs outdoors. Here, a French model, brought to the Roman countryside, posed as Christ in Manet's *The Dead Christ and the Angels* (1864) sustained – in Witkin's interpretation – not by Manet's angels, but by the saints John and Peter, though this scene is barely visible. The nude (an Italian painter) leading the horse, represents everyman. Does he, like the sheep, ignore the swooning shepherd? The narrative is undirected, deliberately enigmatic; as Witkin says, 'like time at the end of the world'.



Her mother tried to abort her. Surviving her birth, she was abandoned. She lived outside Prague and decorated her apartment walls with pictures of body builders. As *Abundance*, she was transformed into something luxurious – an eighteenth-century garden sculpture. Witkin planted her in the urn; to him, she was a root, strong and tenacious. The American photographer's celebration of her beauty amounted to the most attention she'd ever received.



She roomed with the contortionist (no. 33) and worked at the Lido in Paris, where as an antediluvian in animal skins, she arrived on stage in a rocket ship and battled demons. Gorgeously nude, here, she represents pure carnality. Saint Francis, receiving Christ's stigmata and gazing at the Holy Spirit in the model's hand, stands for a different world. If Christianity had gone Francis's way, Witkin laments, the Papacy would be properly broke.



She was so beautiful he couldn't change her. Yet she could stand for a soul in turmoil, so he enhanced her form with signs that told a story: a dagger, a galleon on the waves of her hair, the ladder and kite in the night sky. Adding a third nipple, he converted this mortal goddess into a deity from his own pantheon.



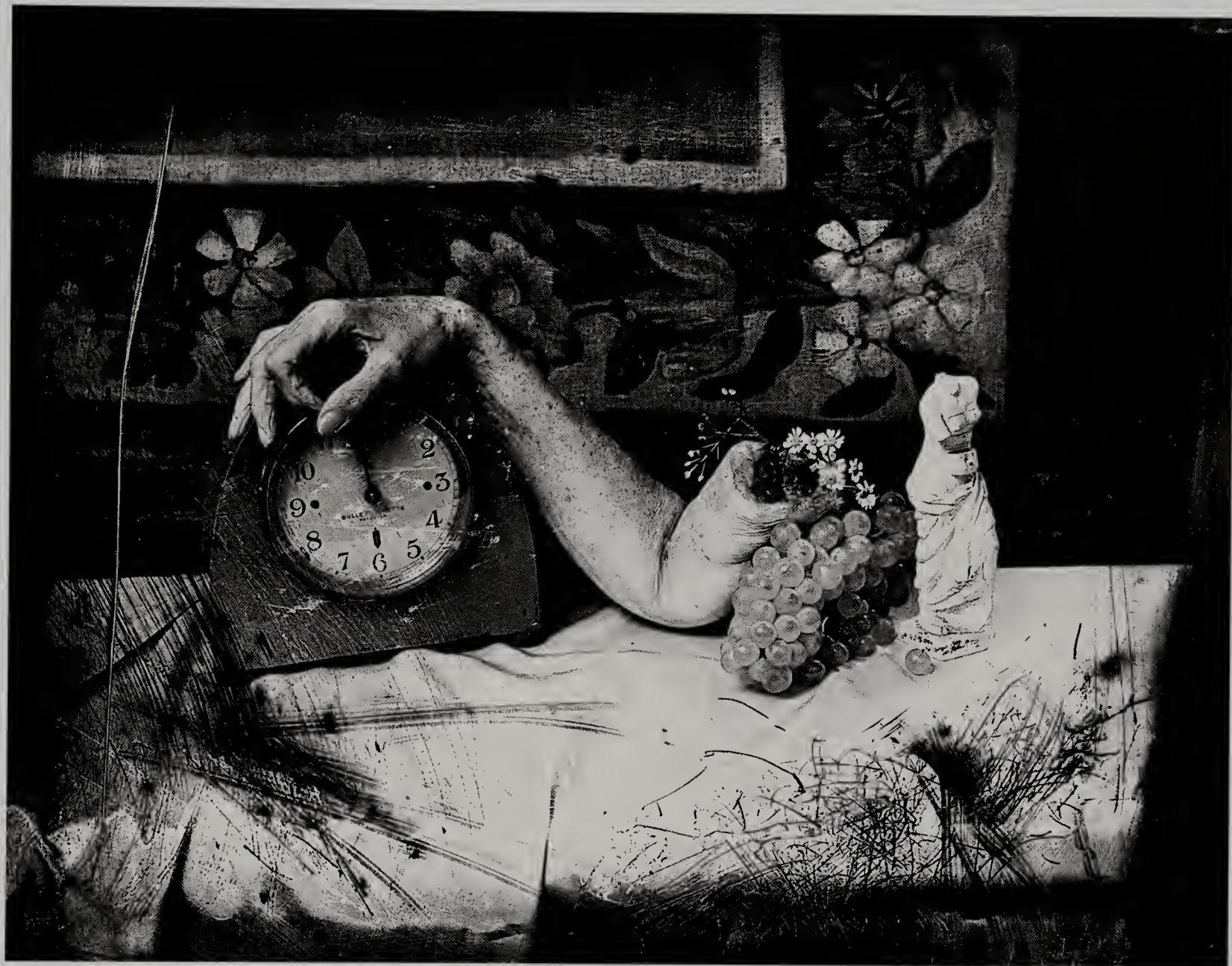
Witkin likes reading theology. He especially likes eschatology, which is concerned with ultimates or last things: death, judgement, heaven, hell. The landscape is Polish. The woman represents a burned-out bourgeois. Holding the penis of a dead horse, she appears bored, impervious to the looming atrocity and what it could mean.



Witkin began composing more pictures in daylight in the late 1990s. Although dissatisfied with most of those taken during a stay in Berlin, he likes this one which simulates a nineteenth-century Romantic artist's studio. The subject is the representation of History. The dangling arm is a reference to David's *The Death of Marat* (1793), while the models emulate other figures in history painting. But there is no narrative. All are disconnected pieces of time, as in an artist's sketchbook.



Witkin loves this poet's work and feels acutely her suffering as an artist during the Stalinist era. He represents her through this graceful arm, with its purposeful hand on the clock. Salvador Dalí's 'ready-made' sculpture of the armless Venus de Milo implies by association that the retrieved arm is that of a divinity. Witkin's trademark scratches on the negative remind us that his photographs are never ready-mades; they evolve, gradually, from the artist's mind and hand.



Although he had sketched the idea ten years earlier, he made this photograph at the same time as *Anna Akhmatova* (no. 46). The tapestry appears in both. He was surprised by how easy it was to drive the old, hand-forged nails into the foot. He found the dead butterfly on a nearby piano. By means of the broken mirror, the long exposure, and by printing the negative through glass, he dimmed and distanced the arrangement into the altarpiece he wished to create.



Saint Sebastian often appears in homosexual iconography: the piercing of this beautiful youth by arrows is interpreted as erotic, narcissistic pleasure. Here, Witkin creates the 'queers' saint' by joining a severed head and penis to a human skeleton in a 'queer' construction. He means to suggest that all groups, in selecting their heroes, reinvent them to suit their own desires. Whatever was saintly in Sebastian's martyrdom, Witkin converts into anomalous emptiness.



Witkin is increasingly attracted to Art Brut – the raw imagery of untrained, primitive, even insane artists on the social and economic margins, whose work was collected and championed by Jean Dubuffet. In this work, which Witkin calls a 'history of the West with Indians', the artist refers to silhouette works by the black American 'outsider' artist Bill Traylor from the 1940s. The hat signifies the chief; the eggs, the tribe. The shoe is 'the tribe in the world'. The language is both cryptic and liberating.



He met her through the internet; she sent him her photograph. She'd been a gymnast, then a nude dancer, but after having her breasts surgically enlarged, she suffered toxic shock, which required the removal of her lower legs, fingers and breasts. Wishing to convert her tragedy in a similar way to *Abundance* (no. 41), Witkin turned to comedy: Mickey Mouse ears and a brassiere made from plastic cones worn by racehorses. For him, the strategy restored her power.



Witkin feels that anything as marvellous as a corpse's head must be presented bountifully, as if it were a gift. Here, bearing apples, the head stands for what books contain as sources for imaginative journeys. Having escaped its pages, it sits like a signpost pointing us towards undisclosed magic.



The horse was ready for the slaughterhouse. Wanting it to perform a final act before becoming dog food, Witkin bought it and had it put down by veterinarians. Behind it is a painting of the Chosen and the Damned by a little-known Vietnamese Christian artist, along with objects which, for the artist, recall the works of Giotto. Satan's kingdom is depicted below. Hideously Christ-like, the crucified horse strains toward universal eternal life. Such images are relevant and necessary today; Witkin is unique in the manner in which he acts on this belief.



Witkin meets Poussin in Hell. He discovers the French genius as a Godless, withered cadaver, who has been in Hell so long he's redone the entire history of painting and is in the process of inventing Abstract Expressionism. We are used to the photographer's fantastic projections; believing only in life is for atheists. Imagining life after death, and embellishing it as his own history of art, he explores the intricacies of his faith.



Based on Corot's painting of the same title (c. 1870), this photograph considers George Steiner's definition of powerful literature in *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (1971) as that which leaves us 'feeling more alive than before'. The corpse lacks an arm, which reappears on the tabletop; this could never be mistaken for a living woman. Has reading made this contemplative 'more alive'? It seems to have devoured her brain. The satin gown, made by an Albuquerque seamstress, glows as the only living presence in the piece.



Witkin had come across all kinds of cadavers, but he was astounded by the purity of this Eastern European specimen. It gave off its own light – proving to him that gods appear when least expected – he had only to follow what it directed. Never has he made anything so eloquent. Witkin regards this work not as a new beginning but as a summary of everything that preceded it. We can only imagine what will follow.



- 1939 Born 13 September in Brooklyn, New York, one of triplets to Max Witkin, a Russian Jew, and Mary Pellegrino, a Roman Catholic.
- 1942 Parents divorce over religious differences. Mother raises children as Roman Catholics.
- 1945 Witnesses a fatal car crash, an experience that profoundly affects him.
- 1950 Makes his first photograph with split-image camera.
- 1955 Using his first camera, a 'Kodak Pony', he is encouraged by his brother to take colour slides of abstractions which he shows to Edward Steichen, director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Steichen selects one for the exhibition 'Masterpieces of Photography from the Museum Collection'.
- 1956 Commissioned by his brother, Jerome, to photograph sideshow performers at Coney Island.
- 1957–61 Works as assistant photographer in a commercial studio making product photographs for catalogues.
- 1961–64 Enlists as photographer in the US Army. Volunteers for duty in Vietnam.
- 1965–74 Works in New York as freelance photographic assistant to commercial and medical photographers.
- 1970 John Szarkowski, director of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, selects several of his photos for its permanent collection. Begins art studies at The Cooper Union, New York. Majors in sculpture but continues to photograph.
- 1974 Graduates from The Cooper Union with Bachelor of Fine Arts. Travels in India.
- 1976 Graduates with Master of Arts in Photography from the University of New Mexico.
- 1977 Meets Cynthia Jean Bency, whom he marries the following year.
- 1978 His son, Kersen Ahanu, is born on 28 August. Works as a waiter to support his family.

- 1980 Awarded the first of four National Endowment for the Arts grants in photography.
- 1982 First European solo exhibition at Galerie Texbraun, Paris.
- 1983 Exhibition at Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
- 1985 Major solo exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. His work is included in the Whitney Biennial, New York. First monograph, *Joel-Peter Witkin*, is published.
- 1986 Awarded Master of Fine Arts from the University of New Mexico. Retrospective exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, New York.
- 1989 Exhibition at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, curated by Robert Delpire.
- 1990 Begins making photographs in Europe and Mexico. Decorated 'Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres' by the French Ministry of Culture.
- 1993 His work is denounced as 'Degenerate Art' by Republican Senator Jesse Helms during a debate in the Senate.
- 1995 Retrospective exhibition at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
- 1998 Exhibitions of his work held around the world, including Belgium, France, Japan, Taiwan and the US. Publishes *The Bone House*, a monograph of his most recent work. Divorces Cynthia Bency Witkin.
- 2000 Exhibition 'Joel-Peter Witkin, Disciple et Maître' held at the Hôtel de Sully, Paris. Decorated 'Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres' by the French Ministry of Culture.
- 2002 *Songs of Experience: Witkin/Blake* is published. Retrospective exhibition in Germany at Städtische Museen, Jena.
- 2003 *Songs of Innocence: Witkin/Blake* is published.
- 2005 Retrospective exhibition at the Moscow House of Photography, Russia. Marries Barbara Anne Gilbert.
- 2006 *Bourgeoisie in De Nile*, a suite of ten etchings is published

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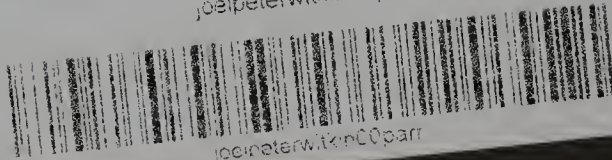
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Jacket image

Three Kinds of Woman, 1992

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One of the most well-known and controversial photographic artists working today, Joel-Peter Witkin (b. 1939) makes photographs that shock, yet also provoke and question. His remarkable tableaux and delicately posed still-lives find beauty in the deformed, the scarred, the unusual and even in the dead. Witkin follows in the tradition of Bosch, Goya and Velázquez, borrowing from the historical and mythological figures and symbols of Western art history, and reinterpreting the nineteenth-century practice of photographing the 'other'. He has won four National Endowment Grants and his work has been included in the permanent collections of the MoMA in New York and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. He has also been the subject of exhibitions worldwide, including a major retrospective at the Guggenheim in New York in 1995. Disturbing and compelling, his images force us to confront our human condition.

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