



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2021 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

<https://archive.org/details/witkin0000witk>

J O E L - P E T E R W I T K I N

Germano Celant

WITKIN

SCALO

Catalogue

Editorial Production
Edizioni Charta, Milan

Design
Gabriele Nason

Editing
Emanuela Belloni

Translation
Stephen Sartarelli

Production
Amilcare Pizzi Arti grafiche,
Cinisello Balsamo, Milan

Cover
Portrait of Nan, New Mexico, 1984

©1995 Joel-Peter Witkin
for his photographs, drawings and text

©1995 Germano Celant
for his text

©1995 for this edition
Scalo Zurich - Berlin - New York
Head Office: Weinbergstrasse 22a
phone 41 1 261 0910, fax 41 1 261 9262
Distributed in North America by D.A.P.,
New York City
Distributed in Europe and Asia by Thames and
Hudson, London

All rights reserved

First Scalo Edition, 1995
ISBN 1-881616-20-7
Printed in Italy

Acknowledgements

An exhibition of the works of Joel-Peter Witkin is, by its very nature, in terms of the images as well as the photographic research, an event of exceptional significance, at any moment and in any expository circumstance. The uniqueness of this show, its difference from other exhibitions, lies in the fact that this collection of his works manages to present an almost complete anthology of his oeuvre. Indeed, for the breadth of its offering of photographs both known and unknown, it is the first exhaustive survey of the work this artist has produced up to 1995.

To Joel-Peter Witkin, as well as Cynthia Witkin and Barbara Gilbert, I must express my profound gratitude for having extended their friendship to me and set me in the right direction, through interviews and materials, in dealing with the itinerary of an art so profoundly spiritual and carnal, historical and contemporary. Without their sensitive and invaluable collaboration which grew with hours and hours of meetings and discussions between New York and Albuquerque, my work would not have attained the scholarly and interpretative density that the depth of Joel-Peter Witkin's photographic art requires.

The completion of this project would also not have been possible without the sensitive perseverance and precious assistance of Ida Gianelli, who agreed to house, at the Museum of Contemporary Art at Castello di Rivoli, the Italian presentation of this first retrospective of Joel-Peter Witkin, organized in collaboration with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of New York.

The task of curating an exhibition and book of this scale, with over one hundred works, requires the help of researchers devoted to an investigation of the iconography. I could not have found a better person and researcher than Vivien Greene of the Guggenheim Museum of New York. Overcoming considerable difficulties, she spent weeks and weeks researching iconographic references. Her constant presence, complemented by the invaluable collaboration of Antonella Russo at the Museum of Contemporary Art at Castello di Rivoli, contributed in a large way to the success of the undertaking. I am grateful to Peter MacGill for the trust he placed in me, over ten years ago, in giving birth to this project, which over the course of time grew out of a brief essay and into so complicated and rich an event as a retrospective. His professional support also made it possible for there to be a dialogue amongst all the principles in this undertaking. I must also thank Margaret Kelly, and her assistant Kimberly Jones of the Pace/MacGill Gallery of New York, for the prompt and rich information they provided on individual works of the artist. A precious contribution in this regard was also made by Jeffrey Fraenkel and Frish Brandt in San Francisco.

Anna Costantini, with her tireless energy in researching and defining the iconic and typographic elements, helped give scholarly consistency to this book, which we can proudly call the first monograph study of Joel-Peter Witkin.

My last but most important expression of thanks goes to those who have lent works which, in a concrete way, have made this important event possible, in Rivoli and in New York. In addition to those who wish to remain anonymous, my indebtedness and gratitude for the trust implied in the loan of such precious works goes out to the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris; Lawrence Barth, Los Angeles; Randee Klein Delvin, Los Angeles; Danny Elfman, Los Angeles; Gayle Greenhill, Connecticut; Samuel and Ronnie Heyman, New York; Baudoin Lebon and Baudoin Lebon & Lunn Ltd., Paris; Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Robert Pearlstein, New York.

Germano Celant

Contents

9	Joel-Peter Witkin. Photography between Flesh and Spirit <i>Germano Celant</i>
45	Works
253	List of Works
261	Appendix
265	Biography
269	Selected Bibliography

A Virtuous Perversion

Witkin's photographs seem to move in a universe of perversity and sacrilege, touching upon all that is taboo, forbidden, hallowed. They draw from the cauldron of life and death, of normality and difference, and make these interchangeable, subjecting the imagery to a kind of diabolical surgery where sacred and profane, pain and pleasure, masculine and feminine are dissolved and transformed, intertwining with one another and creating a forbidden hybrid. In this process the artist takes his role as creator to the extreme, putting himself in the place of the deity, to give life to a new reality grounded in the suppression of any notion of order or separation. He abolishes differences in order to subvert reality and bind it to the pleasure of transgression. He attacks prohibitions that are based on differences of sex and belief, in order to produce photographic tableaux that bring together freaks and pregnant women, transsexuals and animals, midgits and skeletons, fetuses and dissected skulls which, when combined with objects, landscapes, stage-sets, and backdrops engender a universe of extremes of which Witkin becomes the demiurge.

In assuming the role of creator, the artist establishes his own laws, which may discredit or overturn the common laws. This overturning, however, should not be seen only as licentiousness and deviance, but also as transformation and initiation enabling a return to a primitive state in which distinctions of value were different from today and co-existence was still possible. If, in antiquity, monstrosity and hybrids did not constitute exceptions or arouse fears, but were actually cultivated as wonders and portents, then the same can occur in our present day: thus death, instead of being transformed into a repressed, anguishing interdictum, may once again co-exist with life.¹ And the hermaphrodite or androgyne, in all his sexual richness, may come once again to represent an exceptional wholeness, the wisdom from which the oracle springs.² The freak or handicapped person must not be ostracized or considered undesirable as a nightmare of existence, but should rather be seen as an intimation of an absolutized sensibility whose mutant conditions or extremities become superior to equipment used in biotechnology.³

Joel-Peter Witkin believes in the possibility of this return to an undifferentiated unity through photography; he aspires to the supreme act of regenerating a primordial situation in which all metamorphoses coexist and every transformation and vision is possible, untroubled by any fear or denial of the enigma of difference and the unknown, of the monstrous and strange.

In order to achieve this transcendence of distinctions, the Artist-Creator invents a universe for himself, however illusory or fantastic, idealized or dreamed, in which conflicts and repressions are abolished. He projects a landscape of abhorrent, forbidden subjects, then makes it concrete, drawing from the intensity and perverse energy of art. There, all that is differentiated and repressed recaptures a miraculous innocence and begins to move among an archipelago of historical images of torture and wondrous tragedies, painted or sculpted by the likes of Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Antonio Canova, Sandro Botticelli, Diego Velázquez, Hieronymus Bosch, Tiziano.

Using the dramatic factuality of history, Witkin is able to liberate the phantoms of pre-life and after-death, transferring them onto the stage of an objective vision in which art's imaginary mirror gives way to the realism of photography. With the one difference that in his photographs the astonishing transgression

of the “fantastic crime,” that of the sacrifice and monstrosity depicted by artists from Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon to Frederick Sommer and Salvador Dalí, becomes, through the excess of reality, an “objective crime.” Since the artist’s perversity and desire become transformed into reality, and the imaginary apparition and revelation depend on the biological nature of the anatomy and decomposition of bodies, the grafting of humans and animals, the *hybris* of the transsexual and the eunuch, the perverse condition of the sadomasochist and the delirious sight of freaks, corpses and fetuses, it becomes such.

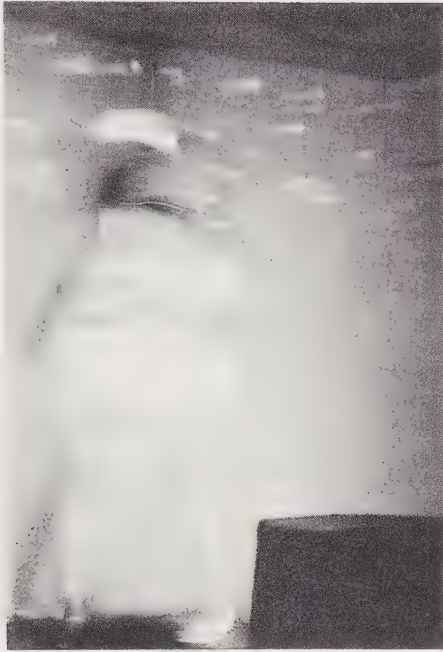
This extremism is grounded in a strong identification of the imaginary with the divine, which in Witkin derives from his upbringing by a Jewish father and a Catholic mother. He aspires to develop, in the extreme, the highly spiritual content of his vision, as though photography were a threshold by which the “sacred” entered the perceptible, real world: “My art,” says Witkin, “is sacred work, since what I make are my prayers.”⁴

Between the image conceived and the image revealed there is a relationship of absolute identity; for Witkin, photographic representation is the incarnation or revelation of a transition between the material and the immaterial, between good and evil, life and death, sacred and pagan. It is almost a manifestation of a visual theology that allows the visible world access to the invisible world. Like Antonin Artaud, the artist is interested in conjoining, through the passage from transgression to morality, the contrary principles of Spirit and Flesh; art thus becomes a metaphor of the boundary between finite and infinite—a membrane poised between chaos and cosmos, formlessness and figuration, nightmare and dream.

To achieve this virtuous osmosis between contrasting, differentiated universes, Witkin uses photography as an interface between two sensibilities at the opposite ends of the spectrum: the earthly, carnal experience of the senses, and the diaphanous, immaterial experience of the numinous and spiritual. He attempts to conjoin and intermingle them, abolishing the distance between them in order to stage an ontological revelation, an illumination of man’s relationship with the godly and holy as manifested in such creatures as the hermaphrodite and siamese twins, and in those states of being-in-the-world, from life to death, whose existence is rooted in the incomprehensible and unutterable.

He endeavors to represent the experience of a new birth and a different planet, where the limits of possibility are stretched and disorders of a physical and sensual nature, the fears and circumstances of life until death, coexist with other energies of existence. It is in this light that sacrilegious images, sadomasochism, mutilation, fetishism, bestiality, necrophilia and all the other social taboos can become translated into revelations or portraits of a reality that has blurred all differences and all limits: “I consider myself a portraitist not of people, but of conditions of being ... [My] hope is not only to show the insanity of our lives, but also that this work will be seen as part of the history of diverse and desperate times.”⁵

And since it is through images that the artist wants to present an unknown reality—one that springs from the physical and spiritual self—the attitude assumed toward the real world in the use of the photographic language becomes crucial to an understanding of how the imagination, which some call perverse, might be transformed into the quest for a sacred emotion. It presents itself as an amazement in the face of a new world in which the confusion of sexes and cultures, of races and differences, keeps pace with the creation of a universal



J.-P. Witkin, *Star of David Dancer*, from
"Coney Island Freak Show," 1956

sentiment formed outside of ceremonies and rules, hierarchies and genders. The photograph is born precisely of the bewilderment and amazement experienced in the face of existence, when the mechanical eye succeeds in stopping the unaltered flow of life and transforming it into a petrified vision. It manages to freeze on the surface an immemorial existence normally receding and moving out of focus in time, and becomes a permanent and unencompassable revelation: a lived image that can no longer return to nothingness. Witkin returns to photography's beginnings, in his use of language as well as of manual techniques; he provides a photographic image that is real, but its reality is entirely subordinated to his imagination, so that it exists "in my own inner experience."⁶ He looks to the revelations of Joseph-Nicéphore Niepce and Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, who between 1826 and 1835 succeeded in capturing, and thereby idolizing, the individual moments of everyday life by separating them through the photographic process, from their context. With Niepce and Daguerre a meditative approach to the world was established, where the seeing subject no longer constructs his vision according to fiction and painterly "irreality," but through the insubstantial appearance of the simulacrum of the real.

Photography became a tool for capturing the images that flit spontaneously into our consciousness and memory; it favored a natural enthusiasm for the beauty of the created world and turned an inward experience into an outward one. With Niepce's and Daguerre's experiments, the metaphysical, immaterial value of figuration vanished, being replaced by an historical, registered, documented, but insubstantial dimension. All "artistic" representation of the world and its natural and human landscapes was thus shunned in favor of revelation, the revelation of a psychological and spiritual visionarism: the light-sensitive surface becomes a nerve-fraught *epidermis* registering all the conscious and unconscious impulses of the photographer. It moves toward the center of his gaze, inside, and presents itself as a spectral geography of his dreams and desires, his curiosities and fears.

For Witkin, too, taking photographs means penetrating the uterine cavities of existence, for the purpose of incubating a second birth: "I think most of the constructed world is actually very, very ugly. In place of that I wanted to create an enclosure, take the best elements of what I have perceived and put them in that enclosure. That way I could direct things that were already, that I could design and establish and reconstruct. This was a very natural approach to me, because it was like I was in a birth, my own birth experience."⁷

It is from just such a cavity that the artist's visual autonomy and mobility are born. Witkin glorifies the delirium of images, highlighting their disruptive, transgressive instances. Through the rebirth of the gaze, he passes through the womb of appearances, directing himself toward the invisible, occult point of pre-birth. An "inner" eye permits the existence of disturbing, enigmatic images like those relating to pre-life, yielding not only the human figure but the fetus, something lying beneath a membrane. And if this view from within is possible, it is only natural that Witkin's ideal is to pass through to the inside of another womb: the counterpart to pre-life, that is, the after-death. The anatomical architecture of photography thus undergoes a marked expansion, fertilizing itself in such a manner as to penetrate into the darkness of the yet-to-be-born and the secret germination of death.

Seeking to express a desire to master the threshold between life and death—in the hope of fully grasping their synthesis—Witkin uses an inordinately tactile photography, one capable of creating a corporeal dimension in which images seem to sprout. It is as though the frame/cavity housed both pain and suffering, pleasure and sensuality, *in nuce*—as though the artist were trying to externalize an eros-thanatos drive, a subject-matter beckoning one to love but also reminiscent of dissection and loss: “My life’s wish is to be connected with a place we can’t know, hope to go to, and hope to be.”⁸

The very surfaces of his photographs thus return to epidermal values. It is almost as though their skin, in some kind of hand-to-hand combat, were spread out through the visions extending out to the public. For this reason, the work contains strong echoes of the technical and linguistic origins of photography, of the time when the procedure, with the camera obscura—the true center of Witkin’s creativity—consisted of chemically controlling the formation and birth of the image during a very long period of exposure and gestation. At the same time, his surfaces recall the tangible, quasi-metallic consistency of daguerrotypes, as well as the dramatic quality of the first photographs taken of surgical operations with ether-anaesthetized patients, or even the surreal quality of the images of dissection and diseases taken by medical photographers from the mid 19th century to the start of the 20th century.⁹

The only difference is that in Witkin, this skin, site of the uncontrollable manifestations of existence, terrain of eroticism as well as necrophilia, is a threshold between outside and inside, between silence and screams, calm and violence. This is why it is often gouged with scratches and marks, both positive and negative, and printed through tissue paper onto Portiga paper using various chemicals to achieve different tones and layerings. Finally, with the camera obscura, this skin is aged, looking almost as though it came from the 19th century, assuming as it were the tactility of an image having arisen from the earth. At times the images are subjected to an encaustic process. After the print is archivally mounted on aluminum, a collaboration begins with Witkin’s wife Cynthia, who hand-tones the grains of the photographic surface with pigments. This process alone may take weeks to complete. Then the Witkins layer the print in pure molten beeswax and proceed to encausticize (locally re-heat the wax again to a liquid state). The surface is then allowed to cool for several days, then polished by hand.

Through all these processes, the emulsified surface, for the artist, becomes the membrane on which the vibrations and impulses, the uncertainties and indecisions of a new life are registered. The photography is porous, impermeable, the seat of a deep perception at once physical and spiritual. It possesses the image, and is possessed by it. In this sense it approaches painting, merging with the artist’s inner gaze; it is a piece of his skin which comes into being and grows, moving about like a living thing, subject to the uncontrollable impulses of his ego.

At times the intricate gestural structure of signs seems like a permanent vibration, a flow of matter, as though the surface had a telluric force of a fluid nature running through it, expressed in unconscious thrusts both beneficial and harmful. The feeling one gets is of entering a cave used for legendary Panic rites as gentle and tender as they are macabre and terrifying. The epidermis seems to reveal itself to be the conductor, the riverbed and matrix, of a perpetual transmutation. Seen as womb, photography becomes the emblem of fertility

(breast, abdomen, flowing hair); it is soft and delicate, and defines tension, movement: an intimacy fraught with lavic liquid, ironlike and burning hot. But the abdominal cavity also suggests surgery and the anatomy table. It is the site of dissections and macabre encounters. Thus the image may move from the lust of eros to the butchery and wonder of *thanatos*. One enters the abyss not only of the mind but of the very matter imprisoned in bodies—a spiral and vortex in which the remains of dissections free matter bordering on the sacred and divine. Here we are not far from the morgue, destination of us all: pit, hole, grave, which Witkin adopts for its quality of legend, and its forbidden character. Access to death is forbidden, since death has its place in the soul; nevertheless, the artist wants to take possession of it, to unite it with life. This is why he touches it, manipulates it, uses it as a kind of visual plastics, a magical icon depicting the unknown, closing the circle of existence: “I wanted my photographs to be as powerful as the last thing a person sees or remembers before death.”¹⁰

At the same time, the quality conferred by encaustic and impasti of soil projects a petrified sense, as though photography wanted to assert itself as a vicarious form of stability and a tool for granting “eternity”—a terrible discovery, in which everything is transformed into relic and thing, into an unfathomable silence where the crust of the cosmos ceases to breathe as a life-substance. Here earth and mud are not regenerative, but serve rather to fix and seal. They enter the photograph’s body like a tomb, sign of a coming into the world as well as a dying out, sign of the appearance and revelation of bodies and landscapes, and sign of their decomposition. If the language of the images represents a return to the earth, it also documents a descent into Hell, into Hades, where it frees the dead and brings them back into circulation.

The Initiatory Journey

From the start, Witkin’s life has been led as though through a cruel, terrifying tunnel in which regenerative baths abound in the chaos of appearances and the



J.-P. Witkin, *Untitled*, from “*Objects Held and Thrown*,” 1978

seas of pain, as though the itinerary of his birth into photography were fated to follow a therapeutic path, often taking the form of a horror-show with visions of the dead. In early childhood, at age six, he entered a dimension of experience that filled his head with apocalyptic visions: "It happened on a Sunday when my mother was escorting my twin brother and me down the steps of the tenement where we lived. We were going to church. While walking down the hallway to the entrance of the building, we heard an incredible crash mixed with screaming and cries for help. The accident involved three cars, all with families in them. Somehow, in the confusion, I was no longer holding my mother's hand. At the place where I stood at the curb, I could see something rolling from one of the overturned cars. It stopped at the curb, where I stood. It was the head of a little girl. I bent down to touch the face, to speak to it—but before I could touch it, someone carried me away."¹¹

The story of this introduction into the macabre, which the artist also developed into his thesis at university, shows a certain narcissism of expression and a visual provocativeness, as though Witkin wanted to go through life bearing a metaphysical blade. This visual experience, whether real or imagined, was the first to remain consciously imbedded in his memory, and it drove him to interpret life and images in such a way as to privilege a destiny within the murderous circuit of pain and terror, violence and martyrdom—a continuous ascension bathed in sacrificial blood.

He was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1939, to a family composed of a Neapolitan Catholic mother and a Russian Jewish father. Having grown up in poverty, Witkin, after the divorce of his parents due to religious conflicts, was raised by his mother in Greenpoint, "a terrible and wonderful place in Brooklyn." There, together with his sister and twin brother, he was strongly influenced by his mother's Catholic beliefs. In 1955 he bought or was given as a gift a Rolleicord reflex camera, with which he began to photograph his existential universe of Brooklyn and Queens. One of his first photographs, *Coney Island Boy* (1956), which portrays a little boy with his face obscured by light, shows Witkin's early interest in the *mask* as a symbolic device for understanding the subject's personality: "This was the first black and white photograph. It was developed and printed in a photo store in Brooklyn. I made this under the Boardwalk at Coney Island near the place where my father was murdered."¹²

Another symbolic or metaphorical death of his beliefs or obsessions? Perhaps. Certainly Witkin's photographic adventure is marked, in its beginnings, by events prophesying his future, as though he were somehow chosen to turn his attentions to the at once awe-inspiring and terrifying work of the Deity determining his destiny. According to the Catholic matrix, this would be God. One of Witkin's initial concerns was to document the "revelation" of God; that is, to photograph the extraordinary, exceptional effect experienced by someone chosen by God. Thus, in the 1950s, after reading in the *New York Daily News* that a rabbi in the Bronx claimed to have seen and spoken with God, he went to the synagogue in hopes of obtaining a portrait of an illuminated being. Instead, according to Witkin, "I found a tired, sleepy little old man sitting in a corner of a large, dusty study. I did not see G-d within the rabbi or the presence of G-d within the room. I decided to photograph the rabbi anyway, hoping that perhaps, if I couldn't see what I had imagined to be there, the film would reveal it. Perhaps G-d would appear on the film when it was processed. Somehow, I knew that it wouldn't turn out that way."¹³ Nevertheless, the quest for the

expression of the sacred continued, because “I still believed that reality meant only one thing—the presence of G-d before me. Until that happened, I could have no identity, no purpose.”¹⁴

At the urgings of his mother, who had prompted his sister to study piano and his brother to become interested in painting, Witkin developed a passion for art and photography. Later his brother, who was looking for unusual subjects for his paintings, invited him to come with him to document the freaks at a Coney Island sideshow, and he proceeded to photograph the various “attractions”: Lantini the three-legged man, a woman called “The Chicken Lady,” and a hermaphrodite, with whom—by his account—he had his first sexual experience. These images are in color, in the form of slides—such as *Star of David Dancer* (1956; page 11), and *Untitled* (1956). The latter photo portrays a woman with dysfunctional features, suffering from deformations of the bones and other anomalies. The malformed figure was the first evidence, for Witkin, of a creature that could become an object of both terror and love—an image between real and unreal, between self and other, experience and fantasy, sexuality and asexuality, animal and human, factual and mythological, bizarre and tragic, between the fear of living and the fear of dying.

The representation of this condition of existence is a triumph because it tends to present the life of marginalized or “different” persons as testimony to the *infinity* of existence and aesthetics. In the history of photography, this attention to the terrible, awe-inspiring inequality existing among human beings was passed from Brassai to Weegee before Diane Arbus confronted it; Witkin, however, embraces it not as a social, but as an ontological experience. He sees freaks as the manifestation of something exceptional and extraordinary: the infinite will of God. This is not mere spectacle, the staging of a weird, repressed universe, but rather a sacred, essentially moralistic and messianic vision. These unusual beings are a testimony illuminating and revealing one of humanity’s possible destinies. A photographic reflection of their existence, though viewed through a perspective of fantasy, can, however, provoke violent reactions, including the desire to protect the public from the impact of this reality. And as in all disputes between iconophiles and iconoclasts, Witkin’s photographs are and will forever be destined to spur bitter conflicts between those supporting and those denying the admissibility of certain images that confront the relationship between perversion and morality, between matter and spirit, between the simulacrum and the original, between the worldly and the divine.

For a number of years following his fascination with freaks, the artist, for lack of living specimens, devoted himself to constructing fantastical, grotesque figurations, like those of the medieval and Renaissance illustrators who portrayed men with ostrich-necks and goose-heads, or sporting superfluous horns or strange protuberances, odd hybrids of man and beast, male and female. Perhaps some psychic impulse drove him to look for the profound underlying basis to his childhood. Perhaps this is the source of his uncertainty and confusion between the real and the unreal. It is the very sort of ambiguity that has sustained literary and visual masterworks from Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll to Alfred Kubin and Félicien Rops, and it is shared by Witkin, who seeks intoxication in the peculiar nature of a photograph as mirror of his being-in-the-world as well as of the fantastic universe of the real and the everyday.

His attraction for living metaphors of the enigma of life—from giantesses,

midgets, and the superego-bese to siamese twins and the elephant man—found its complement at the time in his fascination with comic strips that didn't distinguish between reality and fiction. With the additional influence of his uncle Tony, who wanted to become the Masked Marvel¹⁵ and who during the war was “stabbed in the foot” by an Italian soldier, Witkin was seduced¹⁶ by super-heroes and super-heroines, by Batman and Wonder Woman, prodigious beings and existential fictions that functioned as mythic monsters no longer exhibited at fairs but on the television screen.

They became the present-day proof of the age-old power of the divine, in all its manifestations from the angelic to the diabolical: Superman translated into the revelation of positive force, while Batman represented the Antichrist, ruler of the shadows, and Wonder Woman, the Amazon or Valkyrie, became the Virgin Mary, who forgives and releases. In this sense Witkin introduced a positive notion of the world of make-believe, going beyond the simulacrum, perceiving it as an energy through which to understand and represent “the dimension of being.”

From 1958 to 1960, while working in various New York studios and laboratories, he entered The Cooper Union School of Art and studied the rudiments of sculpture under Rubin Kaviar, which in the 1970s would lead him to create strange, surreal objects based on human figures with expanded, deformed anatomical features, such as *Woman* (1970), where a tiny head projects above a partial torso resting on wheels, supporting very large, oversize breasts.

In 1961, he enlisted in the Army, in the photography division, first joining the satellite image sector and later working as a combat photographer, where the work consisted of documenting deaths due to accidents, maneuvers and suicides.

After his military service, he returned to Cooper Union, obtaining a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree after studying from 1970 to 1974. During this period he made, among other things, a kinetic sculpture—*Corpus* (1971-74)—where the figure's head, like Saint Sebastian, is pierced by nails. It is an image of Christ as duality between the human and the divine, here functioning as a tabernacle and monstrosity.

The fullness of being is, in esotericism, the product of differences and antagonistic polarities. Existence is covered with sulphur and coincides with the ecstasy of death and rebirth, from *nigredo* to *albedo*—a process that Christ himself goes through, in his journey between death and life. Another interest of Witkin's is the transmutation or reincarnation, sublimation or transfiguration that arises from immersion in the social. In darkness and degradation, in abjection and ruin lies the source of a new vitality. The pure springs from the impure; to find the light one must immerse oneself in darkness.

In 1972, after a series of sculptures on the subject of the sensual and sexual double, consisting of little male and female figures with truncated torsos, and photographs of sphinxes (*Paris*, 1972), the upwelling turmoil of his childhood and youth, marked as these were by shocking experiences and a Catholic education—as well as by the polymorphous nature of childhood bisexuality—became the subject of an angelic and demonic evocation of Christ and an exaltation of the feminine nude.

One example of this attraction to the ambiguity between the divine and the sexual is *Rest after the Passion, New York City* (1973). A young man with Christ's face is sitting on a roof with another man beside him wearing a Batman costume, symbol of evil and darkness: counterpoised figures of light and shadow. One is the illuminated face of the divine, the other is the masked mien of the demonic. This very sort of tangle of forces rules the world, harnesses its energy between



J.-P. Witkin, *Mexican Pin-Up*, New Mexico, 1975

love and violence, reality and fiction. To live in our age, for Witkin, means accepting both such forces, reinstating the monsters of the night, going through the repressed, terrible side of our passions and obsessions without recoiling in fear. This scene, put together on a Manhattan rooftop, establishes a theatricality of the passions where gestures are measured, controlled. The characters sit peacefully, confronting one another in the balance of opposites: positive and negative, sacred and profane. There is a fixity, a stability, that might nevertheless erupt at any moment in an uncontrollable magmic burst of deadly proportions, releasing a horrifying, catastrophic energy.

In his early period, however, the artist is not interested in martyrdom and the tortures of the flesh, or in the shock of depressing, painful images, but rather in the reconciliation of opposites. *Untitled* (1972), which belongs to the same series as *Rooftop*, presents an encounter between a veiled communicant and a female figure who is seated on a ruined bicycle, playing a trumpet. The sexual symbology between the bride and the “celibate” machine is clear, except that the act is suspended, as though the outcome of the struggle or encounter cannot be resolved, as though the eroticism lies in the irreconcilable tension between the parties involved. The roof is a stage in the sky, the tableau the theatrical technique Witkin uses to convey the opposing categories of good and evil that here meet on the stage of the world. The dramatic effect is achieved by employing the space of art and the theatre, which are capable of creating a metaphysical reality.

The adoption of the sexual double is reflected in the series *Contemporary Images of Christ*, where the “glorious body” of the tree of Christian life suffers all the burdens of existence, from being the innocent savior to being the androgyne. Transitional creature, alembic of alchemical and spiritual transformations. In *Jesus and His Mother Mary: Photographed by an Anonymous Galilean Photographer* (1974), a naked baby is wearing a mask of Christ’s face and a female figure—the mother—has a triangular hood over her head. Christ’s sexuality and humanity are transcended in the mask, with the result that his condition truly becomes the tool of a divine transformation: “In order to know if I were truly alive, I’d make the invisible visible! Photography would be the means to bring God down to earth—to exist for me in the photographic images I would create. I believe that all my photographs are incarnations, representing the form and substance of what my mind sees and attempts to understand. I believe that Christ was a man who transcended this bodily form and became God; or to put it in terms of my personal belief—God placed on the man called Jesus the mask of Christ!”¹⁷

The mask, in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, refers to sorrow. It speaks of the struggle for existence, the fight against anguish and the fear of the lonely. It is connected to suffering and danger. It is an intermediary surface that documents the duplicity of being. In using the mask, Witkin takes the side of appearances, for he is aware that the photographic tableaux are inseparable identifications of his conception of life, “the feedback of my consciousness.”¹⁸ In this sense the manipulation of the appearance of his models is actually a way to respect their identities, while the masks are a liberation of their duality. The models can be used as pure and impure bodies, flesh that comes to represent secret life-fluids which, with the interposing of the mask, bear witness to a dispossession. The human being removed from himself thus becomes a testimony to otherness and the divine.

Like the spirit and the flesh, the mask and the person tend to coincide and become confused. The next step is to reinforce their fluidization, to achieve a

full metamorphosis. Images of such intersection can be found in the series *Image of Woman*. Here the female figure becomes the center of attention, but is subjected to a game of voyeurism and perversion. Temporarily putting aside his Catholic impulses, Witkin now confronts his debts to eroticism and its imaginative power. He thus moves from the sanctification to the laceration of woman. He transforms her into a mythic animal or buries her in macabre caskets. One feels the incandescence of his desire for clotted, swollen flesh, or for a laughable, skeletal body. He has erotic fluids and disgusting secretions flow through the photographic organ like so many sublime and degrading humors. They are “visual liquids” that leave their source and spill over into the image, like shit, sperm, urine, and saliva, tokens of an impure body spawned by sexuality: “I created a true photo-physical metamorphosis in which my fantasies were manifested by the most voyeuristic and perverse means. I placed *Woman* in coffins, glued leaves on their bodies, had them respond to phallic fetishes, tied, bound and masked them—all in the same hope as in the *Christ* series, that hope being my personal ‘Revelation,’ the end of all my doubts, confusion and pain.”¹⁹

The Uncontrollable Scream of Existence

In 1975 Witkin left New York, to study photography at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. There he broadened his knowledge of Art History and Photography, but more importantly, he entered a new cultural climate, one of existential and behavioral transgressions, the world of the pagan and sacramental rituals of the Southwest. This helped him to penetrate the mystery of his obsession with a visual art inspired by desecratory illuminations of the sort that inform the art of Luis Buñuel, Artaud, Federico Fellini, Alejandro Jodorowsky. He took a keen interest in the ascetic and mystical rites of Native American cultures, and sought to reconcile his Catholic and Jewish experiences in hopes of creating a legitimate fusion of the two. He indulged his great attraction for freaks and at the same time abandoned himself to his own antibourgeois, anarchistic nature; this enabled him to shatter all forms of security, without hypocritically upholding even one. Everything becomes jumbled together: zen mysticism and Judaism, yoga and Kabbala, alchemy and spiritualism. Thus began a voyage and adventure of initiation that continues to this day, a journey in search of a mountain that stands on the boundary between life and death and exists in the eyes of those who wish to reach it. Searching for a vision, Witkin immediately approached the imaginary apocalypse of the universe of pain. In his first year at Albuquerque, he looked for human subjects whose delirium of pain and suffering could be revealed photographically. The intention was to transform the image into an uncontrollable “scream” of existence. The idea was to “record real feeling in real time rather than the fantasies of his models.”²⁰

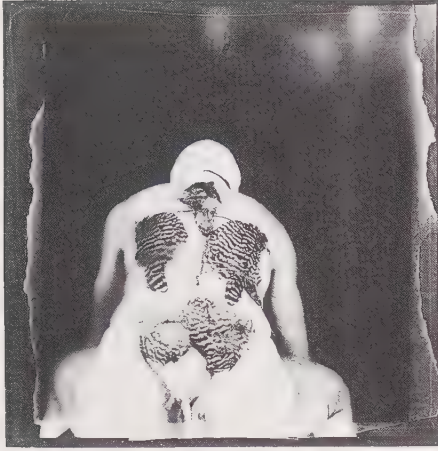
His aim was to transform the photograph into pulsating flesh—a shudder inspired by the feelings of the people portrayed, when squirming in their horror or filth, their eschatologies and deceptions. In this way he managed to become an accomplice of their “torture” and “pathology,” taking part in their emotional intoxications, going so far as to affix a man suffering from claustrophobia to a wall with straps and belts, or immersing himself in the mental whirlpool of a woman just released from a psychiatric hospital.

In images such as *Ivan* (1976), *Anonymous Atrocities*, *Indulgences (Leo)*, *New Mexico* (1976; plate n.3), and *Hospital, New Mexico* (1976), the experience of



pain is physicalized in the photograph, which becomes an accursed, sulphurous, dramatic testimony. Visually the images move in a “dark domain,” with the figures almost fading out. There is no bright clarity in madness and pain; rather, there is delirium and fever, which blur all outlines. The soft focus attenuating the contours corresponds, in all of Witkin’s work, to an osmosis between the carnal, the psychic, and spiritual, as though he wanted to assert that bodies are sites of mercurial constellations, made up of carnal and pneumatic emissions, whose haloes must be seen as the projection of both the unconscious and the energy of the cosmos.

Here Witkin’s approach outlines a twofold state—on the one hand the body with its burden and its erotic, passionate presence, on the other the randomness of an imminent explosion arising from the threat of a marvelous, monstrous, unknown condition. It is a suspended, indefinite state, for it allows the figure to be susceptible to a conversion from the one condition to the other, from presence to an obscure latency. The theme of the crystallization of polarities that seem to have been placed together by an inhuman “higher will” becomes evident in the combination of a woman’s head with an alligator’s body, a visual incest, here obtained by combining toys, that becomes the subject of a long series of images shot in urban settings. The bi-frontal cipher, a cross between human and animal, is already in itself an indication of a doubled, and duplicable, way of thinking, where identity is uncertain and all is reversible. Thus the animal is reflected in the human, just as shadow is projected in light, white is converted into black, pleasure into pain. Witkin acknowledges that he exists inside such a perverse duality when, in one image—*Los Angeles Death* (1976; plate n.2)—he shows a Los Angeles cityscape with a woman passing furtively by, suddenly entering the field of vision. It is a revealing discovery, for it in fact bears witness to the photographer’s demiurgic desires and sadomasochistic urges: “This woman’s physical form, especially the way in which it was cut in half by the frame, ‘made’ this image for me—but her presence was disturbing. She was now



J.-P. Witkin, *Atrocité*, 1977

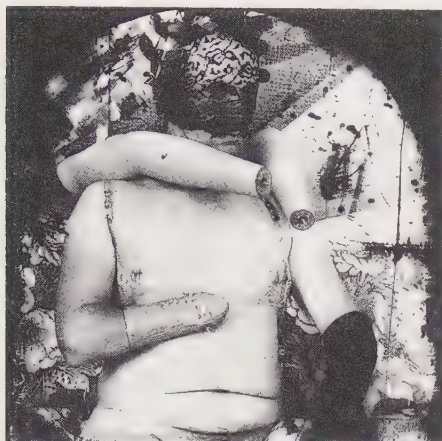
part of an 'incident' I had created and also a 'witness' to it. She had observed me symbolically inflicting pain onto the object I had made by attempting to strangle it. This object then became a symbol not only of the image, but of my sadism."²¹ Because of this discovery, Witkin altered the negative, scratching and adulterating it. The result was its transformation into still another testimony, that of Witkin's emotional reaction to his own images. The intervention on the negative is important, because it reveals to the photographer that images are not absolute crystallizations or quasi-impersonal, arid, frozen sensibilities, but rather potential materials of passage that may lead to other sources of expression. They are thresholds the artist can cross to reach other layers of emotion and communication. This passage is essential to an understanding of how the image, for Witkin, is always a "suspended" aggregate, not a "full whole." The act of scratching and altering is thus an activating force, a regenerative fire that rends and destroys, just as the disintegration and horror of manipulated bodies are signs of a revelation. The "scribbling," moreover, is a gesture of insanity in the face of the rational, mechanical significations of the photographic act. Underlying it is an additional appropriation of meaning, as though the artist wished to re-appropriate the moment of "that intensity," that emotion. The mortification and adulteration of perfection are therefore not a search for degradation but for life's fire.

This refusal of pure, perfect material has its technical counterpart. In 1976, in the photograph portraying a seated figure next to a dog, from the series *Anonymous Atrocities*, Witkin attempted to reduce the image's frozenness, its profound stagnation, by using tissue as memory's surrogate in the printing, so that the bodily aggregate of the individual subjects would melt away, almost to the point of abandoning the bodies altogether. The process consists of placing a thin piece of tissue paper over the enlarging paper so as to increase light refraction and make the image atmospheric, almost blurred. At times, following the process used for *Los Angeles Death* (1976; plate n.2), he intervenes during development, adding scratches and using potassium ferricyanide to create yellow and brown hues, alternately lightening and darkening the surfaces, making them look as though they were taken out of time.

All these factors change the representation, making it spectacular, magical, ever-changing, for the effects of the tissue and its weave are always different and unique. The point is to make photographic information "fabulous," (as if out of a "fable") so that it becomes the privileged place of a quasi-miraculous event whose process remains unknown. The image is not supposed to speak of a regulated world but to span a temporal and spatial density that, by its archaism, alludes to a mysterious, almost sacred intensity.

The intention is to reject reality in order to push it towards a metaphysical tension, by emphasizing the spectral sedimentations contained in it. By modifying the materials of photography, Witkin wants to "remake" the image, to revolutionize it with gesturality, so that the subjects become *presences* of an unknown life animated by the spirit of the individual creating them and fecundated by the vital spirit of a sacred, unknown, but present existence. If art is the realm of the double, Witkin cannot photograph only reality's outer shell; he must also reveal its inside, the profound substance of its *animus*.

The same is said of the body the artist takes to be the territory of all limits, the surface of a fragile barrier between inside and outside, between soul and senses. The energy contained within its confines and viscera is something that can be



J.-P. Witkin, *Deviated*, San Francisco, 1981

released, but for this to happen it must be pierced, fragmented, penetrated. In *Mexican Pin-Up, New Mexico* (1975; plate n.1), he portrays the bust of a woman with her breasts and nipples pierced by needles, as though the artist wished to show that the human surface is a membrane and that beyond its boundary throbs still another life. This image is the first in a series that resonates with an imagery of interiority based on the introduction of objects into the body, as though the subject were searching, through such objects, to communicate with his or her insides: *Woman Breastfeeding an Eel, New Mexico* (1979; plate n.6), *Carrotcake I, New Mexico* (1980; plate n.9), *Angel of the Carrots, New Mexico* (1981), and *Sanitarium, New Mexico* (1983; plate n.37).

The breaking and entering of the body by a thing aims at establishing a communication between the universe of the manifest and the realm of the unknown. Thus for Witkin the martyred, tortured body is the symbol and metaphor of a dialectics of the absorption of spiritual vision. From the very beginning, this approach has enriched itself with images of transsexuals, prostitutes, freaks, pregnant women, fetuses and midgets: trauma and disorder are in fact the antechamber of revelation. The *conjunctio* between body and other is for Witkin a way to divert his desires as well as his dream fantasies onto the photographic subject. The face of the *Woman Breastfeeding an Eel, New Mexico* (1979; plate n.6), is enhanced by a conical protuberance that establishes itself as a fleshly and material excrescence and brings about a plastic modification of her appearance. It upsets her form as well as broadening her being. In later works—from *Deviated, San Francisco* (1981), and *Bird of Queveda, New Mexico* (1982; plate n.23), to *The Bra of Joan Miró, New Mexico* (1982; plate n.21), *Negre's Fetishist* (1991, plate n.90) and up to *La Serpentine, Marseilles* (1992; plate n.101)—the protuberances and extensions of the body, from the leg to the arm, the foot to the hand, capture a dynamism and power of flesh and skin—an effervescence and tumescence that become erotic, as though sensuality were seeking an escape to the outside, beyond closed form and equilibrium. The artist bends and plastically transforms the figures, because in the swollen and the stretched he sees the passage to a manifestation of inner ecstasy. The human being is a ventilated cavity, which swells by different capabilities. It has an extraordinarily active power of agitation and impetuosity. And if a pregnant woman affirms the happy principle of swelling—as in *The Wife of Cain, New Mexico* (1980)—other sorts of internal modifications also exist, those due to libidinal impulses that lead the body to feed on sex and fetishes, prostheses and mechanisms that can give pleasure, as in *Testicle Stretch with the Possibility of a Crushed Face, New Mexico* (1982; plate n.28), and *Woman Masturbating on the Moon, New Mexico* (1982; plate n.30).

The physical and imaginary combinations of bodies and objects call to mind the imagery of Surrealism and Dada, where the relationship drives the horizon of the imagination ever further away, creating situations where objects serve to engender desire or nightmare. Objects take control of meaning and reveal their perverse purpose: the perversion of signification.

Such artists as Marcel Duchamp and Dalí present a spectacle of perversion, where things and images are subjected to an endless crisis of interpretations and critical openings. Witkin follows the same path, using the unknown possibilities of chance associations of subjects and objects in a paranoid-libidinal perspective that spans the irrational and the oneiric. He seizes events and phenomena and



J.-P. Witkin, *Autoerotic Death*, New York City, 1984



J.-P. Witkin, *26 Year Old O.D., New Mexico*, 1982

manipulates them. He subjects them to a law of imaginary conquest in order to create an excess representation, one capable of forming an erotic and macabre labyrinth. Appropriation is a way for him to link images with private motivations. Witkin recognizes himself in the subject as well as the object, which together become the narcissistic conquest of his identity.

The itinerary, and the dismemberment, of the subject expressing his own inner dynamic also pass through drawing and collage, which Witkin uses erotically in the manner of Max Ernst. The artist has worked in these mediums since 1974—from *Collage* (1974), to *Bee Boy* (1974), to the collage using photographic “fade-outs,” *The Emperor of Japan, New Mexico* (1978; plate n.5)—because they allow him to disembody reality, to multiply and articulate it. Through these visions of deviation and montage, Witkin defines an oblique, unforeseen movement that comes close to mythic thought: “The characteristic of mythic thought, like that of *bricolage* on the practical level, is that it elaborates structured wholes, not directly with other structured wholes, but by using the remains and fragments of events: *odds and ends*, or *des bribes et des morceaux*, as they say in French, fossils bearing witness to the story of an individual or a society.”²²

Collage and drawing, however, remain only tools of study and planning; the only practicable form of communication for the artist is the bodily form, and thus the only material to be shaped, disembodied or nullified, dressed up or reincarnated, remains the human body. And although his vision inhabits a two-dimensional realm, that of photography, the artist carries out his phantasmatical shifts manually, by altering and transforming bodies both living and dead. And if it is possible in collage to manipulate, assemble, and paste in order to attain the power of revelation, the same must also be true of reality. The normal destination of an entity is cancelled; its customary use value has no relation to its “pieces.” In order to recognize the presence of obsession and mania, of creativity and fantasy, reality must be diverted and reconstructed according to unnatural, unusual relationships. In *26 Year Old O.D., New Mexico* (1982; page 22), and *The Kiss (Le Baiser)*, *New Mexico* (1982; plate n.27), parts of corpses—a young woman’s torso and an old man’s head—are used to create and reformulate an image of excess, the perversion of which leads to surprising figures that can nevertheless be found in the history of art, from Andrea Mantegna to Constantin Brancusi. The adoption of death and annihilation is not, however, sadistic or barbaric, but helps Witkin to express the anomalies and enigmas of reason and belief and thereby to arrive at a healing, a defense against the intolerable reality of life’s end.

Through the madness of images the artist displays a network of actions and moments that approach that ineluctable truth. But his method consists not of resisting death and decomposition, but rather of showing himself to be flexible, available and able to come closer to their unknown reality: “embrace death to save it” (Walter Benjamin). And just as dead beauty, tortures, ruined lives, monsters, marvels, portents and unlikely legends abound throughout art history, the transfiguration of transience and redemption finds a thousand outlets in ancient iconography. The artist sets out in search of the voices of past artists, the vast frescoes and the great fables imbued with the gigantic aspiration to Art. He turns to the mountains of figuration, from the Gothic to the Baroque, from the Enlightenment to Romanticism. Through photography he re-evokes their forbidden territories, realms of the strange and deformed, the sublime and the

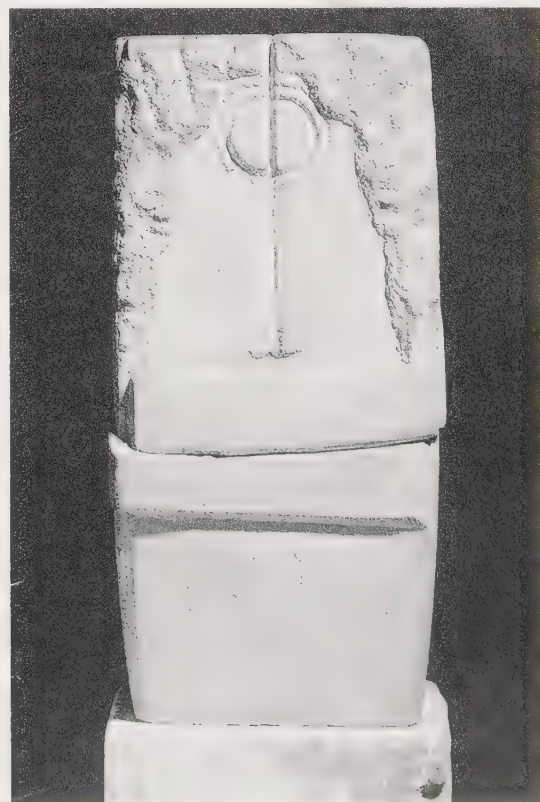
terrifying; he recovers the ineffable, disturbing, extraordinary, repellent beauty of mixtures that lead from Bosch, Botticelli, Velázquez and Goya to Moreau, Redon, Pablo Picasso and Kubin. He portrays the world of the present like a museum collection, a chaos and labyrinth registering the mad accumulation of things and acts, people and events. The updating of historical iconography and the adoption of a conventional language, that of painting and sculpture, are part of a communicative strategy aimed at defining an intermediate dimension that, through the continuity of History, provides consolation for the mad intensity of the artist's impulses. By virtue of historical updating, Witkin remains within the sphere of known or at least recognizable sensibilities. He manipulates institutional stereotypes, from the *Venus de Milo* and Botticelli to Moreau's and Dalí's sphinxes, from the still lifes of Sommer and Jan Davidsz de Heem to Nicolas Poussin's *Leda*, to arrive at something that can be legitimately asserted, an approach that makes the artist a vehicle of social and sacred communication. He works with resemblances and references as a way of emphasizing that art has always taken the unutterable and unrepresentable into account. He has expressed it even when "it" could not be found in reality: "If I can't find it in real reality, I can make it happen somehow in the photographic material." But like all artists, Witkin does not efface himself in technique, he realizes himself: "I am not interested in photography per se, I am dedicating myself to myself. This is my vocation."²³

J.-P. Witkin, *The Kiss (Le Baiser)*,
New Mexico, 1982

A Metaphysics of the Flesh

The materialization of the unrepresentable and the incommunicable makes visible the emotional and oneiric occultation of the artist. It gives it body and

Constantin Brancusi, *Le Baiser*, 1940-45.
Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou



image, unveils its fantastical, libidinal physiognomy. To come into being, however, such a manifestation must pass through multiple stages, avail itself of existing languages and iconographies, repeat itself so as not to fall into the void of ephemerality and appearance. This obsessive concentration on always the “same” stage of the divine and the astonishing, which carries over from one photograph to the next, enables Witkin to realize permanent *tableaux* that show rather than demonstrate what he means to communicate. His quasi-maniacal “repetitiveness” is in fact aimed at creating converts who will become accomplices, not voyeurs, not cold, detached observers, of his convictions. He dwells on one universe, however paradoxical, so that its inhabitants might assume, and thus be accepted as, real bodies and souls.

Although his *tableaux* may represent an historical or mythological stage—such as *Portrait of Holocaust, New Mexico* (1982; plate n.24), *Daphne and Apollo, Los Angeles* (1990; plate n.86), *Expulsion from Paradise of Adam and Eve* (1981), and *The Graces, New Mexico* (1988; plate n.76)—they are inspired by reality and express a maximum adherence to the present. Every image is thus an extension toward the everyday, capturing the spectator’s attention because it moves him in some way. It makes him an accomplice, in fact, and on the photograph’s skin a kind of hand-to-hand struggle is established between the one shooting and the one looking on, as both become co-protagonists of their mutual idiosyncrasies.

Every photograph of Witkin’s is a tool for soliciting and spurring a participation. That is why they are dramatic and baroque; they turn an unpredictable, terrifying sensibility inside out, and they are frightening because they are based in a pragmatic, real vein whose truthfulness involves the spectator in such a way

J.-P. Witkin, *Manuel Osorio, New Mexico*, 1982

Francisco Goya, *Manuel Osorio de Zuniga*, ca. 1788. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art





J.-P. Witkin, *Venus and Eros in Purgatory*, New Mexico, 1982

that he cannot escape. Witkin's images are in fact living communications and affirmations. Though filtered through historical citations and reworkings, in a kind of contemporary *mannerism*, they pervert our perception, our physical, tactile faculties, and call our emotional entrails into question.

If one glances at the metaphysical subjects in their vacillation between contingency and eternity, the role of the tortured flesh which with its gravity and weight anchors the spirit to earth without, however, denying its process of regeneration, one sees that the iconographic themes are many and varied and deal with the dialectics of darkness and light, imprisonment and freedom, the nostalgia for beauty and the petrification of ugliness. In *Indulgences (Leo)*, New Mexico (1976; plate n.3), the mutilated person is masked and enclosed in a cage, as if in a prison. The mask and the metal structure complement each other. The human being moves about with his back raised above the ground, as if he possessed legs and were going beyond his life. And he is looking through the mask because he is searching for something beyond his life. Here we are in a period in Witkin's work where he uses the mask to affirm people's aspirations to a life, their desire to be "actors" in a different, dreamed universe. In *Man without Legs*, New York City (1984; plate n.46), the aspiration—perhaps because of the vehicle that serves as a support to the fragmentary body—is to run and move about, so as to enter a sacred, Olympian territory, light and airy, represented by the divine triangle. Elsewhere deformity, for the artist, is a virtual fire in which the spirit, through suffering, becomes power and beauty: *Art Deco Lamp*, New Mexico (1986; plate n.56). In short, the negation of the body, for Witkin, is the positive proliferation of another source of light: the advent of a boundary illuminated by an unexpected creativity between the human and the divine. Later the mask falls, and the deformities and the manifestations of existence agree to present themselves with their real faces, which are the real "masks" of their lives. In *Un Santo Oscuro*, New Mexico (1987), *Portrait of a Dwarf*, Los Angeles (1987; plate n.68), and *Satiro*, Mexico (1992; plate n.100), the human being expresses energy, accepts himself, is no longer separated from his body, whatever body that may be. He lets himself be photographed, both as himself and as a reincarnation in Witkin's image. Here the subject and the object, the photographer and the photographed, arrive at the mystical realization that they are not oppositional entities, but rather participants in the Other, who reunites matter to spirit, reintegrating the soul.

The formless and the deformed, the base and the terrifying must be brought back into the light. In this sense Witkin works with Arbus and Robert Mapplethorpe to ensure that the notion of "cruelty" is no longer hostile but is transformed into a cognitive nucleus purged of its dark and negative connotations. Going to the inhuman sources of life, in pilgrimages to mental hospitals and clinics, to sadomasochistic clubs or baths, to circuses and freak-shows, means recuperating a spectacular force from the unleashing of the sublime from other sexual and physical, rational and emotional universes. It means celebrating the errant forces of an existence that inevitably makes and unmakes life. The photographs of Arbus, Mapplethorpe and Witkin struggle against a destiny of ghettoization and submission, and evoke an energy that exults in asceticism.

In this sense Witkin's itinerary highlights, like Artaud's, the double valences of bodies' spectacular being-in-the-world. He tends to measure himself against the figures of the sphinx and the angel, the hermaphrodite and the transsexual, the

midget and the giant, illness and delirium, because these are charged with a positive ambiguity, that of a passage or an intermediary situation involving a vacillation between being and non-being, male and female, life and death. Likewise the concern for history and its iconographic ruins displays an interest in the voices of past dramas and tragedies: these are traces of ancient fables, signs of similar valences between religion and atheism, reason and unreason. Witkin is seeking to save all this, by discovering in it a meaning for himself and for others, an irrefutable significance that reveals as it were the contemplation of destruction. It is not destructive, but participates in the construction of the sacred and the modern. In this respect he takes his place beside the Romantics and the Surrealists with their bents for still lifes and “exquisite corpses.”²⁴

The double leads to the sacrilegious universe of interchangeability between human and divine, between life and death. Everything forbidden and taboo is called into question, the in-between areas undergo a metamorphosis, and the artist can bring out a dead baby, a fetus, to re-create a different, tragic “maternity” relating to the sacrifice of innocents—*Portrait of Holocaust*, New Mexico (1982; plate n.24), *Counting Lesson in Purgatory*, New Mexico (1982; plate n.26)—or to create a new Madonna, a new Mother, in *Androgyny Breastfeeding a Fetus*, San Francisco (1981). The transformation of the classical iconography of motherhood and the Sacred Virgin does not negate or violate the tradition. The destruction leads to a new creation, while the confusion of the sexes, the passage from one to the other, implies not a dissolved universe, but an enlarged one. The use of the fetus involves, for Witkin, certain personal projections, such as the fear of fatherhood—“I didn’t think there was a physical life in me”²⁵—and the reincarnation of death in a new life. The fetus is life’s innocence, and should be iconically recuperated not as fear or disgust but as an angel: “The fetus will become the angel, driving them out...because death is driving life away.”²⁶

The fetus, already formed, is likewise a sign of premature and gratuitous death; thus it comes to symbolize the tragedy of another kind of war: no longer that symbolized in Picasso’s *Guernica*, but that of the innocents moving about the Earth at every moment: *Pygmalion*, New Mexico (1982; plate n.34). Yet one could also interpret its use as a way of outdoing the destructured, chaotic imagery that the Cubist artist used to depict the tragedy of that Spanish city’s destruction—with the main difference being that in Witkin the formal allegory assumes a real, fleshly manifestation.

The artist is endlessly repeating the idea of a nature living on fusion, and like an angel or sphinx he derives energy therefrom, in order to approach divinity or at least its enigma. Such representations are almost always accompanied by the figure of a woman or transsexual.

The angel, like the sphinx, is a double, or at least ambivalent, figure; it is a typical experience of religious legend or archaic myth. The angel is eternal beauty, prodigy and hero, innocence and purity, but also the bearer of messages, of news. The angel is thus a mediator between opposite universes; he embodies a bipolar situation, between human and animal as much as between human and divine. For this reason, Witkin makes the angel the protagonist of many photographs. It appears as a quotation in *Portrait of Holocaust*, New Mexico (1982; plate n.24), but is a main character in *Angel of the Carrots*, New Mexico (1981), *Bird of Quevedo*, New Mexico (1982; plate n.23), and the *Expulsion from Paradise of*



Adam and Eve (1981). It is finally transformed into a pagan deity in *Hermes*, *San Francisco* (1981; plate n.12). The figure of the angel, like the fetus, abolishes the universe of difference, subverts reality, and thus for Witkin signifies a virtuous perversion. The perversion, however, remains inevitably sadistic, and since intermixtures are forbidden in Judeo-Christian culture, Witkin attempts, in Sadian fashion, to further shatter common and current taboos and prohibitions. He depicts the passions based in all possible forms of doubles: the relationship between man and woman with animal—*Eunuch*, *New Mexico* (1983; plate n.38)—or sadomasochistic relations—*Infantilism*, *San Francisco* (1985; plate n.53), and *Dominatrice* (1988; plate n.77). He creates new combinations and new forms which, by excess or enormity, wavering between the erotic and the deathly (*Sander's Wife*, *New Mexico*, 1981 [plate n.17]), manage to create a new Olympus (*Apollonia and Dominatrix Creating Pain in the Art of the West*, *New York City* [1988; plate n.73]) or a new mythology (*Daphne and Apollo*, *Los Angeles* [1990, plate n.86]). In so doing, he comes close, with his photography, to playing the Demiurge: the artist as mediating angel and messenger of the heavenly word. The subject of duality is given a concrete language in *Siamese Twins*, *New Mexico* (1988; plate n.78), where we find the recurrent theme of inseparable twins. The fusion of the body in the union of two beings here finds its most extreme form, revolving around the head, as though the elsewhere sought by Witkin were to be found somewhere other than in a physical or even mental double universe. According to the symbology, the monochorial twins take part in a double reality; one is divine and the other human, and they possess the power that results from a double personality. According to the beliefs of Native



Americans of New Mexico, their appearance in the world bears portents both positive and negative. This belief seems to have influenced Witkin, who is himself a twin.²⁷ His and his brother's birth was part of a triple pregnancy in which the fraternal triplet died while in the fetal form—thus forming a trinity, part of which exists in death.

The pantheon of figures living double existences includes, of course, the transsexual, whose identity is linked to a transcendence of the distinction between male and female. With the image of the transsexual, Witkin overturns the classical concept of beauty, making it an attribute of the Venus as she has been known over the centuries from Botticelli to Canova. Dissolution and transgression, however, lie not only in the decline of differences, but in the search for an "other" eroticism that manages to include all bodily and sexual identities. *Canova's Venus*, New York City (1982; plate n.20), and *Gods of Earth and Heaven*, Los Angeles (1988; plate n.75), derive their tremendous fascination from the enchanting magic of history; they grab one's attention through the use of Renaissance and neoclassical icons, but then surprise the viewer with the spell cast by the sexual inversion. Witkin's notions of divinity and beauty are often related to phallic expression—as in *Hermes*, San Francisco (1981; plate n.12) and *Bacchus Amelus*, New Mexico (1986; plate n.59), *Leda*, Los Angeles (1986; plate n.62), and *The Graces*, New Mexico (1988; plate n.76). And since myth is the first defiance of death, the doubling of angel and animal, vulgar and sublime, masculine and feminine, is the symbolic double, the transsexual living an intermediary existence. The transsexual embodies a seduction based on fascination and deception, on the mingling of genders, on the binary stage of the



Rembrandt, Saskia as Flora, 1635. London, National Gallery

instincts at the crossroads of two orders of desire. Hermes acts as the shuttle between two worlds, the human and the divine, the high and the low; he lives on unveilings and concealments, he is a messenger of the “non-social,” in that in his double role he is bearer of confusion and intermixing, of disorder and perversion. But at the same time, as a god, he is pure principle; he announces what will occur. The transsexual, by taking the place of the deity, is thus transformed into an oracle. With his erotic unreliability, or rather his sexual ambivalence, he is best endowed to predict the future. He wears his completeness, his perfection—the antithesis of the reigning norms—as a maximum beauty, outside the rigid barriers of collective thought as represented by Classical art.

Into the Underworld of History

The fact that, for Witkin, transgression and perversion are not acts of defiance and negation, but forms of reception and recognition of a newly defined form of feeling and seeing that demands veneration, is literally personified in the photographs. Here we find subjects such as the sightless—*Blind Woman with Her Blind Son*, Nogales (1989; plate n.79)—and people suffering from severe and fatal diseases—*John Herring P.W.A., Posed as Flora with Lover and Mother*, New Mexico (1992; plate n.97), and *Costumed Inmate*, Budapest (1993; plate n.103). The darkness of the sightless is equivalent to that of the mental abyss of the madman: “The subject of *Costumed Inmate* has been an inmate in the asylum for over eighteen years. I chose to photograph her because of her almost complete removal from the world. I chose a costume for her to show society’s fear of difference. Who can say what contribution to life this woman could make? She is left to perceive existence with her own reality, with her own language, which no one has nor will probably ever hear.”²⁸

The personification of the goddess Flora is an homage to pleasure and licentiousness. Witkin portrays her in various guises, and describes the garden of delights reflecting her sensuality as well as her innocence: “John Herring, who is now dead of AIDS, was a friend. Knowing he would die of AIDS, I wished to make a classical portrait of something of John’s life, joy and death. I posed him as Flora by Rembrandt. Flora was the goddess of flowers. John was thrilled with this idea since, until his illness, he had devoted his entire life to working as a florist. The background was based on paintings by Tiziano and Tintoretto. I posed John’s lover as though holding John in an embrace. I posed John’s mother as though holding her once small infant. I placed John on a cloud-form in order to show his elevation above life and existence. The creature going out of Herring represents his illness. A pure child crowns his life as he accepts the end of it. The small child and the small white dog represent the thing he loved most: innocence.”²⁹

If the sacred is the other face of the accepted and the recognized, the side that religion tends to leave in shadow, then even the image of Christ or of sacrifice must be re-invented, by bringing in darkness and the unknown, to broaden knowledge of these things. In *Penitente*, New Mexico (1982; plate n.29), and *Savoir of the Primates*, New Mexico (1982; plate n.31), the other face of God on Earth, Christ, is presented through other creatures, the human and the animal. Witkin subjects the figure of religiosity to a ritual passage, that of the Mexican *penitentes* who have themselves crucified at Eastertime, and to an animal sacrifice. These are two lower worlds that never come out into the light, but are nevertheless signs of another sacredness, the sort that spills over into the



Odilon Redon, *Head of Martyr*, 1877.
Otterlo, Rijksmuseum Kroller-Muller

violence and cruelty of immolation. At the source it is always a spiritual principle that suggests the image, which in Witkin must always take the form of the reintegration of society's dark monsters. The immersion into the darkness and filth of an animal carcass or into the ecstasy of a penitent is marked by the eroticism of a back-and-forth movement between life and death, which on the cross becomes a transmutation and cosmic interchange.

The descent into the underworld of ancient myth takes place in *Laokoön*, *New Mexico* (1992; plate n.95), where the carcasses of primates replace, with the impure gushing of their rotten flesh, the liberating muscular tension of the Greek hero. The battle waged by the priest and his sons against the serpents is now extended into the area of devastation and horror, as though the struggle against evil and the torment of combat now concerned other primates, who deserve the same sort of attention for their suffering as we once paid to man. This exacerbated relationship to death and its carcasses pushes Witkin toward a hallucinatory scenario, that of translating a perversion into myth. It nevertheless rests upon a strong historical consciousness, an attempt to dramatize the present based on Baroque scenography. The need to spectacularize the everyday, to display it in scenes that multiply the unconscious and religious meanings through the use of figures and bodies, is especially typical of 17th-century iconography and its excesses. One need only think of the cannibalistic, necrophiliac desire implicit in the image of Salome as it developed over the centuries, from the Cinquecento with Tiziano, Bernardino Luini, Jacob Cornelisz and Bernardo Strozzi, up to Moreau and Redon, and compare it with Witkin's *Woman with Severed Head*, *New Mexico* (1982; plate n.22), and *Head of a Dead Man*, *Mexico* (1990; plate n.92), to see how the artist is influenced by the Baroque somatology of desire. His Salome affirms feminine desire; she is an ardent, veiled woman, mysterious and seductive, who devours the other's body. The combination of the erotic body of the woman and the hallowed head of the saintly man creates a relationship that is not very religious, as though for Witkin all victims, before being sacrificed, were guilty but desirable bodies, mere flesh. This dialectic between the absent body and the present body, between the body of the Church and the body of Christ, between the sacral body and the real body, is typical of the Baroque.

The inflection of a present in accordance with a particular historical iconography is indicative of a need on the artist's part to integrate the scenes and allegories of his own fascinating and terrifying desires and visions into a unitary path of History, and thereby to legitimate its course by linking it to the intellectual and cultural emancipation of human society. It is a way of rescuing the ghosts of the present in order to justify them through tradition and the story of ancient communities. Witkin uses history as a tool of iconic syntony as well as metaphysical-temporal justification. History becomes the matrix of emancipatory omens, bearing witness to the ceaseless formation of visions dominated by figures of dangerous, seductive, devouring monsters, half-human, half-dragon or serpent or scorpion, in the form, between eros and thanatos, of such figures of seduction as Lilith, the Sirens, the Gorgons or the perverse, frenzied maidens of Redon, Max Klinger, and Balthus. They are medusean beauties, with a castrating sexuality, erotic mantises thirsty for the blood of pleasure, femmes fatales and vampiresses that suck the energy out of the male-primate: *Sanitarium*, *New Mexico* (1983; plate n.37), and *Mask and Severed Genitalia as Netsuke* (1990).



The adulterated revival of the past is a way of carrying with oneself the traces of a disease—from the plague to AIDS—as well as the traces of a belief—from the pagan to the religious—that might reveal beauty and love, so as to be accepted in its present-day manifestations. This recollective process, in Witkin, passes through sculpture to painting until it arrives at photography: *Cupid and Centaur* (1992; plate n.96): “I believe the myths of the Greeks offered to the Western mind the thread of divine origins. I wanted to recreate ‘the proof’ of Cupid riding a Centaur as it would be presented in a Museum of Love—a Museum of Belief we all need so desperately.”³⁰

This revival works on the absoluteness of the mythic archetypes as they have been represented in the various languages of the past and present. Such is the case with *Von Gloeden in Asien, New York City* (1984; plate n.40): “Von Gloeden is my connection with male beauty, which we more and more realize has been with us from the time of the Greek pagan gods. My image is homoerotic, but a person who is not homosexual can also love the male body. I am interested in historical references, social references, and aesthetic references. [...] And it’s interesting how people’s perception as viewers and creators of work changes just because of the viability that they’re exposed to by way of the quality of the images they’re addressing.”³¹

One of Witkin’s references is the realism of Caravaggio, with his vision of dramas and events dominated by a sense of tragedy and silence, by darkness and a commitment to the Counterreformation. It is his monumentalization of human events—“used to overcome the contemplative character of the artist with a moral interest”³²—that Witkin looks to, to demonstrate how art and photography can become ethical, civil testimonies.



J.-P. Witkin, *Von Gloeden in Asien*,
New York City, 1984

One need only look at the treatment of Caravaggio's *Bacchus* (1596), which the American artist transforms into *Portrait of Holocaust, New Mexico* (1982; plate n.24), to see that Witkin is against formalism and in favor of a photography that "observes the truth" and is therefore not abstracted from history, but present, by virtue of history's very authority. The echo of 17th-century naturalism, with its awareness of the real things, as opposed to allegories, that come into our perception, is reflected in other quotations as well, which range from Rubens—echoed directly in *Journies of the Mask: Helena Fourment, San Francisco* (1984; plate n.41)—to Velázquez to Rembrandt, passing by way of Bernini and Guido Reni and including Manuel Osorio de Zuniga. Such references abound in *Penitente, New Mexico* (1982; plate n.29), *Portrait of a Dwarf, Los Angeles* (1987; plate n.68), *John Herring P.W.A., Posed as Flora with Lover and Mother, New Mexico* (1992; plate n.97), and *Manuel Osorio, New Mexico* (1982; plate n.33), as well as in the great photographic narratives of *Las Meniñas, New Mexico* (1987; plate n.69), and *The Fool, Budapest* (1993).

The representation of the representation of these great realists indicates, in Witkin, an acceptance of reality, in all its crudity, as a cognitive value, a guide to the discovery of the world. It is interesting to point out that his photographic creations, though spiritual in subject, differ linguistically from the documentary representations of Arbus and the idealized, neo-Classical figurations of Mapplethorpe, as though Witkin were rejecting the innocent voyeurism of the former and the sublimations of bodies and sex of the latter. Both detached from the context—perhaps because they shoot their photographs in ghettoized places such as mental hospitals or in the studio—Arbus and Mapplethorpe (and Weegee) seem to reject all historical experience, while in Witkin this often takes the form of the artist's projecting himself into the past and the vagaries of art. He does not register the here and now, but defines and registers without choosing or isolating, positing distinctions and hierarchies that do not come from history.

In this sense, Witkin's photography of the imagination, though rebellious, is almost reformist, since it does not remove its eyes from the sculptural and painterly model. It re-makes, by conditioning the subject and violating the traditional realistic procedure. He doesn't merely imitate, but rather creates things and forms, scratching and marking the negative, or shaping the bodies of subjects by adding plastic protuberances. He thus exerts not an objective, but a participatory imagination—something halfway between historical photography and genre photography that can adapt to tragedy and drama as easily as fable and comedy. Witkin moves from the one to the other because he is presenting the past, something that belongs to history, but at the same time he is portraying the present, what is happening now and may occur again in the future.

Witkin's historical adventure is thus an open one. It may relate to Michelangelo's notion of the sublime, as in *Decadent Artists, New Mexico* (1983; plate n.39), or to the realism of Caravaggio, but it also draws on the bizarre of Arcimboldo's *Four Seasons in Harvest, Philadelphia* (1984; plate n.48), and on the 17th and 18th-century still-life manner of Willem Claesz and Abraham van Beyerens in *Feast of Fools, New Mexico* (1990; plate n.83), and *Still Life, Marseilles* (1992; plate n.94). In all these references what counts most is the awareness of the tragedy of death as the sole real otherness in life. They are usually oppositional and perpetuate an impossible relationship, a situation that Witkin struggles

with in order to fuse them together and make them interpenetrate: "In 1990, I was in a forensic hospital in Mexico City. A doctor took me downstairs and pulled out the drawers to show me some bodies. Now I have been to any number of hospitals and seen dead bodies —most dead bodies are boring because if they were boring in life they will be boring in death too. They are not going to get more exciting in death [laughs]. The doctor, who was tiny, a tiny Mexican man, opened the wrong drawer by mistake and inside there were parts of bodies, arms, legs, ears—floating around parts of babies—everything you can imagine, in this swill of human soup and pus and degeneration. And I said to myself, that is why I'm here—I can't even look at this, it's like looking into Hell! At the same time I said to myself: Is this the way I have to do my work? Is this the way I'm going to feed my family? But at the same time I was very excited, knowing that I do have a capacity to find beauty in the most vile, ugly things. It was an incredible challenge to see this event. [...] I came back the next day to the forensic hospital knowing that I can put a photograph together, and the photograph became the *Feast of Fools*."³³

In portraying the mortal remains of the human being in the form of a still life, the artist does not intend to renounce the body and the flesh, but neither does he want them to be perceived through the prism of convulsive, unreasonable impulses. By arranging them in compositions like vases of flowers or natural decorations, he subverts their macabre aspects, aspiring to sublimate them and bring them out of their vile, unsightly condition to constitute a "living" life that will remain an allegorical transposition of the *memento mori*—like *The Result of War: Cornucopian Dog*, New Mexico (1984; plate n.49), and *Vanity*, New Mexico (1990; plate n.89)—but is also pure tragic figuration, a meditation on the reality of life: "*Still Life, Mexico* (1992), is an image of mystical life, of the most troubling light, of circumstance somehow redemptive. When I first held the leg, I realized

J.-P. Witkin, *Portrait of Holocaust*, New Mexico, 1982

Caravaggio, *Bacchus*, 1596. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi



I was holding what is now for her the space between her body and the earth. The idea of placing objects on a white ground, separating them from darkness, came the night before I made the photograph. I had gone to a small German restaurant near my hotel for dinner. After I ordered my food, I placed the unusually heavy white folded napkin on my lap and realized that the whiteness of the cloth would be the altar of presentation. I offered to buy the napkin, but the waiter refused, stating that only the owner could give permission and he would not return to the restaurant until the next evening. I offered to call him, but was told he could not be disturbed! I went back to the hotel and told the owner, an old woman who spoke English, what had occurred and what I needed. She assured me that she would talk to the waiter, that I should go to sleep and that in the morning before I left to photograph, she would have the napkin. I accepted what she said—mostly because I had to. The next morning as I approached the front desk, the owner was holding the napkin. She said she had to leave her alarm clock as collateral in order to get it. I assured her I would return the napkin to her that evening.

I took a taxi to the market to buy whatever best suited the making of a 'Vanitas,' which I knew would be, had to be, at once, the symbolic celebration of her loss, and my finding...beauty."³⁴

The emphasis on mortal remains and their fragments highlights the absolute irrelativity of existence, which Witkin confronts with a poetics that, in accordance with the Catholic faith, considers death a passage to the supernatural but also experiences it as an extreme event, a closing of the life cycle. It is yet another duality, which is disturbing because of the osmosis he creates between metaphysics and realism: "I do not make the work to disturb people...I photograph death because it is part of life! I look forward to dying because I think living on earth, on this plane, is one part of existence, and death is another part, and that we are constantly learning through the process."³⁵

Yet Witkin complements the passion for immersion in history's reality, as experienced in art from Caravaggio to Canova, with a sensibility broad enough to include Gustave Courbet. He feels in fact a profound bond with the French painter, who attempted to translate the customs, ideas, and appearance of a society and an epoch. The practice of photography, like art for Courbet, must not be only spiritual, but engage in an interpretation of society. Witkin is aware that giving himself over to Classical concerns brings with it the risk of art for art's sake, photography for photography's sake.

By including the reference of Courbet in his adventure, he implies that the representation of representation is a way of defining the allegory of life. Yet this allegory does not find concrete form in a utopian or supernatural universe, but only in truly existing people and events: *Studio of the Painter (Courbet)*, Paris (1990; plate n.85). The reference to that painting, in which Courbet portrayed his friends Max Buchon, Champfleury and Charles Baudelaire, is intended to imply that in painting, as in photography, there are no invented figures, according to Witkin. Surely he agrees with Courbet's assertion, made in 1861, that "painting is an essentially concrete art and can only consist of the representation of real and existing things. It is an entirely physical language, whose vocabulary is made up entirely of visible objects: an abstract, invisible object that does not exist is foreign to the sphere of painting."³⁶

In *Courbet in Rejlander's Pool, New Mexico* (1985; plate n.52), in which the figure portrayed is Witkin's wife Cynthia, the reference is a direct one, since Witkin

Pieter Paul Rubens, Helena Fourment in a Fur Coat. Vienna, Gemäldegalerie, Kunsthistorisches Museum

Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Summer, 1563. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

J.-P. Witkin, Journies of the Mask: Helena Fourment, San Francisco, 1984

J.-P. Witkin, Harvest, Philadelphia, 1984



J.-P. Witkin, Feast of Fools, Mexico City, 1990

*Jan Davidsz de Heem, Still Life with Fruit and
Lobster, 1648-49. Berlin, Stiftung Preussischer
Kulturbesitz, Staatliche Museen*



is deriving his vocabulary of the world from “real and existing” things; yet he transforms these things into images that are the synthesis of an historical and critical, as well as intellectual and imaginative, process. His realism is not a documentary realism like a piece of news reporting; rather, it is the realism of an experience whose boundaries are strangely open and accessible. A further consequence of this is the transformation of photography into a visual text open to the intersection and overlapping of unconscious signs and omens.

Witkin also counterbalances the historical and cultural overdeterminations with the fluidity of figures of the imagination and the inner depths, poised between the visionary and the surrealistic. For although sacrality resides in the unknown, the occasions for its existence lie within the caverns of the self, in their unfathomable, enigmatic depths. Sweetness and ferocity, intimacy and violence mark the imaginative lexicons of all visionary artists from Moreau, Klinger, Redon and Kubin to Dalí, Giorgio de Chirico, Brancusi, Picasso, Balthus, and Francis Bacon. Their disruptive, anti-orthodox language is an inspiration to Witkin when he is seeking to express the constellations of the tragic and the symbolic, the mysterious and the surreal, the morbid and the perverse, as in *The Guernica Variations: Pathological Reproductions*, New Mexico (1986; plate n.58), *Man without a Head* (1993; plate n.102), *Torture of the Pope in Exile* (1982), and *Nude with Mask* (1988). These are all metaphysical images, disturbing and enigmatic because they are marked by the absence of man as subject; there is only an entity without identity, a mannikin living in a hardened, solitary universe. An anomaly of life, like *Man without a Head* (1993; plate n.102): “I had requested the head of a cadaver to be cut off. I asked for a well built, muscular man. I was to return in two days to photograph him. I already conceived of the way I would photograph him—sitting in a chair. A dead man, without a head, sitting in a chair. I wanted to make the loneliest photograph ever made.”³⁷

That leaves the last imaginative ventures, the reflections on American and European magic realism and the absolute and perfect realism of the photography, in which the solemnity of the figures lies in the exclusion of any empathic or participatory process. Witkin turns to John Kane and Grant Wood, in *Portrait of Nan*, New Mexico (1984; plate n.47), or else runs through the spectrum of options contained in the photographs of blind couples by August Sander in *Blind Woman with Her Blind Son*, Nogales (1989; plate n.79), or in Man Ray’s *Violon d’Ingres* (1924), in *Woman Once a Bird*, Los Angeles (1990; plate n.82). The conviction that a photographer portrays or constructs images in order to fully realize his existence gives Witkin an unsteady equilibrium: he means to participate, but also to remain detached. To be other and others, in order to realize himself in their reality. To avoid now having to show his passions and obsessions, or at least in order to control them, he implicitly appeals to the cold definition of magic and photographic realism. He covers himself—in *Portrait of Nan*, New Mexico (1984; plate n.47), and *John Kane*, San Francisco (1984; plate n.43)—with a pictorial technicalism that estranges and obscures the figure in order to bring to the fore the mysterious and enigmatic intent of his inspirations, which rest not only on the obvious and manifest, but on the unknown, the sacred as well as the unconscious. The technique that covers the faces of the subjects, and the reference to the classical beauty of August Belloc, Brassai, von Gloeden, and Man Ray, are still other masks. They are tools of absoluteness that



serve to crystallize the surface of the painting as well as the photograph, to keep intact the volcanic agitation of the lavic force forever shifting, in Witkin, between mysticism and eroticism. Wavering between sexuality and spirituality, the body, for the artist, becomes an envelope, a membrane, the dross of existence in which thought and the soul, desire and the unconscious, lose themselves. Its real existence lies in being a fulcrum between high and low, suspended in the void—again, as in *Man without a Head* (1993; plate n.102)—a formless, spectral witness commanding, through its own physical encumbrance and its fleshly cavities, that it be portrayed in death: “What I wanted to do was not to make a photograph per se. I wanted (as I always do) to honor the condition of this man... I acknowledged the fact that I had the power to direct this, and said... ‘Let’s lift him up and put him on a chair.’ But to sit a dead man in a chair gave it a form of animation that was the most horrible thing, again very much like looking at the drawer full of swill and parts of hell. And while we were sitting him up, all the blood was rushing back from different parts of his body, like rain along an umbrella-handle, only it was blood rushing back. It was a terrible and wonderful situation. So we sat him up in this chair—it was an art deco chair, a very heavy steel chair—and by damaging all our backs, we got the huge guy up there. The background was set up already, I did that.

But he kept falling off, and the blood was coming out of him, and the only way I was able to position him was to take his hands and balance him; so he was informing me, in death, how he should be photographed. And he had socks on, and the socks were the convincing factor in making the photograph. Had he not been wearing them, it would have been too raw and punishing, but the fact that he had those socks on

meant that he was still in a very, very contemporary, human circumstance.”³⁸

The choice of an extreme image, of a person only recently dead, implies a descent or ascent to an inaccessible, unimaginable universe, that intermediary realm between the perceptible world and the metaphysical world, where the body can still be imagined as a living organism, though already carried away in a visionary, mystical realm, the place of the occurrences of the soul. It is the realm of the passing, when the body-spirit goes beyond the boundary and leaves the material world to enter the immaterial one: a place of suspension ideal for Witkin. In that limbo between life's cessation and the passage into death, between above and below, flesh and spirit, there exists a tension, a vibration that the artist is seeking to crystallize. Thus the readings of Velázquez and Courbet, where the painting freezes the scene or begins to document reality.

The reference is of course to *Las Meniñas*, New Mexico (1987; plate n.69), and *Studio of the Painter (Courbet)*, Paris (1990; plate n.85), in which the paintings of Velázquez and Courbet carry iconographic suggestions on the compositional as well as symbolic levels, but more importantly prefigure the poetics of the photographer. Witkin takes their images upon himself and reinvents their grandeur, making another metaphysical and physical drama issue from them. In *Las Meniñas*, New Mexico (1987; plate n.69), the allegory of artistic creation painted by Velázquez³⁹ becomes the self-portrait and self-quotation of a spiritual and subjective process that includes all of Witkin's thematics, from Christ and the disabled to surrealism and the remaking of history.

The narrative complexity of the painting is reposed through various shots and substitutions. First of all, the figures of the King and Queen, in the painting's background, remain, as though Witkin wanted to emphasize a royal continuity as well as the acceptance of his photographic agenda by History. Being protected by the sovereign figures, the image is granted recognition of liberality and honor; since Apelles had been so honored by Alexander the Great, and Velázquez by Philip IV and Marianne of Austria, the same must then happen for Witkin. Except that the protagonists of his photographic painting are no longer the *infanta* Margarita Maria, her maids of honor or *meniñas*, the two midgets and the *apostador* of the Queen, but lay, pagan figures, formless characters spawned from embryos of visions. In Witkin's *Las Meniñas*, New Mexico (1987; plate n.69), the *infanta* is replaced by a woman with stumps for limbs who is raised off the ground by a structure with wheels, a direct quotation of *Woman on a Table*, New Mexico (1987; plate n.71).⁴⁰ The *apostador*, who in the background of Velázquez's painting is announcing the entry of the Queen, here leaves his place to another “announcer,” Christ, who opens the way from one luminosity to another, as from one century to another. The *infanta*'s servants and attendants, from the midgets to the chambermaids, have been replaced by an astonishing, monstrous form derived from Miró. Finally, while the paintings that were in the background of Velázquez's studio have been replaced in the photograph by quotations of his own subjects from the religious to the profane, such as *Los Borrachos* (c.1629) and the *The Coronation of the Virgin* (c. 1635), Velázquez's place, on the left-hand side of the painting and photograph, has been taken by Witkin himself, though his face has been removed by scratches. The photographer's attitude in relation to the subject reveals, through the references, not only a perfect knowledge of the realm of painting, but also the fact that Witkin, like Velázquez, feels privileged to be able to make images of sovereignty. Thus if the



J.-P. Witkin, *Man without a Head*, 1993



J.-P. Witkin, *Las Meniñas*, New Mexico, 1987



J.-P. Witkin, Drawing for "*Las Meniñas*", 1987

Spanish painter was able to assert a unique relationship with the family of Philip IV, a relationship that ensured him a noble status as painter, Witkin's intention is to underscore a comparable situation of privilege. With the one difference that his nobility and status as artist depend not on the power and prestige of a king but on the impact of a geography of the formless and the unknown such as that based on the beauty of freaks and the disabled, of dreams and nightmares, reason and madness (*Las Meniñas* is dedicated to Spain and to Foucault)⁴¹, and on the consciousness of rebirth spurring the divine hybrid, the resurrection of Christ.

The figure of the artist as a character surrounded by the presence and memory of his visionary epiphanies appears in *The Studio of the Painter* (Courbet), Paris (1990; plate n.85), in which the space of the photographic scene is teeming with apparitions, in keeping with *Studio of a Painter: A Real Allegory Summarizing My Seven Years of Life as an Artist* (1855), by Courbet. Compared to the swarming composition of the French painter, however, Witkin effects a reduction, a cancellation of the sociopolitical context, concentrating instead on a personal and imaginary universe. In the foreground the painter-photographer is sitting with his face masked, in front of a painting, overshadowed by a bird with spread wings, while all around teems the human bestiary and crowd of linguistic references. Next to the artist is the model, whose gesture echoes *The Bathers* (1853), also by Courbet, while on the right bursts forth a quotation from the history of photography, the famous *Man in black suit with white stripes down arms and legs, walking in front of a black wall* (ca. 1884), by Etienne-Jules Marey. On the left is another reference to Courbet, *The Young Ladies of the Banks of the Seine* (Summer) (1856). On the upper left, there is a figure covered in black, with a death's head at its feet. The references are expressed in an intensive manner: for example, the *conjunctio* between painting and photography, and the way they breathe life into each other, are represented, as work materials, in the dialectic between Marey and Courbet, and between abstraction and realism. Moreover, the analogies help propagate the liberation of the libidinal and sexual material, which ranges from the coupling of artist and model to the lesbian union in the erotic revisitation of *The Young Ladies of the Banks of the Seine* (Summer). Finally, there is the obsession with the tender elegance of death and its ghostly, macabre geography, associated with entering the cavity of darkness represented by the funerary figure next to the death's-head.

Substitution occurs once again in the striking visual hotbed that is *The Fool, Budapest* (1993), in which Witkin's crystallization is heightened by visible strokes of the paintbrush scratching the surface of the negative, bearing witness to the anxious, passionate thrill of his experience of art and photography. This image combines Velázquez's portrait of *Philip IV on Horseback* (1634-35), and Tiziano's *Rape of Europa* (1559-62), which are transfigured not only into a nightmare situation, but into a whole grotesque world: "I was working with a kind of lunatic story about a person in a palace, exerting himself as a signifier of power, iconography filled with the colossal and the portentous. For Tiziano's *Europa*, the white bull was too expensive and the grey, spotted bull they sent over looked too much like a horse. So the owner of the slaughterhouse killed a white cow, cut it in half, and we had to drag this carcass of a half-cow into the palace. We used an actor for Philip IV, but I placed a mask on his face that was a photograph of my son, suggesting a kind of blind, adventurous youth. The actress had a pretty good body, but she was quickly fed up with the wax and latex of

J.-P. Witkin, *Studio of the Painter (Courbet)*,
Paris, 1990

Gustave Courbet, *Studio of a Painter: A Real
Allegory Summarizing My Seven Years of
Life as an Artist, 1855. Paris, Musée du
Louvre*





the mask I wanted to use to evoke the horrific, raped face from Bacon...The dwarf was covered with feces, so we made him keep his sock rolled up to lessen the smell."⁴² The grotesque amalgam of kingly and sacred representations from King Philip IV to the goddess Europa presents something anarchic and dissociative. It dislocates the power of history, shunting it into a primordial chaos delegated to the energy of youth, represented in the face of the king (Witkin's son) and distorted by the caricatural figure of the dwarf, who comes to represent the army or the people following the great leader. There is a loss of sacrality enhanced even by the transfiguration of Europa, who is no longer seduced by the physical sweetness of the Zeus-bull, but by his dismembered, impotent carcass. The deterioration of the allegory, like the shifting of kingly values, is effected by the splitting of the senses between the serious and the comic, the caricature and the grotesque. It is as though Witkin wanted to convey that catharsis does not belong to the tragic and the sacred, but to the power to *regenerate*. Essentially, all internal and external deformations belong to the resurrection of images. It is therefore possible to use Boschian monsters, horrid conjunctions of animals and things, of people and machines, possible to resort to Satanic characters and macabre symbols: even the images of the grotesque have a right to citizenship in this universe. Since they subvert, they are possible. In *The Fool, Budapest*, the photographer broadens his method of contagion, whose source is the prodigious and surprising efflorescence of hybrids and absurdities. He combines the absolute with the caricature, finding a dimension of balance that yields an unexpected poetry of images always arising from the depths and the unknown: "The Grotesque derives from *grotto*, the caverns and subterranean darkness. Saints have loved the darkness because that's where you go to bring out the people who are drowning. When I, as an individual, continue my journey into perception and better realities, I have to engage the person in darkness, because I'm in darkness. I have an opportunity to celebrate the person's life. But unless the image of emotional associations represents a moral equivalent of some higher, noble force, it can damage me and others in the process. If your life and work are about despair, there's no resolution, no redemption."⁴³ The expansion into the realm of the grotesque represents a further mode of expression, in as much as the representation is further developed, the portrayal charged with psychic values. It helps in rummaging through the physiognomy of reality as well as dream, and produces effects similar to the marvelous and the terrifying, because it releases a flow of buried images. By means of the grotesque, the artist enchants, casts spells, and with a smile the images can more easily cross the barrier of death. We are dealing with an almost wizardlike intensity here, where the transfixion of effigy in animal-figural-human form serves to exorcise all subjects that logic considers taboo. The disturbing impact of the grotesque comes, in this way, to rebound in favor of the tragic. With its inhumanity, it does not give rise to generic effects, but remains within the sphere of Goyesque, Boschian, Moreaesque, Redonesque nightmare, where the tumultuous life enclosed in a photograph is transformed into a piece of human skin, that which covers and forms the nervous system and metaphysical conceptuality of Joel-Peter Witkin, resonance-box of the fire of the divine Demiurge.

Translated from the Italian by Stephen Sartarelli

¹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, Free Press, New York, 1973; Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976.

² June Singer, *Androgyny*, Anchor Press, New York, 1977.

³ Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Sacred Self*, New York, 1973; Paul Virilio, *L'Art du moteur*, Galilée, Paris, 1993.

⁴ Joel-Peter Witkin, *Revolt against the Mystical*, University of New Mexico, 1976.

⁵ Quoted in Gerry Badger, "Toward a Moral Pornography," *Creative Camera*, London, September 1986, p. 33.

⁶ Quoted in A.D. Coleman, "Joel-Peter Witkin & Duane Michals," *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Summer 1993, Vol. 6.1, p. 111.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

⁸ Quoted in Hal Fisher, "Looking into Darkness," *Artweek*, New York, August 13, 1983.

⁹ Joel-Peter Witkin, "Believing Life to be Passion...", *Masterpieces of Medical Photography*, Twelvtree Press, Pasadena, 1987.

¹⁰ Joel-Peter Witkin, "Divine Revolt," *Aperture*, no. 100, New York, Autumn 1985, p. 36.

¹¹ Joel-Peter Witkin, op. cit.

¹² From the interview with Germano Celant, New York, November 7, 1993, unpublished.

¹³ Joel-Peter Witkin, "Divine Revolt," op. cit., p. 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ From the interview with Germano Celant, cit.

¹⁶ Van Deren Coke, "Introduction: Joel-Peter Witkin," in the catalogue of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, December 1985, p. 7. To this day Van Deren Coke's historico-interpretative analysis remains the richest and most detailed written commentary on the work of Witkin.

¹⁷ Quoted in Van Deren Coke, op. cit., p. 9.

¹⁸ Joel-Peter Witkin, op. cit.

¹⁹ Van Deren Coke, op. cit., p. 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, Plon, Paris, 1962, p. 32.

²³ From the interview with Germano Celant, cit.

²⁴ Franco Rella, *Metamorfosi, Immagini del pensiero*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1984.

²⁵ From the interview with Germano Celant, cit.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ "Myself and my brother are identical twins [...] we were born, my brother and I, in a still birth; it was called a miscarriage [...] there was a fetus. It was a triplet that my mother expelled too." From the interview with Germano Celant, cit.

²⁸ Sasaki Naoya, "Gamble of Intention. Joel-Peter Witkin," *Switch*, no. 5, a.11, Tokyo,

November 1993, p. 33.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³¹ Quoted in Van Deren Coke, op. cit., p. 17.

³² Giulio Carlo Argan, "Il 'realismo' nella poetica del Caravaggio," in *Immagine e persuasione*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1986, p. 147.

³³ "A Darker Light, Joel-Peter Witkin interviewed by Andres Serrano," in *Blind Spot*, no. 2, New York, 1993, p. 65.

³⁴ Sasaki Naoya, op. cit., p. 42.

³⁵ "A Darker Light...", cit., p. 65.

³⁶ Quoted in Linda Nochlin, *Realism*, Hardmondsworth, 1971.

³⁷ Sasaki Naoya, op. cit., p. 35.

³⁸ "A Darker Light...", cit., p. 66.

³⁹ Charles de Tolnay, "Velázquez' 'Las Hilanderas' and 'Las Meninas' (An interpretation)," *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, no. 35, Paris, 1949, pp. 21-38.

⁴⁰ "Woman on a Table, from birth a disease grew with her. After thirty-nine operations, the disease was removed — along with her legs. Enduring pain all her life had made her mystical. She could take herself out of her body and watch the surgeons open her near lifeless body. I photographed her on a small table in order to suspend her above the world, to show her majesty, her special space of removal and isolation." Sasaki Naoya, "Gamble...", cit., p. 47.

⁴¹ Joel-Peter Witkin, *Gods of Earth and Heaven*, Twelvtree Press, Altadena, 1989; Michel Foucault, "Las Meninas", in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan Smith, Pantheon Books, New York, 1970.

⁴² Quoted in R.H. Cravens, "Joel-Peter Witkin," in *Aperture*, no. 133, New York, Autumn 1993, pp. 58-62.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

To my grandmother
Maria Antonia Pellegrino
immigrant, holy woman, invalid

with



My photography has evolved through three time periods which have determined the three divisions of this thesis. The first section, entitled "Initiation," shows the effects of my primary visual experience on my life and work. The second, entitled "Induction," traces relationships between my concept of existence and my concept of photography. The third division, called "Insurrection," explains work begun in 1970. The work from that period to the present represents my personal revolt against the mystical. This third section explains the philosophical and creative causes behind the visual work. The work objectifies what my mind sees and attempts to understand. The subject matter of the work in this time period includes symbols of life and living—"God" and "Woman." Finally, the subject becomes the source of those projections—myself. The most recent work is an attempt to clarify the purposes of my art. These images no longer deal with fantasies or religion or myth. Instead, they are concerned with the fear of my being, the unknown of myself.

*"I'm looking for the face I had
before the world was made."*

William Butler Yeats ("Women Young and Old")

Initiation

This thesis is an attempt to understand my work, its sources, its methods, and its meanings. In the personal history that follows it is clear that the most profound experiences of my life—even my first conscious recollection—have been connected to photography.

My earliest recollection occurred when I was six years old. It happened on a Sunday when my mother was escorting my twin brother and me down the steps of the tenement where we lived. We were going to church. While walking down the hallway to the entrance of the building, we heard an incredible crash mixed with screaming and cries for help. The accident had involved three cars, all with families in them. Somehow, in the confusion, I was no longer holding my mother's hand. At the place where I stood at the curb, I could see something rolling from one of the overturned cars. It stopped at the curb where I stood. It was the head of a little girl. I bent down to touch the face, to ask it—but before I could touch it—someone carried me away.

This, my first conscious visual experience, has left its mark. Out of it I see many roots extending to my visual work in my use of severed heads, masks, and my concern with violence, pain, and death. I am no longer the helpless observer, but the objectifier who chooses to share the "hell" of his confusion visually, rather than to confront the quality that distinguishes a vital and functional being from a dead body.

Induction

No one could explain what life and death were. No teacher, book, radio broadcast, or television program could tell me. I concluded that only the Creator of all things, God, maker of death and life would know. I wanted to know, from him!

An opportunity to know came to me when I was seventeen. My fascination with seeing and observing things was based on the uncertainty of being alive. I wanted proof of existence itself! I became interested in photography because I felt that it could supply that proof. I had read several beginners' books on photography, and purchased a used Rolleicord camera and film for it. My father, an orthodox Jew, who

divorced my Christian mother for religious differences, told me that he had read an article in the “New York Daily News” of a rabbi who had seen and talked to God! I was ecstatic with the prospect of meeting such a man. Now it would be possible to know what death and life were from a holy man who had seen God! I called the synagogue and got permission to photograph the rabbi. My first photograph, the very first piece of film I would expose, would be of *The Rabbi Who Saw God*. I was to photograph him in his study, that was the very same place where God appeared to him!

That day arrived. I was escorted by a young rabbi to a great pair of wooden doors. He told me to knock, and he left me there. I knocked and entered with instant disappointment. I imagined a room flooded with light, angels, and suns. I expected rainbows and constellations with the rabbi standing, shining, and larger than a mountain. His voice would be of thunder. And he would tell me what death and life were and what became of that little girl.

Instead, I found a tired, sleepy, little, old man sitting in a corner of a large dusty study. I did not see God within the rabbi or the presence of God within the room. I decided to photograph the rabbi anyway hoping that perhaps, if I couldn't see what I had imagined to be there, perhaps the film would reveal it. Perhaps God would appear on the film when it was processed. Somehow, I knew that it wouldn't turn out that way. I closed the great doors still believing that the sight of God would give life reality and purpose. I believed that knowledge would come, and photography would be the means to see and relive my fantasies. These fantasies had no place in the ordinary, but only in the most secret and hidden things—in the strange, the bizarre, the invisible.

It was about a year later that my twin brother who was a painter, advised me to go to the Museum of Modern Art and show my work to a Mr. Edward Steichen, Director of the Department of Photography. Arriving there the next day with my work, I told a Grace Mayer that I wanted to see Mr. Steichen. She thought I was a messenger with a package to give him. When I explained what I wanted, she took me to Mr. Steichen's office. He was bending over a lightbox, looking at slides. We were introduced. I spread all twelve of my best slides on the lightbox. He studied them for several minutes with the same kind of secret care that I studied them for hours in my room. He straightened up, smiled, and said he'd accept one of the slides for a show he was putting together. I took the other eleven slides, said, “Thank you,” and left with Grace Mayer. A print was made from that slide and included in the exhibition, *Great Photographs from the Museum Collection*, Museum of Modern Art, 1959. This opportunity gave me the motivation to continue my work in photography.

My first photographic assignment soon followed. My brother was working on a painting that incorporated freaks. He asked me to go to a freak show in Coney Island, Brooklyn, New York, and photograph different views of a three-legged man, a dwarf called “The Chicken Lady,” and a person named Albert Alberta, a hermaphrodite.

I photographed the three-legged man, “The Chicken Lady,” and the hermaphrodite, with whom I had my first sexual experience. The freak show became my home, my real environment filled with living fantasies. Unfortunately, the freak show was moving to the South. I wanted to travel with them, but they didn't need a photographer and I wasn't a freak. Instead, I stayed in New York City and worked in commercial photographic studios. With the freak show gone, I began to create my own environments of personal fantasy to photograph.

The visual influences which had the most important effect upon me at this time were paintings dealing

with religious and esoteric themes such as those by Cimabue and Giotto, because of their depiction of the frozen emotion of the sacred; Rembrandt, because he made the sacred human; the Symbolists, Félicien Rops, Gustav Klimt and Alfred Kubin because their work dealing with dreams, perversity and satanism somehow challenged the sacred, yet seemed an unavoidable part of the sacred; Balthus and Max Beckmann because the former satisfied the appetite of his vision, the erotic and the voyeuristic, while the latter, dealing in the melding of pain, lostness and death, hoped to find what was “real” by objectifying it.

Another form of visual influence were comic strips depicting contemporary myth-heroes. I could never accept any symbol for its intended use, in any form. This applied to scripture, myth, and all art forms, even to the simple stories of the comics. Therefore, Superman became the hero of goodness, the secular Christ; Batman was the Lord of the Bird world and Darkness, the Anti-Christ; Wonder Woman—the Amazon of impotence, the Virgin Mother.

At this time, I wanted no personal contact with other photographers, preferring to work out my own vision in isolation. The only photographer whose work strongly influenced me was August Sander. His images were faithful to the character of his subjects. He was able to go behind the mask of each of them with the most straightforward use of the medium. Sander worked with the reality of his time, in the setting of his native land, and the consciousness of its people. My work would have none of these qualities. I didn’t believe in the reality of time or space, the consciousness of all people was outside my own. To me people were only masks. My interests would not be to reveal what the individual subject chose to hide, but instead to make the qualities of the hidden more meaningful. This is why I could engage the world on my own terms. I could deal only with people by superimposing my own mask on theirs. The work of August Sander had the impact of his reality, of his convictions. My work would have the impact of my irreality, of my doubts. The images I’d produce would not necessarily be aesthetic, but would represent source material of an individual’s rage of confusion and need to find the Self. I wanted my photographs to be as powerful as the last thing a person sees or remembers before death.

The next three years were filled with photography and death. In 1961, I was working full-time as a dye-transfer technician and attended evening classes at The Cooper Union School of Art. I was drafted into the Army because I was not a full-time student. In order to continue photography while in the Army, I decided to enlist for three years. Instead of being part of a combat unit, I wanted to continue working as a photographer, however monotonous the resulting work might be.

I figured everything wrong. I was trained as a combat photographer. There was no monotony; there couldn’t be. I spent over two of those three years working in twenty states and Europe, assigned to different airborne and combat divisions. Photographing maneuvers represented only part of my duties. The other half was documenting, photographically, forms of death. I recorded death resulting from accidents on maneuvers and death resulting from suicides due to unending depression, fatigue, and boredom. By this time, I’d become so hardened to death that I volunteered as a combat photographer in Viet Nam and received special training for my work there. After training and while waiting for orders to Viet Nam, I attempted suicide.

After being discharged from the Army, I went back to school and continued my photographic work in seclusion.

Six years later, in 1970, I made another trip to the Department of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art, and left my portfolio of photographs for John Szarkowski to see. He accepted two prints for their

collection. This was a great moment for me. A great deal had happened in the eleven years between seeing Mr. Steichen and Mr. Szarkowski. I had survived. I survived because of the devotion to the hunger of this self's needs; a devotion made visible through photography.

Insurrection

The work from that period to the present time represents my personal revolt, through the use of photography, against all things—mystical. I revolt against the mystical in order to be overwhelmed and won over by it. It is unfathomable, yet I attempt to understand it. It is invisible, yet I try to objectify it, hoping to find revelation and truth.

“You’ve got to get down into the pit of the self, the real pit, and then you have to find your own way to climb out of it. And it can’t be anybody else’s way. It has to be yours.”

Stanley Kunitz

Human into Icon

The years of military service resulted in creative dormancy. I felt *bound* to a form of institutionalized self. As a result I was more confused than ever, feeling cut off from personal transcendence. This transcendence could only be gained by my assuming the responsibility of my own reality. But reality still escaped me. When I closed the great doors of the rabbi’s study years before, I still believed that *reality* meant only one thing—the presence of God before me. Until that happened, I could have no identity, no purpose. I then was a man in my late twenties whose sole ambition was to see God and whose compulsion was to make photographs. In my impatience to know reality and therefore to understand myself—I decided to combine my ambition and my compulsion. I could no longer wait to *see* God—therefore, I would *create* the image of God! In order to know if I were truly alive, I’d make the invisible visible! Photography would be the means to bring God down to earth—to exist for me in the photographic images I would create!

I chose to incarnate Christ as God, because I believe he is God and because he still represents the living belief of this culture. He is the symbol, regardless of historical existence, representing REDEMPTION, and the end of suffering and confusion.

The series of photographs resulting from this concept was called *Contemporary Images of Christ*. I will state at this time that I have never nor will ever describe the photographs I have produced or will ever produce as being “pictures.” They are “images of things not actually present in reality, other than my own reality.” Pictures are common things which do not reflect devotion to their creator’s self-revelation—images *are* that devotion at first visualized in the mind, and then made material or, “visibilized.” I believe that all my photographs are incarnations, representing the form and substance of what my mind sees and attempts to understand.

“God created man in His own...”

Gen. 1:27

I believe that Christ was a man who transcended his bodily form and became God; or to put it in terms of my personal belief—God had placed on the man called Jesus—the mask of Christ!

In this series of photographs I made my own transmutations by using the energy of the needs and confusion of my consciousness and transforming them into the objectification of my ultimate fantasy—God. My faith in the need to do this transformed the images first visualized in my mind, then into the person, as model, who was finally visibilized by the use of photography into a sacred object-image, the photographic print—my Icon. I *used* people to make those images, as I used photography as a subservient tool to make the images permanent.

At that time I worked in complete isolation. I wished no influence from anyone, not even the work of August Sander. The work of Sander had been the only inroad I had ever made into the history of photography. Therefore, I truly believed that I was the only photographer who had ever conceived of making images of Christ!

I later realized this, of course, was not the case at all. However, I believe my motivations were of a vastly different nature than all other photographers who had attempted to create the image of Christ in photographs. Historical parallels include Oscar G. Rejlander, Julia Margaret Cameron, and F. Holland Day. The work of Day, however, offers the closest connection since he worked with the personae of Christ. However, Day was not a religious man. His prime motive in creating what he called “Sacred stuff” was to bring the art of photography up to the stature of the traditional arts. In a letter to Alfred Stieglitz in the summer of 1898 he wrote, “Since July 1, I’ve been doing nothing but Sacred stuff, and I think I have succeeded in getting some effects which are at least encouraging although as yet only preliminaries.”¹ This “Sacred stuff” was a series of 250 of Day’s photographs of himself as Christ. Photographing himself as the central figure in this range of subject matter was an extreme extension of his private fantasies into art. The justification offered by Day for this extraordinary operation and for the solemnity with which it was undertaken is that it continues the tradition of sacred art of the past. He wrote, “...at this period of the world’s history, it seems rather late for any serious objections to be raised to the portrayal of sacred objects in art. If the painter, and the sculptor are permitted to portray such objects, there is no reason why the etcher and the serious lithographer, or the wood engraver should not have the same privilege. And it immediately comes to a question as to the seriousness of photography.”²

I created this series with the earnest hope of finding “Revelation,” the knowledge of divine truth which would be the end of my suffering—the need to end confusion and find peace. However, the means of finding “Revelation,” of recording the Ineffable, Illusion Itself, was accomplished by another illusion, photography. The paradox was that photography is illusion and a two-dimensional pictorial system which represents material reality. This concept gave me great comfort, for it supported my own belief that I too was an illusion.

Being an illusion, working with a process that is an illusion in order to objectify Illusion Itself, God, gave me the feeling of purpose and with it, a sense of great power. I believed that the making of these images would give me the God-realization I sought and the power to create a new sacred art form, photographic Icons. The work would have nothing to do with any form of doctrinal practice pertaining to Iconography. I would create the life of Christ based on my own consciousness.

It became evident even in the planning stage of this series that I would be mocking God through this work. Already, I was jealous of the Creator of all creation. Feeling that I was only part of it, I wanted to dominate, as I felt God dominates. I therefore began to hate the very thing I believed I loved and needed most. That love-hate would manifest itself in all the visual work I would create; in the form of perversion, the desire to

first seek that which is good, but in the process of seeking it, the very thing that is sought becomes twisted and represented as something else.

There was nothing sentimental about the work. The very first image was made in a slum in Pennsylvania. It represented the coming of Christ into the world. Like Julia Margaret Cameron, I was concerned only with the expression of my feelings and not with historical accuracy. For example, in Mrs. Cameron's *The Return from the Temple*, she shows Jesus (Freddy Gould) as a four-year-old, rather than the twelve-year-old boy described in the New Testament. In place of a baby coming into the world, I used my brother's five-year-old son who was stripped of his clothes on an abandoned street of the slum. His face was then powdered white and he was given a dead bird to play with. I photographed this child as he reacted to the environment I had placed him in, to the dead bird which he held and the various reactions of the people watching from windows and curb sides. At the time I was completely oblivious to any psychological damage to my models as a result of my work. I did not care about anyone else's existence but my own. The models represented only a part of the means to my own reality and nothing else.

The life of Christ continued for me in any environment which served to heighten the power of the images I was creating. Rooftops offered seclusion. They were pinnacles overlooking metropolitan New York, on which my mental apparitions were visibilized. Seclusion was often necessary. One of my "Mary" subjects was a two-hundred-pound extra in porno films! More and more I felt directly influenced by my past. I did not suppress these needs, incorporating shock and the bizarre, as well as the humor I have always felt with reference to pain, in these images. My main concern was to establish as many irrational encounters as possible. I photographed Christ at the world's end, on a rooftop, exhausted and defeated by Batman, the Anti-Christ, Lord of Birds and Darkness.

Some of the titles of this series mocked the literal qualities of most photography and contemporary social attitudes. My purpose here was to denounce all methods of the past and all taboos of the present. One image, photographed in a commercial studio shows a young nude boy wearing a Christ mask standing between the legs of a seated, nude Virgin Mother. It is entitled *Portrait of the Child Jesus and the Virgin, His Mother, Taken by an Anonymous Galilean Photographer*. The stiff frontality of this image showed relationships to the daguerrean portraits as well as to the inflexible gestures of painted icons. The *Ecce Homo* of this series is Christ as a homosexual which mocked the Church's stand against homosexuals as believers. Here *Christ-Homosexual* wears nothing but Japanese World War II Kamakazi Flyer's goggles and a woman's spiked high heel shoes!

The images tended to repel and shock. Yet, I believe they possessed tender and enlightened qualities which were strangely moving. The imagery was highly structured and filled with personal symbolism. These symbols included ladders, black clouds, masks and severed heads. The figures were always isolated because the Sacred is always beyond nature, beyond existence. Other imagistic means were frontality and the placement of subjects in front of black backgrounds. The dark background gave the impression of viewing an inescapable confrontation within an enclosure affording no sense of scale.

All the work from this series was highly finished with every effort to achieve the highest resolution of the subjects documented. The prints from the series were very small and placed at eye level, so that the viewer's eyes would move very little while viewing the Icons. I did this so that the viewer's field of vision would approximate my vision during the time of exposure. In this way I hoped to share with the viewer my internal reality now made external. I confronted the viewer with my own relationship with the Divine as

evidence of my own incomplete self. This self like the viewer's, has no place in a contemporary life style which thrives on the myth of the escape, the happy, the normal. For this reason I have never considered my work as being therapeutic either for myself or the viewer. I do not wish to make a social adjustment through it, but wish instead to expand through the making of the work into a wider spectrum of life awareness.

Human into Myth

After a year of working on the *Christ* series, I accepted the fact that the images I was creating were not God, but were rather my personal interpretations of God objectified in the form of photographic images. These images were the product of an eccentric twentieth century believer in Christ. This believer could only relate to himself, to his God and to all people by the use of self-originated visual symbols.

I also accepted that I was not an illusion or a spectre who was able to sense without real existence. I had an existence—my own. I was a person and could relate to human beings as a human being, but visually I continued to relate to people mainly through symbols. I understood that my images were a kind of automatic writing, the feedback of my consciousness. I decided to continue the *Christ* series, objectifying my supreme fantasy of the invisible, and to begin a new series based on my supreme fantasy of the visible—“Woman.”

Life and death continued to be the most profound mysteries for me. I believed God was the power of creation, of life, and death. I was still jealous of that power. I was especially jealous of the way that power manifested itself in women who are able to give birth to beings who would eventually die. I was confused by life, by its origination, continuation, and termination. I could presumably help create physical life with a woman, but the idea repulsed me since I did not understand what life was and therefore had no wish to propagate more confusion whose end is death.

No one, not even Christ, was exempt from pain and suffering. I continued to show his suffering and his confusion to be God. In the new series I would show the paradox of “Woman.” A woman is alive and able to bring forth life but only by a process of pain and suffering. Conquest, shown as “Woman” in isolation, and degradation, shown as “Woman” in bondage would be the means of showing these “qualities” of the paradox of “Woman” in the photographs. I exhibited “Woman” in isolation, at times as a sexual object, but more often as an impotent Amazon having no direct historical or fictional basis.

My ambivalence toward “Woman” was often objectified photographically by the use of the sadomasochistic symbol of bondage: *sadism* expressed the twisted understanding I had towards “Woman” to repay “Woman” for my confused existence, *masochism* represented the abuse and pain I felt originated with “Woman.”

As I had expressed personal attitudes in the *Christ* series using esoteric symbols, in the *Woman* series I used symbols of pain and enclosure. I saw the body of “Woman” as the most beautiful and sensual object created, yet a prison for the potential life within her. “Woman” was real flesh and blood yet beyond the physical, in that “Woman” could transcend (as Christ) the body, by the miracle of birth. This was beyond my comprehension. Therefore, I believed “Woman” was both person and myth.

As in the *Christ* series, I continued to use masks so that the personality of the subject would not interfere with the potential image, unless the face of the model was more expressive than any mask I could devise, and as such, it was a mask. Since I felt less alienated from the world, I allowed my models more freedom to move and thereby participate in the image-making event. These shooting situations were in essence

“conceptual” since I explained to the models what I was trying to do and what I believed the image would mean. Then the models themselves could offer suggestions based on their own fantasies which I would later accept or reject at the time of making the exposure.

This method allowed for both a responsive and a directional mode of image making. I always photographed “Woman” nude because I loved the forms of the body and because the nude body represented timelessness. In most of the photographs I included “Woman’s” vagina since it represents the opening of the tabernacle of life. It is the tangible mystery, the true face and the true mask of “Woman.”

There were also strong connections between the *Christ* and *Woman* series. In the former, I was attempting to create a personal “graven-image” of God. In the latter I was attempting to create a personal mythological image of the source of all human life.

The source of the symbol of human life is the “World Mother.” She is among the oldest of the known divinities in the myths of the world. She was known to the cultures of the Mediterranean under many names—Cybele, Isis, Ishtar, Astarte, Diana; she was the Magna Mater, the Great Mother, who existed before anything else. She was the *primum mobile*, the material matrix out of which all came forth. In the prehistory of the Aegean she was the Venus-Aphrodite represented as the great cosmic mother with her son, the ever-dying, the ever-living god: Eros, the God of Love.

Joseph Campbell, in his book, *The Masks of God*, brings this all closer in time when he states:

“Let us press the question further: Can the Virgin Mary be the same as Venus-Aphrodite, or as Cybele, Hathor, Ishtar, Isis and the rest? No good Catholic would kneel before an image of Isis, yet everyone of the mystic motifs now dogmatically attributed to Mary as a historic human being belongs also to that goddess of whom Mary and Isis are local manifestations: the mother-bride of the dead and resurrected god!”³

The images from the *Woman* series represented a mutation between the peaceful and the sinister. As real experiences in life, these two attitudes represented the condition of my mind, especially during that time. The first images of the series were soft, representing romantic allegorical themes. As in the *Christ* series, I first made sketches based on my mind’s apparitions. The first images were of female friends and intimates. Soon I found it more gratifying to walk the streets of New York City and find the random female subjects for my work. The physical appearance and the personality of the women I approached (after they had accepted my offer to photograph them) would dictate what symbols I would use to change their reality to my own. I would then make detailed drawings of these potential subjects in environments I already knew of or had already created. In time this method of finding women became a voyeuristic process of stalking. At this time the *Christ* series was giving way to the output of the *Woman* series. This was so because my interest in the *Christ* series had diminished. Christ was outside the world, outside my power to objectify him as image. I was of the world, Christ was not. I could deal with the world, especially the world of “Woman’s” flesh—where I created a true photo-physical metamorphosis in which my fantasies were manifested by the most voyeuristic and perverse means.

A female who agreed to be photographed would arrive at the isolated location I chose, either outdoors or in a studio. Then she would undress for me and be the physical object of my Love-Hate! All this was done with her complete consent and cooperation. I placed “Woman” in coffins, glued leaves on her body, had them respond to phallic fetishes, tied, bound and masked them; all in the same hope as in the *Christ* series, that hope being my personal “Revelation,” the end of all my doubts, confusion, and pain.

Howard Hess in his book, *How Pictures Mean*, compares the two protagonists in the history of art, these are

the *formalists* who believe that art is a convention and the *fantastics* who believe that art is the truth, a hidden truth, a mysterious truth and therefore so much truer than reasonable truth.

“These are the two approaches: those of the classical rational disposition who try to impose order on the world, and those romantic, religious painters who try to find a hidden external order in the world, which is called *revelation*.”⁴

I have always been a romantic or fantastic artist and hope always to remain so. However, the purposes and the means to the creation of my art have always been and may always remain the greatest blocks to my deepest expressions.

The Work in New Mexico

In 1975, I was accepted as a graduate student in photography at The University of New Mexico. The opportunity to leave New York City after almost eight years of work on the *Christ and Woman* series, afforded the possibility of release from what I had become, a highly neurotic maker of photographic images characterized by extreme cruelty and satanic travesties. Living in the southwestern United States would mean open space, clean air and sunshine. It meant leaving a stifling city where my mind and spirit continued to be damaged. It also meant the termination of the *Christ and Woman* series. By this time, I had all but lost the faith I believed I once possessed, and my relationships with women were limited only to the women whom I would photograph and later seduce. I wanted all this to end! A new life and new work would await me. However, when I boarded the jet airplane for Albuquerque, I carried two cases; in one case were my cameras, in the other, my collection of masks and leather belts for binding.

The exposure to other photographers at The University of New Mexico and the study of photographic history greatly impressed me and expanded my outlook—theoretically. Practically, the vision and methods of my photography that first semester were for the most part extensions of the New York work. The new work was still based on the making and the consequent documenting of physical constructs. However, the university environment, and the many intense discussions of work and ideas encouraged me to investigate the possibilities of more humanistic and contemporary concerns. As a result, the photographs I produced that first semester were tougher images than the New York work and had no iconographic connections. The environment of New Mexico had no effect on this work. (I was a completely “urbanized being.” As a child I thought flowers came from tailor shops since I remembered seeing roses and carnations crucified between the breasts of women on their dresses, and over the hearts of men on the lapels of their suits.) The darkness of my vision and alienation from nature made me hate the sun, but I used its intensity to illuminate my images.

The new images were no longer stuck in time, either iconographic or mythological. The environments, now always indoors, were less about enclosure and more about a sense of release from containment. The images were more objective. They were about what people feel. As a colleague wrote of this new work after my first semester’s review:

“They are not about horror and suffering, but are the profound emotion which arises when a man is conscious of the potential of horror and suffering that is always present in the reality of the human condition. Here we are confronted with the depths that a conscious man can probe in his search to find himself and what makes us human beings.”

This statement is true. These were my needs, but the methods I chose to use to “probe” my search were

destructive. The people used as models for these images responded to ads I had placed in local newspapers. I interviewed all of them and showed them my former work. I was then careful to choose only the people who seemed the most damaged and malleable who would show their pain, for me. Now when I belted, hooded, and nailed a claustrophobic man to a wall, or when I bound a woman who only the previous week had been released from a local mental institution, oddly enough called "Nazareth," I was experiencing and documenting real feeling in real time. I was no longer dealing in the fantasies of my models, but in their attempts to suppress pain.

The reality of these situations gave these images an insistence and a velocity which caused them to be simultaneous assaults on the senses and the spirit. They were tough because they came out of conditions of real suffering. They appeared to be quiet, but the suppressed screams made silent, because a still photograph is silent, made the screams all the louder past the eyes of the viewer to his brain.

I was fully aware of the damage these situations could have on the models. At first I justified all the work as extensions of photographic and conceptual ideas on my part, that "Life Follows Art." But the results would never be justified! I finally came to understand how far I would go to damage other people and myself in order to make powerful images! Yet, I was still more than ever a seeker after personal truth, and more than ever confused by what that truth was, and by what means it could be gained. I continued to believe that I would find it in my work. I was devoted to my work, but that devotion had become completely distorted. I had failed in New Mexico. The new work was crueler, more fiendish than ever. The work had to change! A period of introspection began as the result of this juncture. From it came several realizations. The first being that I had always "stacked the visual deck" to my advantage. In the *Christ* series I had used as subject matter, perhaps the most powerful single symbol of Western culture. In the *Woman* series, the subject was the universal symbol of life, and the symbol of male bonding.

In the first photographs made in New Mexico, I included contemporary "kinky" symbols such as giant "dildos." I had also transgressed other symbols in this series, such as placing a muscular black man born with no legs in a cage—leaving him in there masked and helpless while I sought to find the "truth" before me in the viewfinder!

Another realization with reference to subject matter was that if the work eventually would not be accepted aesthetically, then perhaps the "oddness" of its subject matter would keep it from obscurity, assuring its existence as a kind of "industrial folk art," the art of the industrial age. It has always seemed to me that the "odd" would always be interpreted as the "profound." I have always believed that the "odd" for photography is the equivalent of the "primitive" in the traditional arts. Whereas the latter is the physical creation of a *separate reality*, the "odd" photographic image would always have its dependence on *reality*, therefore making its pictured reality believable, to the point of being profound.

Another reality involved method. All along I had *used* the photographic process of camera image making solely to record my "personal vision." I had *used* this process rather than *including* it in the image making or the print making process. If the work had to change, I had to include these realities.

The greatest change had to involve subject matter. I had to know if I had a photographic vision or not. Was the work powerful because of the subject matter or what I brought to the work? If the work was to be truly new and honest, the "person as symbol" could not be part of the work.

After this period of reflection, I evolved a new method of image and print making which represented the complete opposite of the method I had always used. I would now photograph in bright sunshine, and

without a tripod; the camera would be an extension of my body and mind. I wished to be free to move and respond as quickly as possible, therefore only one camera would be used. A 35 mm camera was chosen because of its small size and weight. It would be equipped with one lens, a 28 mm wide angle lens, because it afforded excellent image coverage and depth of field. The film to be used would be Kodak Tri-X Panchromatic film because it offered a wide exposure range. Previously I had always used fine grain developers in processing film and made small prints from the negatives. Now I chose to use a coarse grain film developer and would make enlargements of considerable size. (This change had already begun in the previous series in New Mexico.)

I did not know what the subject matter of my new photographs would be until I would find it. I felt that it would be something that I would respond to immediately; something that I could not construct nor plan for. On the first day of this search, I left in the early morning and did not return until sundown. I did this for two days; without making an exposure. By the end of the third day, still no image had been made. I was deeply depressed and began thinking of quitting school.

On my way home, I noticed an empty black plastic garbage bag being carried by the wind. I stopped to observe the shapes it made in the air. This activity was interrupted by rain which compounded my depression. The black plastic bag had landed close to where I walked, so I decided to use it as protection from the rain. No sooner had I reached the plastic bag—when the rain stopped! In a fit of anger and frustration, I grabbed the black plastic bag and began to throw it into the air violently and watched it as it fell. In a while my anger subsided and I began to enjoy the shapes this object made as I held and threw it into the air.

Then it occurred to me that after three days of looking for “something”—perhaps, this object or this activity was what I had been looking for. It could be that if this activity was worth doing, it might be worth “doing with a camera.”

I held the plastic bag at arm's length while looking through the camera. The 28 mm lens on the camera was focused at infinity, a common precaution to protect the lens against impact while not in use. Since both my hands were occupied, one holding the camera and the other holding the plastic bag, I had no choice but to view the moving of the plastic bag at infinity, but I made no attempt to change the focus of the lens since its effect while looking through the viewfinder at this object was a revelation to me. The plastic bag was completely out of focus and therefore the perception of its forms as it moved created visual changes which were entirely new and unpredictable. The background too was changed optically and symbolically, but in a completely different way than the object near the lens. The background was slightly curved, its perspective and focus seemed infinite against the glowing, moving form held in front of the lens. What I viewed represented a new image, which was completely photographic in its conception and perception.

I decided to photograph this activity of real experience, in real time, in which everything participated and moved; the world as background, the subject as an object from the world, the camera and lens as the means of mechanical and optical perception, and myself as activator within an activity which was new and everchanging yet and entirely photographic process that was mainly about responding to feeling, rather than thinking. I exposed an entire roll of film in the hope of photographing the visual activity I saw in the viewfinder, which was the result of my own movement holding the object and the camera, the changing movements of the object itself, and the visual and symbolic changes the small out of focus object had on the focused background. The fastest shutter speed was used to stop the action and to steady my movements.

Chance played an important part in this method of image making. Only in the final print could the results of my direct responses to the activity be seen, since so many visual events had taken place at the same time during each exposure. I had always been in “control” of my work. This new method offered the loss of control and the chance to make a new kind of image.

The final print showed how my responses to immediate activity, using this new method, produced an image of meaning without the use of production and without the use of people. This new method, because of its immediacy could reveal the essence of my photographic vision, and could possibly be the key to the vision and purpose of all my previous work.

The final print did not remotely resemble what I thought it would look like during exposure. The plastic bag had become a dark phantomlike shape dividing and dominating the world behind it, where concrete flowed into vehicles, and where the grass of the earth ran laterally past the phantomlike form and became a window. Here at last was a truly ambiguous image which, unlike all my previous work, illustrated nothing. Its meaning was not controlled but open and free to interpretation. This new image that was entirely photographic in its conception and process represented the first image of a series entitled *Objects Held and Thrown*.

I found it extremely important to participate in this image activity from both sides of the camera. This was accomplished often in this series, by the use of my hand as the object holding or throwing the found object. The use of a black glove over my left hand in several of the photographs from this series helped mystify when I chose to, the resulting image. My sense of ritual became part of this activity, since in looking for new subjects for this series, I'd often wear one black glove.

In several of the images from this series, “light” itself was the object held and thrown. This was achieved by the carrying of a piece of mirror, about 2" x 10", in my gloved hand. In one image the combination of my gloved hand holding the mirror resembled the profile of a deer, or a dog. The light glowing from this shape was focused on a young tree and outlined the base of the tree with intense white light. In the final print, this effect does not represent the light that gives life, but rather a light which kills. I identified strongly with the found objects. Often they represented objects which the world in one way or another discarded. As it happened, the majority of the objects found were dead birds. The throwing of these objects of former life into the air excited me. This action represented an atrocity in one image and in another, mocked the very essence of Christian truth—the Resurrection of Christ!

This series constituted the work of my second semester at The University of New Mexico. In most of the images from this series the subject matter was death. This was not planned, but was the spontaneous result of the methods described. These images continued to represent dark, odious allegories. However, given the conditions of image making, I believe this work represents the equivalent of my consciousness; a consciousness which derives emotional and aesthetic pleasure in the creation of images which pertain to confusion, mystery, and cruelty.

I continued this series in Los Angeles during summer vacation. Two major changes in method, at this time which had been previously worked out in New Mexico, were the use of one orange and one red contrast filter over the camera lens during exposure. This effect yielded a shorter tonal range and more contrast in the final print and also gave “cut-off” at the four corners of the negative. I liked these effects because they gave the final print more of a feeling of “dream-vision,” representing an additional change from the original reality photographed.

The second major change was that instead of finding the object to be photographed, I created it. This

object, and symbol of the Los Angeles work, consisted of two small rubber toys; the first, a woman's head, and the second, an alligator. I bound these two forms together with wire so that the alligator wore the head of a woman. I spent several weeks in Hollywood, California, making hundreds of images using this object. As in all the images from this series, this object was held close to the lens, while the lens was set at infinity, and as always, no people were to be included in these images.

After studying the contact sheets made from the Hollywood negatives back in Albuquerque, I decided to print only three negatives from all the images made there. I called the three prints, made from these negatives, *The Abduction*, *The Blow*, and *The Death*. The last image, *The Death*, contained the very thing I did not want in it—a person! Evidently, during the instant of making this image, I failed to see the woman who had walked from a pathway hidden by tall hedges and into the frame of the image.

This woman's *physical form*, especially the way in which it was cut in half by the frame—"made" this image; but her *presence* disturbed me. She was now part of an "incident" I had created, and also "a witness" to it. She had observed me symbolically inflicting pain onto the object I had made by attempting to strangle it. This object then became a symbol not only of the image, but of my *sadism*. I had been caught in the process of inflicting pain. In all my previous work, the viewer could never know that I had either caused or renewed the pain and suffering which I presented as photographic prints. This image proved it!

In order to protect myself and remain "the anonymous sadist" of what I created, I decided to remove all the evidence within the print that would incriminate me. What was exciting was the realization that real-time existed for me only in the print. The making of the image and its consequent existence as a photographic print now represented the reality of space and time. Therefore, to go back in time simply meant to go back: into the print!

I wanted to print from this negative because it was a strong and unusual image. I did not want to remove the woman since her form was so important to the image. What I wanted instead was for her *not* to have seen what I had done. Therefore, the only thing I could do now while printing, was to stop her from being able to see—this meant blinding her! I accomplished this by obliterating her face with a needle on the emulsion side of the negative. I used this same technique to "remove the evidence of place" existing on two billboards. The scratches on the woman's face could represent a mask, a severed face, death, but more importantly, they represented my continuing participation within the image—after the event itself had ceased to exist allowing me to change the image for my own emotional and aesthetic purposes.

The series, *Objects Held and Thrown*, proved to me that I have always had a photographic vision. That is, the ability to objectify emotion materially, so that the final physical object, the photograph, is that emotion visibilized. The Hollywood images from this series represent the most sophisticated use of the techniques begun in New Mexico. I believe these are the most unusual images I have ever made. They strip mystery in that they reveal *what* was photographed, and *how* it was photographed and later, what was *changed*, and in doing so, they are the physical translations of unconscious experiences, thus becoming new forms of the indescribable.

What I had learned in the making of the print, *The Death*, would allow me to deal with people who would accidentally become part of my images. What I still did not know was how I would now respond to the intentional use of people in my work. For six months I had evolved a new imagery constituting the *Objects Held and Thrown* series, in which objects were invested with symbolic meaning. But for years previous to this time, I had attempted to transfer these same concerns onto the people used as subjects in my work. I

now had to know if I could ever use people as subjects and what kind of imagery would be the result of these encounters.

I used the first three weeks of the Fall Term, 1976 to find this out. I still had grave doubts about what I had always tried to create, perhaps this had been and would always remain the universal stigma of art. But I have continued always to discover things about myself through my work. Photography was still the best means I had found to accomplish self-discovery, however painful the results.

Before beginning any photographic work pertaining to this potential series using people as subjects for the imagery, I resolved not to create conditions that would not harm those people or myself and to extend into this new series all the visual advances from the previous work, *Objects Held and Thrown*.

But first, I wanted to see how I'd react to a person as potential subject. A woman who was a close friend and who was well acquainted with me and my work agreed to be the subject. We would spend an entire day, if need be, in the hope of finding how I'd respond to her emotionally and photographically. For the first four hours of this activity I would observe her with and without the use of camera walking, talking, gesturing, and in different changes of clothing. It was useless! Finally, after a long silence I suggested she remove her clothing. She did this. Again the process of observation continued for two more hours. By this time I was beginning to think that all this proved that I would never again use people intentionally in my work. We were both physically and emotionally drained and for a long time sat opposite each other without speaking.

Then she said softly, "Get the mask!" She knew what I had dreaded most, yet had to face. I returned with one mask, a domed black hood. When I placed it over her head and face, I was trembling—with excitement. I stepped back to observe what I had done. What I saw *was* my visual reality. She was real now because she did not have a face! I had to acknowledge that using masks was an integral part of my vision. After I removed the mask, we made arrangements to photograph the following day. I spent that evening feverishly making drawings pertaining to the way I'd photograph her. Early the next morning, hours before the photography was to take place, I telephoned her and asked that she bring her dog. I would photograph both of them in the image I had planned. In the resulting image the animal was close to the camera lens and therefore out of focus, this being a connection with the previous series. The woman was seated and wore the mask. This image, as in all my previous imagery involving people, was about enclosure and isolation, but some other aspect existed now, that was, the deep pessimism of eternal waiting.

This photograph and all the others which were part of this series represented the futility of my longing for release. The people in all these images were myself. It was this self-acknowledgement which gave me the consolation that the lives of the people who were my models continued before and after these images were made. I carefully screened the potential models, making them understand that what I was going to do was a visual examination of my own mind. They would assure me as best they could how they felt about positive the "roles" they would play in the images I would create. This work would not be "photographic-theater." My work has never been that. I am not a part of the "post-modernist" tenet in photography whereby it is believed that all images are fictitious entities and that accepting them as representations of external truth is visually naive. My life is not fiction; therefore, my work is not fiction! Therefore, I agreed to photograph my potential models only after they understood that in my images I would deny, as I always have denied the individual character and reality of models. They were the visual symbols of my thoughts.

These thoughts now were of my deepest fears. Fears of loneliness, castration, and love. These images

represented my future—as the “Evidences of Anonymous Atrocities,” which became the title of this series. I had to photograph the unknown of myself, the fear of my being, in all the potentialities of its anonymous lostness, in the hope of facing it and thereby being emptied of it.

The technique used in the camera-image making of this series did not vary from the technique used in all the other images of people I previously made, except for the occasional placing out of focus of animals in the foreground. The printing of these images, however, represented an extension of the techniques of manipulation discovered in the previous series. As the negatives of this new series were being enlarged, I used a piece of translucent tissue, which had been textured by ripping and puncturing, over the enlarging paper and sprayed water from an atomizer onto the surface of the enlarging paper and the tissue during exposure.

The use of tissue and water served several purposes. They changed the areas of the print which would be in or out of focus depending on how the tissue had been previously textured prior to exposure and where I chose to spray water on this tissue during exposure. *Symbolically* this effect represented the “veil” which I believe has always existed between myself and all other life. *Aesthetically* this effect gave these prints the appearance of wire service news and war photographs—the hurriedly processed and printed evidences of political and social disasters. In this case, however, these images represented the assassination and battlefield of my own spirit. Another printing technique which I had never before used was the masking of the negatives from this series before enlarging in such a way that a black frame of about one-eighth of an inch surrounded the final image. The use of the translucent tissue during exposure gave this edge an undulation which I feel gave these prints the effect that the images were sealed in time. In most of these prints I continued to remove evidences pertaining to the model’s identity, thereby contributing to the images’ power. This series was interrupted in order to write this thesis. It has been two months since I began this confrontation between myself and my work—in order to understand its sources, its methods and its meanings. In that time, I have not used a camera or made a print. The temporary loss of this method of visual self-discovery has served to increase my sense of futility.

Until I resume my visual work and see in what new direction it may assume, I can only entertain the futile prospects of either continuing the *Evidences of Anonymous Atrocities* series in which the last vestiges of my spirit may well be depleted, or the continuation of the series, *Objects Held and Thrown*. In reference to this series, I have conjured a future spent in years of walking endlessly with a strange object in my hand and a camera around my neck, incessantly repeating the methods of this series as an old man, a lonely misfit scorned by people and bloodied by stones thrown by children. And that one day I’d be found dead in squalor surrounded by thousands of photographs I had embraced at the moment of death.

The only comfort I now have is that I am not alone. I exist in the world having individual existence that is not exhaustively describable nor for that matter, understandable. My work represents this search.

¹ Ellen Fritz Clattenburg, *The Photographic Work of F. Holland Day*, exhibition catalogue for Wellesley College Museum (Wellesley, Mass.: Thomas Todd, Company, 1975), p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³ Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), p. 271.

⁴ Hans Hess, *How Pictures Mean* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 111.

Bibliography

Borges, Jorge Luis. *A Personal Anthology*. New York, 1975.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God*. New York, Viking Press, 1970.

Clattenburg, Ellen Fritz. *The Photographic Work of F. Holland Day*. Exhibition Catalogue for Wellesley College Museum. Wellesley, Mass., 1975.

Hess, Hans. *How Pictures Mean*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1974.

Wright, James. “The Art of Poetry XIX.” *The Paris Review*, Vol. XVI, No. 62 (Summer, 1975), 43.

2. *Los Angeles Death*, from the series
"Objects Held and Thrown," 1976





4. From the series "Anonymous Atrocities," 1977



5. *The Emperor of Japan, New Mexico*, from
the series "Objects Held and Thrown," 1978



6. *Woman Breastfeeding an Eel*,
New Mexico, 1979















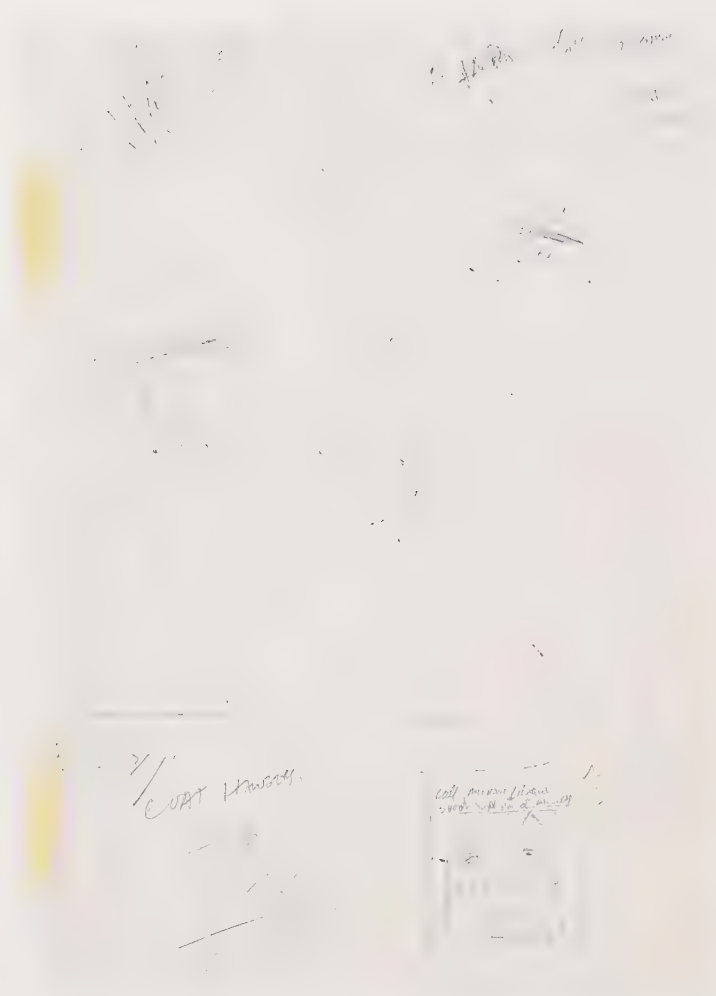












18. Drawing for "Arm Fuck," 1982

19. Arm Fuck, New Mexico, 1982















26. *Counting Lesson in Purgatory,*
New Mexico, 1982





28. *Testicle Stretch with the Possibility
of a Crushed Face, New Mexico, 1982*

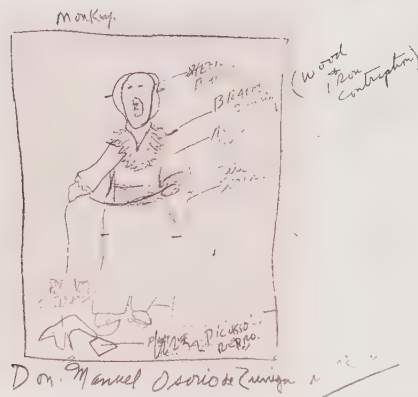




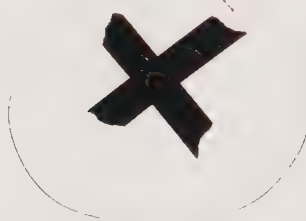
30. *Woman Masturbating on the Moon*,
New Mexico, 1982







X
near
red
fox



32. Drawing for "Manuel Osorio," 1982

33. Manuel Osorio, New Mexico, 1982









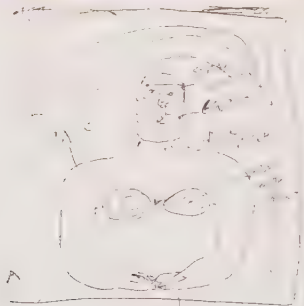
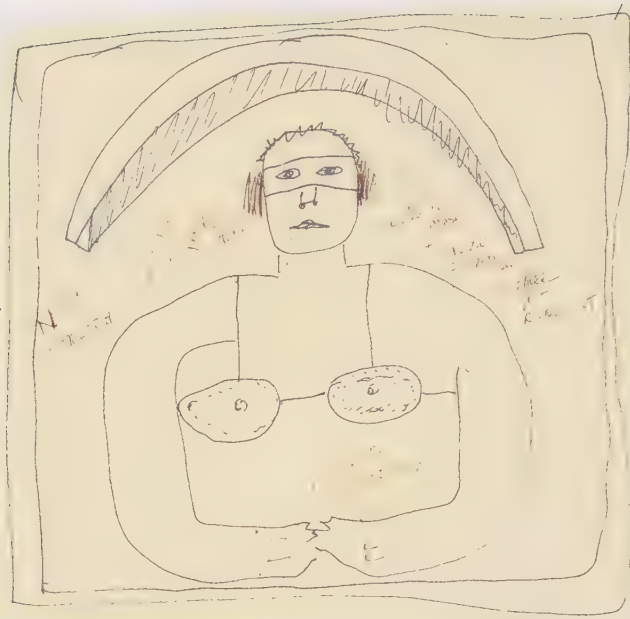












42. Drawing for "John Kane," 1984

43. John Kane, San Francisco, 1984







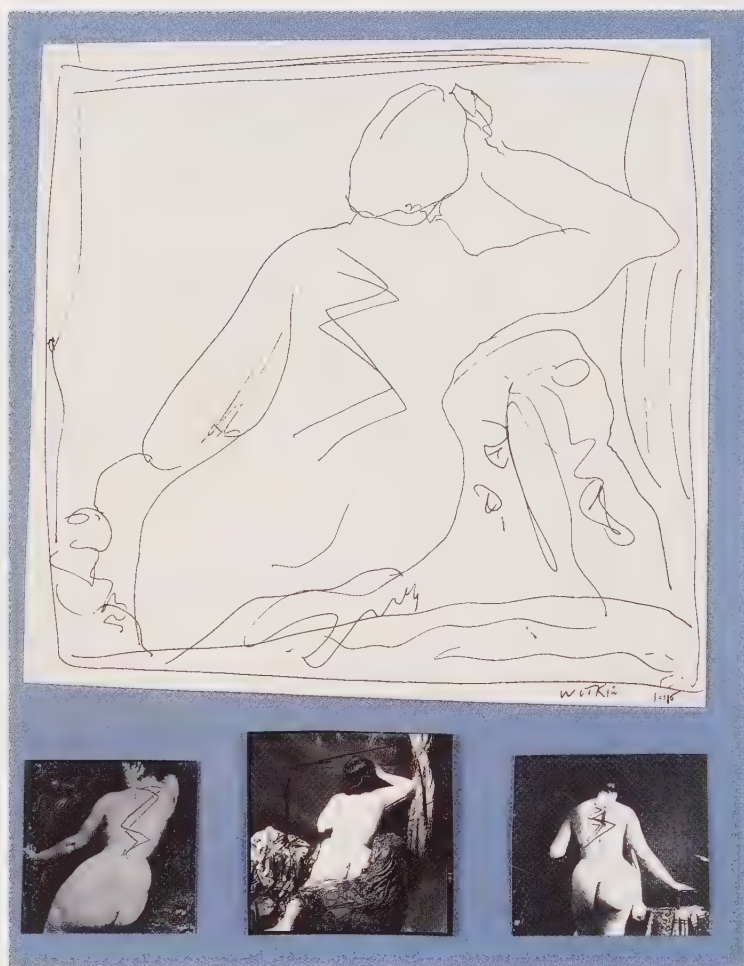












51. Drawing for "Courbet in Rejlander's Pool," 1985

52. Courbet in Rejlander's Pool, New Mexico, 1985





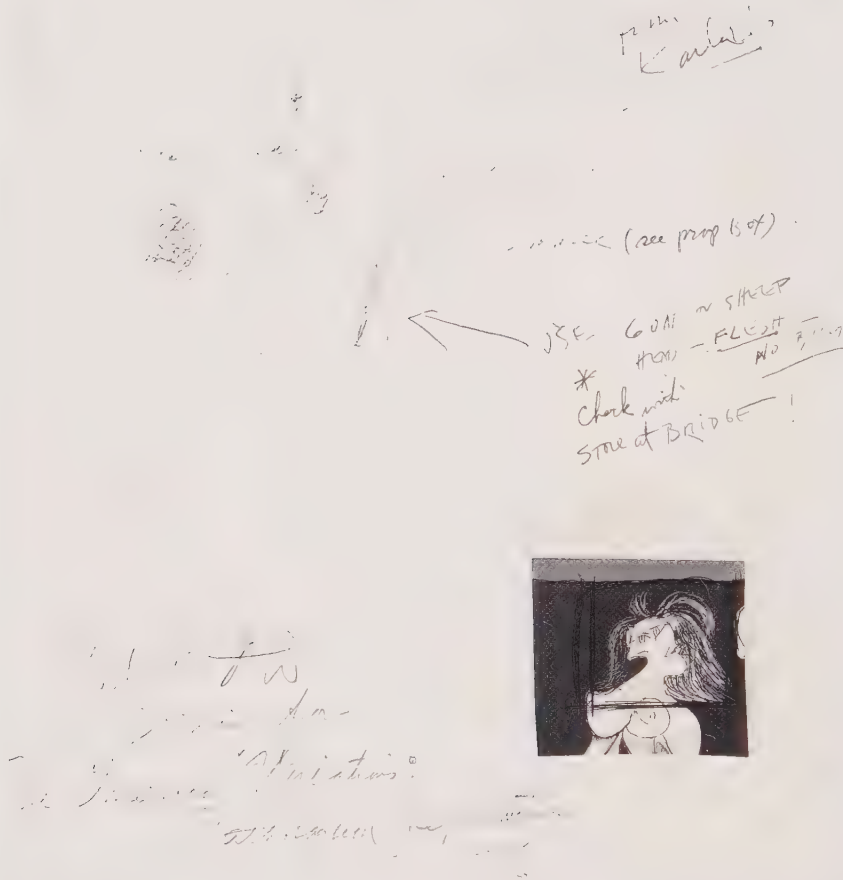


54. Drawing for "Melvin Burkhardt:
Human Oddity," 1985

55. Melvin Burkhardt: *Human Oddity*, Florida, 1985





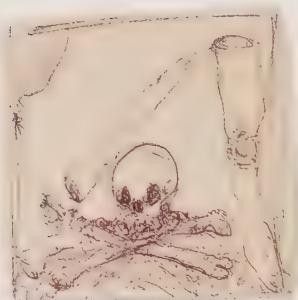


57. Drawing for "Guernica Variations: Pathological Reproductions," 1986

58. The Guernica Variations: Pathological Reproductions, New Mexico, 1986







with "Pied" Berlin 1986

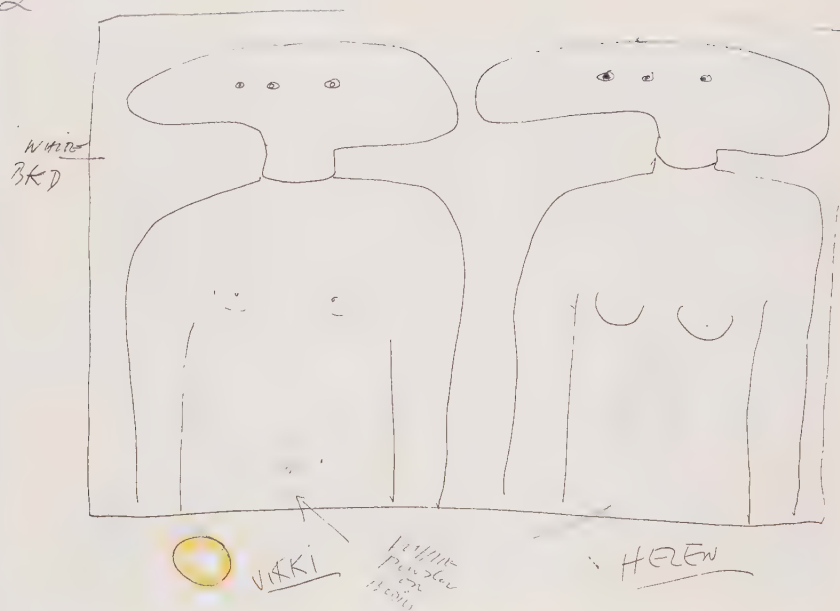
60. Drawing for "Poet: From a Collection of Relics and Ornaments," 1986

61. Poet: From a Collection of Relics and Ornaments, Berlin, 1986





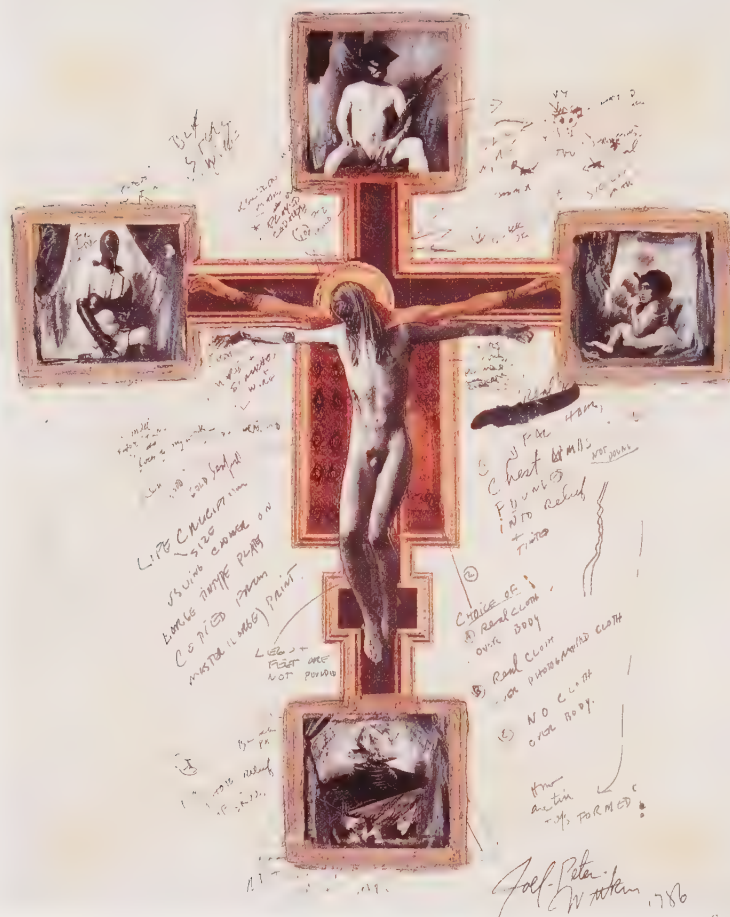
2 Women



63. Drawing for "I.D. Photograph from Purgatory: Two Women with Stomach Irritations," 1986

64. I.D. Photograph from Purgatory: Two Women with Stomach Irritations, New Mexico, 1986



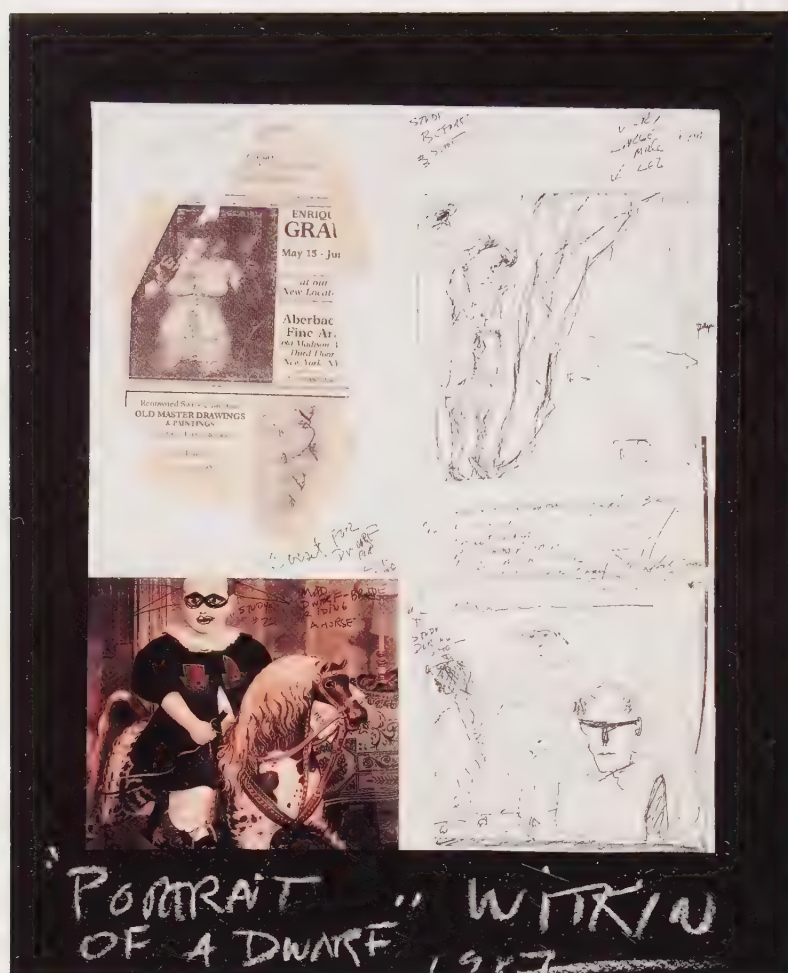


65. Maquette for the Crucifix, 1986

A partial listing of my interests: physical prodigies of all kinds, pinheads, dwarfs, giants, hunchbacks, pre-op transsexuals, bearded women, active or retired side-show performers, contortionists (erotic), women with one breast (center), people who live as comic book heroes, Satyrs, twins joined at the foreheads, anyone with a parasitic twin, twins sharing the same arm or leg, living Cyclops, people with tails, horns, wings, fins, claws, reversed feet or hands, elephantine limbs, etc. Anyone with additional arms, legs, eyes, breasts, genitals, ears, nose, lips. Anyone born without arms, legs, eyes, breasts, genitals, ears, nose, lips. All people with unusually large genitals. Sex masters and slaves. Women whose faces are covered with hair or large skin lesions and who are willing to pose in evening gowns. Five androgynes willing to pose together as *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Hairless anorexics. Human skeletons and human pincushions. People with complete rubber wardrobes. Geeks. Private collections of instruments of torture, romance: of human, animal and alien parts. All manner of extreme visual perversions. Hermaphrodites and teratoids (alive and dead). A young blonde girl with two faces. Any living myth. Anyone bearing the wounds of Christ.

Joel-Peter Witkin, 1985





67. Drawing for "Portrait of a Dwarf," 1987 68. Portrait of a Dwarf, Los Angeles, 1987







70. Drawing for "Woman on a Table," 1987 71. Woman on a Table, New Mexico, 1987





73. *Apollonia and Dominetrix Creating Pain in the
Art of the West, New York City, 1988*





74. Drawing for "Gods of Earth and Heaven," 1988

75. Gods of Earth and Heaven, Los Angeles, 1988







77. *Dominatrice*, 1988





79. *Blind Woman with Her Blind Son*,
Nogales, 1989





80. *Agonistes of the Eternal Wait*,
Portugal/New Mexico, 1990





81. Drawing for "Woman Once a Bird," 1990 82. Woman Once a Bird, Los Angeles, 1990







84. Drawing for "Studio of the Painter (Courbet)," 1990

85. Studio of the Painter (Courbet), Paris, 1990









88. Drawing for "Vanity," 1990

89. Vanity, New Mexico, 1990







91. Drawing for "Head of a Dead Man,"
1991

92. Head of a Dead Man, Mexico, 1990











97. John Herring, P.W.A., *Posed as Flora
with Lover and Mother, New Mexico, 1992*





98. Drawing for "Three Kinds of Woman," 1993 99. Three Kinds of Woman, Mexico, 1992

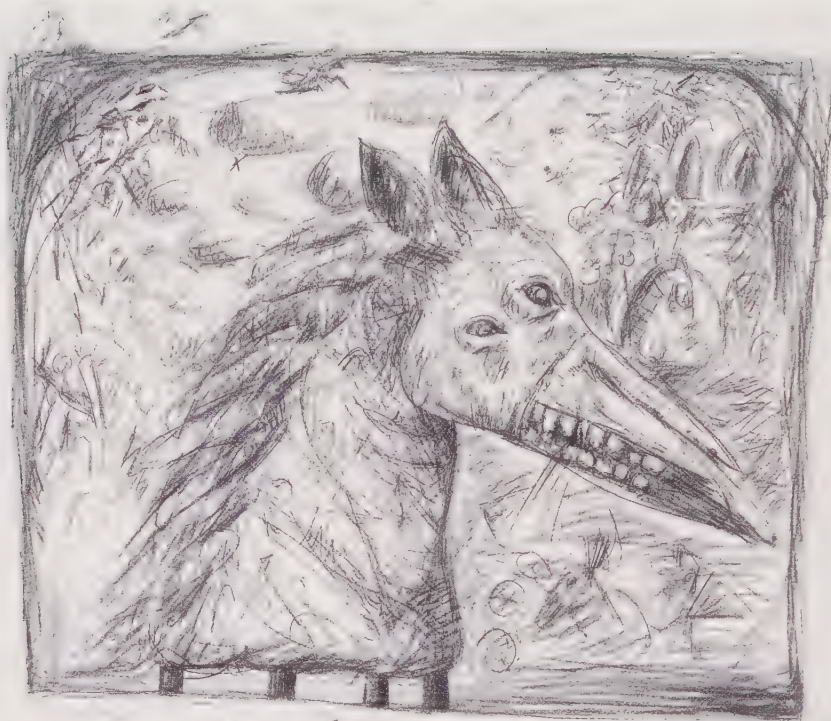












104. Drawing for "Printemps," 1993

105. Printemps, New Mexico, 1993













110, 111, 112. *Pictures from the Afterworld:*
Countess Daru, 1994; *Monsieur David*,
1994; *Madame David*, 1994

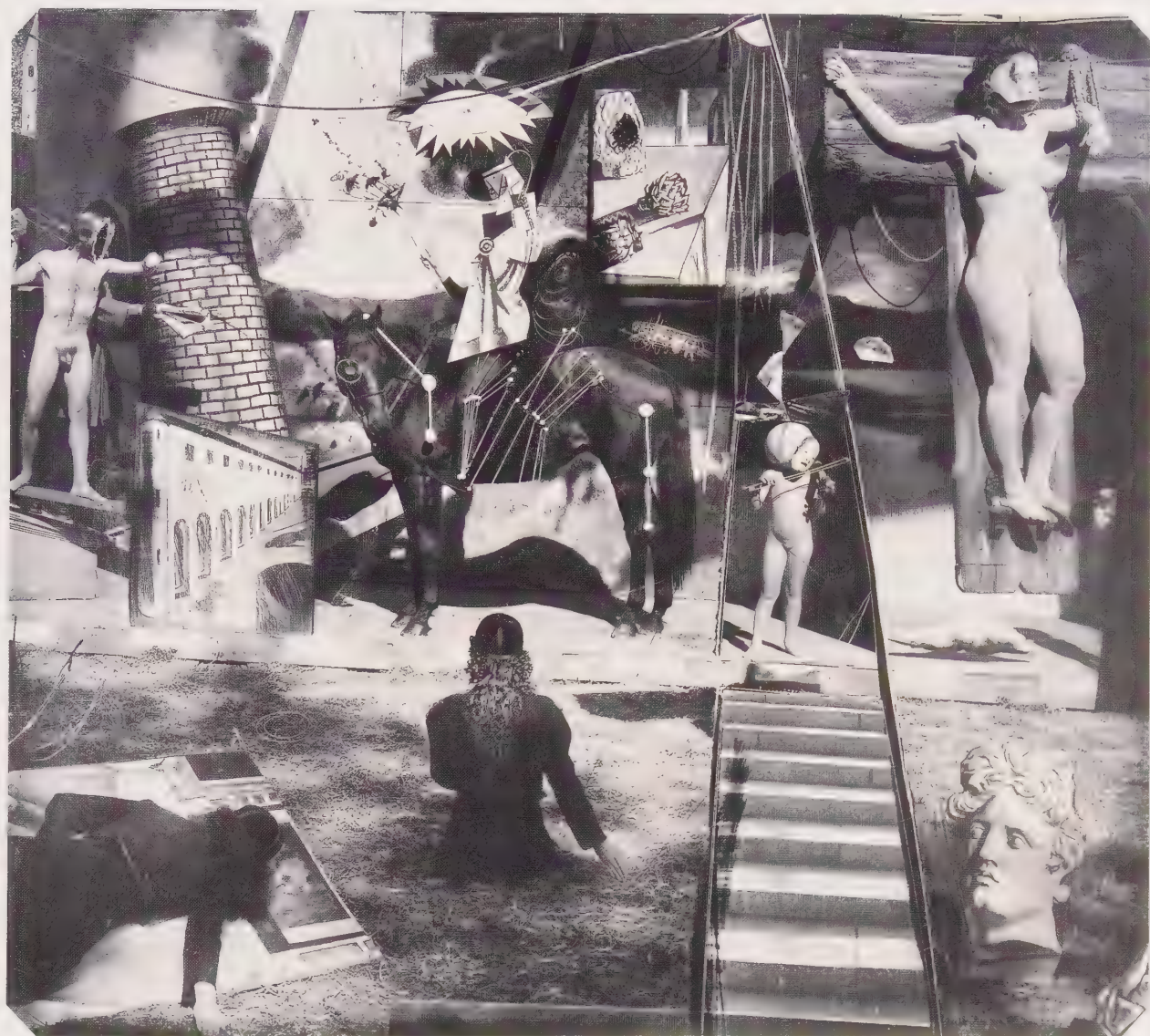


When people see my work, there is no “gray area” of response. What they experience is either love or hate. People who hate what I make hate me, too. They must think I am a demon or some kind of evil sorcerer. Those who understand what I do appreciate the determination, love, and courage it takes to find wonder and beauty in people who are considered by society to be damaged, unclean, dysfunctional, or wretched.

My art is the way I perceive and define life. It is sacred work, since what I make are my prayers. These works are the measure of my character, the transfiguration of love and desire, and, finally, the quality of my soul. With this work, I am judged by myself, by my contemporaries, and finally, by God. My life and work are inseparable. It is all I have. It is all I need.

Joel-Peter Witkin, 1990

113. *Waiting for De Chirico in the Artist's Section
of Purgatory, New Mexico, 1994*



List of works

Rest after the Passion, New York City, 1973
gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
11 x 14"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
San Francisco
(not reproduced)

Elizabeth D., New York City, 1973
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
10 x 8"
Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(not reproduced)

Mexican Pin-Up, New Mexico, 1975
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
16 x 20"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
San Francisco
(plate n. 1; not in the exhibition)

Los Angeles Death, from the series "Objects
Held and Thrown," 1976
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 25
9 x 12 1/2"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 2; not in the exhibition)

Indulgences (Leo), New Mexico, 1976
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
San Francisco
(plate n. 3)

From the series, "Anonymous Atrocities,"
1977
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 25
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 4; not in the exhibition)

The Emperor of Japan, New Mexico, from
the series "Objects Held and Thrown," 1978

toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 25
9 x 12 1/2"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 5; not in the exhibition)

Woman Breastfeeding an Eel, New Mexico,
1979
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 3
28 x 28"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
San Francisco
(plate n. 6)

Mother and Child, New Mexico, 1979
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
San Francisco
(plate n. 7; not in the exhibition)

Arms Broken by Windows, New Mexico,
1980
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 8; not in the exhibition)

Carrotcake I, New Mexico, 1980
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
San Francisco
(plate n. 9)

Cadaver with Necklace, New Mexico, 1980
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
(negative destroyed)
20 x 16"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 10; not in the exhibition)

Fetishist, San Francisco, 1981

toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 11; not in the exhibition)

Hermes, San Francisco, 1981
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
16 x 20"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
San Francisco
(plate n. 12)

Mandan, San Francisco, 1981
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
San Francisco
(plate n. 13)

The Prince Imperial, New Mexico, 1981
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
Gallery, New York, and
Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 14)

The Sins of Joan Miró, New Mexico, 1981
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(plate n. 15)

Madame X, San Francisco, 1981
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(plate n. 16)

Sander's Wife, New Mexico, 1981
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15

20 x 16"

Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 17)

Androgyny Breastfeeding a Fetus, San Francisco, 1981

toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
20 x 16"
Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(not reproduced)

The American Way, New Mexico, 1981
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
20 x 16"
Collection Robert Pearlstein, New York
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(not reproduced)

Arm Fuck, New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 3
28 x 28"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 18)

Canova's Venus, New York City, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
20 x 16"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 20)

The Bra of Joan Miró, New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 3
28 x 28"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 21)

Woman with Severed Head, New Mexico, 1982

toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
20 x 16"
Collection Samuel and Ronnie Heyman, New York
(plate n. 22)

Bird of Queveda, New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
20 x 16"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 23)

Portrait of Holocaust, New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
20 x 16"
Collection Robert Pearlstein, New York
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 24)

Collector of Fluids, New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 3
28 x 28"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 25)

Counting Lesson in Purgatory, New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 3
28 x 28"
Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(plate n. 26)

The Kiss (Le Baiser), New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
(negative destroyed)
20 x 16"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 27; not in the exhibition)

Testicle Stretch with the Possibility of a Crushed Face, New Mexico, 1982

toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
20 x 16"
Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(plate n. 28)

Penitente, New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 3
28 x 28"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 29)

Woman Masturbating on the Moon, New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 3
28 x 28"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 30)

Savoir of the Primates, New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 3
28 x 28"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 31)

Manuel Osorio, New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 3
28 x 28"
Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(plate n. 33)

Pygmalion, New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 3
28 x 28"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 34)

The Capitulation of France, New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 3
28 x 28"
Collection Baudoin Lebon, Paris
(plate n. 35)

26 Year Old O.D., New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
San Francisco
(reproduced on page 22)

The Invention of Milk, New Mexico, 1982
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 3
28 x 28"
Collection Samuel and Ronnie Heyman,
New York
(not reproduced)

*Journies of the Mask: The Phrenologist, San
Francisco*, 1983
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 36; not in the exhibition)

Sanitarium, New Mexico, 1983
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
16 x 20"
Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(plate n. 37)

Eunuch, New Mexico, 1983
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 3
28 x 28"
Collection Baudoin Lebon & Lunn Ltd.
(plate n. 38)

Decadent Artists, New Mexico, 1983
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Private Collection, Switzerland

Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(plate n. 39)

Von Gloeden in Asien, New York City, 1984
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
San Francisco
(plate n. 40)

*Journies of the Mask: Helena Fourment, San
Francisco*, 1984
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(plate n. 41)

John Kane, San Francisco, 1984
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(plate n. 43)

*Journies of the Mask: The History of Com-
mercial Photography in Juarez, New York
City*, 1984
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 3
28 x 28"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
San Francisco

*History of Commercial Photography in South
America, San Francisco*, 1984
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 3
28 x 28"
Collection Baudoin Lebon, Paris
(plate n. 45)

Man without Legs, New York City, 1984
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 3
28 x 28"

Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(plate n. 46)

Portrait of Nan, New Mexico, 1984
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(plate n. 47)

Harvest, Philadelphia, 1984
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Collection Baudoin Lebon & Lunn Ltd.
(plate n. 48)

*The Result of War: Cornucopian Dog, New
Mexico*, 1984
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 15
20 x 16"
Collection Baudoin Lebon & Lunn Ltd.
(plate n. 49)

*Choice of Outfits for the Agonies of Mary,
San Francisco*, 1984
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 3
29 x 28 1/2"
Collection Samuel and Ronnie Heyman,
New York
(not reproduced)

Woman in the Blue Hat, New York, 1985
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 3
28 x 28"
Collection Baudoin Lebon, Paris
(plate n. 50)

Courbet in Rejlander's Pool, New Mexico,
1985
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
of 3
28 x 28"
Collection Baudoin Lebon & Lunn Ltd.
(plate n. 52)

Infantilism, San Francisco, 1985
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 15
 20 x 16"
 Collection Baudoin Lebon & Lunn Ltd.
 (plate n. 53)

Melvin Burkhardt: Human Oddity, Florida, 1985
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 3
 28 x 28"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 55)

Art Deco Lamp, New Mexico, 1986
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 3
 28 x 28"
 Collection Baudoin Lebon & Lunn Ltd.
 (plate n. 56)

*The Guernica Variations: Pathological Re-
 productions, New Mexico, 1986*
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 15
 20 x 16"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 58)

Bacchus Amelus, New Mexico, 1986
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 3
 28 x 28"
 Collection Baudoin Lebon & Lunn Ltd.
 (plate n. 59)

*Poet: From a Collection of Relics and Orna-
 ments, Berlin, 1986*
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 15
 20 x 16"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 61)

Leda, Los Angeles, 1986
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 3
 28 x 28"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 62)

*I.D. Photograph from Purgatory: Two
 Women with Stomach Irritations, New
 Mexico, 1986*
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 3
 28 x 28"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 64)

*Picasso en Los Disparates de Goya, New
 Mexico, 1987*
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 15
 20 x 16"
 Private Collection, Switzerland
 Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
 (plate n. 66)

Portrait of a Dwarf, Los Angeles, 1987
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 15
 20 x 16"
 Private Collection, Switzerland
 Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
 (plate n. 68)

Las Meniñas, New Mexico, 1987
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 3
 28 x 28"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 69)

Woman on a Table, New Mexico, 1987
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 5
 20 x 16"
 Private Collection, Switzerland

Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
 (plate n. 71)

Amour, New Mexico, 1987
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 15
 20 x 16"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 72)

Un Santo Oscuro, New Mexico, 1987
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 3
 28 x 28"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (not reproduced)

*Apollonia and Dominatrix Creating Pain in
 the Art of the West, New York City, 1988*
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 15
 20 x 16"
 Collection Baudoin Lebon, Paris
 (plate n. 73)

*Gods of Earth and Heaven, Los Angeles,
 1988*
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 15
 20 x 16"
 Private Collection, Switzerland
 Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
 (plate n. 75)

The Graces, New Mexico, 1988
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 3
 28 x 28"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 76)

Dominatrice, 1988
 black and white Polaroid, diptych, unique
 20 x 24" each
 Collection Gayle Greenhill, Connecticut
 (plate n. 77)

Siamese Twins, New Mexico, 1988
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 3
28 x 28"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 78)

Blind Woman with Her Blind Son, Nogales, 1989
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
20 x 16"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 79)

Agonistes of the Eternal Wait, Portugal/New Mexico, 1990
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
three units, 26 3/4 x 48"
Collection Baudoin Lebon, Paris
(plate n. 80)

Woman Once a Bird, Los Angeles, 1990
hand-painted gelatin silver print with encaustic, unique
28 x 28"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 82; not in the exhibition)

Feast of Fools, New Mexico, 1990
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
25 1/2 x 35 1/2"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York,
and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 83)

Studio of the Painter (Courbet), Paris, 1990
hand-painted gelatin silver print with encaustic, unique
28 3/4 x 39"
Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris
(plate n. 85)

Daphne and Apollo, Los Angeles, 1990

toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
28 3/4 x 26 1/2"
Collection Baudoin Lebon, Paris
(plate n. 86)

Man with Dog, Mexico City, 1990
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
33 1/2 x 25 1/2"
Collection Baudoin Lebon, Paris
(plate n. 87)

Vanity, New Mexico, 1990
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
26 1/4 x 28 3/4"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 89)

Negre's Fetishist, Paris, 1990
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 15
25 1/2 x 32 1/2"
Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(not reproduced)

Head of a Dead Man, Mexico, 1990
hand-painted gelatin silver print with encaustic, unique
25 1/4 x 32 3/4"
Collection Lawrence Barth, Los Angeles
(plate n. 92)

Negre's Fetishist, 1991
hand-painted gelatin silver print with encaustic, unique
25 1/2 x 33 1/2"
Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris
(plate n. 90)

Still Life, Mexico, 1992
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 12
31 x 40"
Private Collection, Switzerland
Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
(plate n. 93)

Still Life, Marseilles, 1992
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 12
30 x 40"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 94)

Laokoön, New Mexico, 1992
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 6
20 x 16"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 95)

Cupid and Centaur, 1992
hand-painted gelatin silver print with encaustic, unique
33 1/2 x 28"
Collection Danny Elfman, Los Angeles
(plate n. 96)

John Herring P.W.A., Posed as Flora with Lover and Mother, New Mexico, 1992
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 12
30 x 40"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 97; not in the exhibition)

Three Kinds of Woman, Mexico, 1992
hand-painted gelatin silver print with encaustic, unique
25 1/2 x 32 3/4"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 99; not in the exhibition)

Satiro, Mexico, 1992
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 12
40 x 30"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 100)

La Serpentine, Marseilles, 1992
toned gelatin silver print, from an edition of 12

40 x 31"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 101)

Man without a Head, 1993
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 12
 40 x 30"
 Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
 (plate n. 102; not in the exhibition)

Costumed Inmate, Budapest, 1993
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 12
 40 x 31"
 Private Collection, Switzerland
 Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
 (plate n. 103)

Printemps, New Mexico, 1993
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 12
 31 x 40"
 Private Collection, Switzerland
 Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
 (plate n. 105)

The Fool, Budapest, 1993
 hand-painted gelatin silver print with
 encaustic, unique
 30 x 40"
 Collection Randee Klein Devlin, Los
 Angeles
 Courtesy Fahey/Klein Gallery, Los Ange-
 les
 (not reproduced)

Portrait as a Vanité, New Mexico, 1994
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 12
 37 x 31 1/2"
 Private Collection, Switzerland
 Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
 (plate n. 106)

Glassman, New Mexico, 1994
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 12
 36 x 32"

Private Collection, Switzerland
 Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
 (plate n. 107)

Studio de Winter, Paris, 1994
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 12
 32 x 36"
 Private Collection, Switzerland
 Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
 (plate n. 108)

*History of the (White) World: Venùs and the
 Magdalen, Paris*, 1994
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 12
 32 x 36"
 Private Collection, Switzerland
 Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
 (plate n. 109)

*Pictures from the Afterworld: Countess Daru,
 1994; Monsieur David, 1994; Madame
 David, 1994*
 toned gelatin silver print, from an edition
 of 20
 three units, 26 3/4 x 21 3/4";
 28 1/4 x 23 1/2"; 26 3/4 x 21 3/4"
 Private Collection, Switzerland
 Courtesy Galleria Gottardo, Lugano
 (plate nos. 110, 111, 112)

*Waiting for de Chirico in the Artist's Section
 of Purgatory, New Mexico*, 1994
 toned gelatin silver print
 Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
 (plate n. 113; not in the exhibition)

Drawings

Drawing for "Arm Fuck, New York City,"
 1982
 ballpoint pen, pencil, and collage on pa-
 per
 12 x 9 3/4"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 18)

Drawing for "Manuel Osorio," 1982
 pencil and scotch tape on paper
 14 x 11"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 32)

Drawing for "John Kane, San Francisco,"
 1984
 pen, scotch tape, and collage on yellow
 and white paper
 11 x 8 1/2"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 42; not in the exhibition)

Drawing for "Courbet in Rejlander's Pool,"
 1985
 ink, photocopies, and contact print on
 paper
 14 x 11"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 51)

*Drawing for "Melvin Burkhardt: Human
 Oddity, Florida,"* 1985
 felt-tip pen, pencil and collage on paper
 11 x 8 1/2"
 Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
 (plate n. 54; not in the exhibition)

*Drawing for "Guernica Variations: Patho-
 logical Reproductions,"* 1986
 pencil, ink, magazine print, and scotch
 tape on paper
 14 x 11"
 Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill
 Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery,
 San Francisco
 (plate n. 57)

*Drawing for "Poet: From a Collection of
 Relics and Ornaments, Berlin,"* 1986
 10 1/2 x 7 3/4"
 Courtesy Harry H. Lunn Jr., New York,
 and Galerie Baudoin Lebon, Paris
 (plate n. 60; not in the exhibition)

Drawing for "I.D. Photograph from Purgatory: Two Women with Stomach Irritations, New Mexico," 1986
blue ink on paper
11 x 13 3/4"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 63; not in the exhibition)

Maquette for the Crucifix, 1986
mixed media, collage, photograph, and gilding on paper
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 65; not in the exhibition)

Drawing for "Portrait of a Dwarf, Los Angeles," 1987
graphite on paper
18 1/2 x 18 1/2"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 67; not in the exhibition)

Drawing for "Woman on a Table, New Mexico," 1987
gouache, pastel painting, and cloth on paper
22 1/2 x 18 1/2"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 70; not in the exhibition)

Drawing for "Gods of Earth and Heaven, Los Angeles," 1988
mixed media, collage on paper
15 1/2 x 18 3/4"
Courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
(plate n. 74; not in the exhibition)

Drawing for "Illegal Circus, San Francisco," 1989
pencil on paper
16 5/16 x 15 1/4"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(not reproduced)

Drawing for "Woman Once a Bird, Los Angeles," 1990
34 1/4 x 25 1/4"
Courtesy Galerie Baudoin Lebon, Paris
(plate n. 81; not in the exhibition)

Drawing for "Studio of the Painter (Courbet), Paris," 1990
watercolor, oil paint, and pencil on paper
7 x 8"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 84)

Drawing for "Vanity, New Mexico," 1990
pastel on paper
48 x 50"
Private Collection, Paris
(plate n. 88; not in the exhibition)

Drawing for "Head of a Dead Man," 1991
pastel on paper
21 1/2 x 28"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 91)

Drawing for "Three Kinds of Woman, Mexico/New Mexico," 1993
pencil, pastel, and collage on paper
32 x 39 3/4"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 98)

Drawing for "Printemps, New Mexico," 1993
pencil on paper
8 7/16 x 10 1/4"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(plate n. 104)

Drawing for "Munch in Mexico, New Mexico," 1994
collage, pencil, and photograph on paper
8 1/2 x 11"
Courtesy Joel-Peter Witkin, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco
(not reproduced)

Appendix



A Brief Account of My Career

I began making photographs when I was sixteen. That same year, Edward Steichen selected one of my photographs to be included in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. That was the beginning of a life devoted to photography.

I continued to learn photography by working in various studios and laboratories. In 1961, I enlisted in the United States Army and worked as a photographer and photographic technician. I held the rank of Technical Sergeant and served until 1964. Back in New York City, I worked as a professional free lance assistant to medical, technical and commercial photographers. I attended The Cooper Union on the G.I. Bill, receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree along with a fellowship in poetry at Columbia University. In 1974, I received a CAPS grant in photography through the New York State Council on the Arts.

In 1976, I began graduate and post-graduate work in photography at the University of New Mexico. The following year, I received a Ford Foundation Grant, followed by National Endowments in Photography in 1982, 1984 and 1986. In 1986, I received my Master of Fine Arts in Photography Degree. In 1988, I received the International Center of Photography Award and the Distinguished Alumni Citation from The Cooper Union. In 1990, the French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, awarded to me the title of Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres for my work in photography. In 1992, I received my fourth National Endowment in Photography. In 1993, the N.E.A. and the American Center in Paris made it possible for me to create new work through a residency program in France. In 1995, I intend to create new work in Scotland, France, Italy and The Slovak Republic.

Joel-Peter Witkin

Biography

Born in Brooklyn, New York, 1939.
Lives and works in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Awards and Prizes

1974
CAPS Grant in Photography, New York.

1977
Ford Foundation Grant.

1981
National Endowment for the Arts, Photography Fellowship.

1986
Distinguished Alumni, Cooper Union, New York.
Maine Photographic Book Competition, Book of the Year (Twelvetre Mono-graph), Maine.
National Endowment for the Arts, Photography Fellowship.

1988
International Center of Photography Fourth Annual Award in Visual Arts—Mixed Media, New York.

1990
Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres.

1992
National Endowment for the Arts, Photography Fellowship.

Selected Individual Exhibitions

1969
The Moore College of Art, Philadelphia.

1972
The Cooper Union School of Fine Arts, New York.

1976
The University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

1980
Projects Studio One, New York.
The Cooper Union School of Fine Arts, New York.

1982
Galerie Texbraun, Paris.
San Francisco Camera Work, San Francisco.

1983
Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Hasselt, Belgium.
Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City.
Fay Gold Gallery, Atlanta.
Hardison Fine Arts Gallery, New York.

1984
Paul Cave Gallery, Philadelphia.
Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.
Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.

1985
Forty Photographs, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; The Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, Chicago; The Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York; Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee.
American Images: Photography 1945-1980, Barbican Gallery, London.
Aspen Museum, Aspen.
Institute Franco-Américain, Paris.
Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.
The Unique Vision of Peter-Joel Witkin, Galerie Watari, Tokyo.
Butler Gallery, Houston.
G. Ray Hawkins Gallery, Los Angeles.

1986
The University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
Anderes Ufer, Berlin.
Hochschule der Künste, Berlin.
The Tarrt Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe.
Fay Gold Gallery, Atlanta.
Galerie Baudoin Lebon, Paris.

1987
University of Illinois at Carbondale, Carbondale.
La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla.
Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.
Wright State University, Dayton.
Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.
Galerie Watari, Tokyo.

1988
Tarrt Gallery, Washington, D.C.
Hippolyte Photographic Gallery, Helsinki.
Rotterdam Biennale, Rotterdam.
Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid.
Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston.
Brent Sikkema Gallery, Boston.

1989
Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.
Fahey/Klein Gallery, Los Angeles.
Centre National de la Photographie, Palais de Tokyo, Paris.
Dart Gallery, Chicago.
Museum für Fotografie und Zeitkunst, Bremen.
Encontros de Fotografia, Coimbra.
Palau Sollierie, Palma, Spain.

1990
Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

1991
Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.
Fahey/Klein Gallery, Los Angeles.
Hamiltons Gallery, London.
Galerie Baudoin Lebon, Paris.
Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.
The Museum of Modern Art, Haifa.

1992
Fay Gold Gallery, Atlanta.
University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana.
Picture Photo Space, Osaka.
Studio of Young Artists Association, Budapest.
Fotograficentrum, Stockholm.

1993
Musée de Cahors, Cahors.
Pace/MacGill, New York.

Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.
Catherine Edelman Gallery, Chicago.
Fahey/Klein Gallery, Los Angeles.
Picture Photo Space, Osaka.

1994

Galerie La Tour, Basel.
Galerie La Tour, Amsterdam.
Galerie Mokka, Reykjavík.

Selected Group Exhibitions

1959

Great Photographs from the Museum Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

1968

Two Americans, University of Manchester, Manchester.

1972

Curator's Choice, The Witkin Gallery, New York.

1973

The IX International Biennial of Photography, Lisbon.

1976

1976 Exhibition of American Photography, Andromeda Gallery Ltd., New York.

1977

Photoerotica, Camerawork Gallery, San Francisco.
18 CAPS Photographers, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut.

1978

Contemporary Photographers from New Mexico, Arizona State University, Tempe.

1980

Contemporary Photographers of New Mexico, The Chicago Art Institute, Chicago.
Eccentricities, California Institute of the Arts, School of Art and Design, Valencia.

1981

Photographer as Printmaker, Ferens Art Gallery, Hull.
The Makers, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.
Marked Photographs—15 Photographers, Robert Samuel Gallery, New York.

1982

Androgyne in Art, Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra University, Hempstead.
The Erotic in Photography, Cameravision, Los Angeles.
Form, Freud and Feeling, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.
Staged Photo Events, Rotterdamse Kunststichting, Rotterdam.
New American Photography, Galerie Texbraun, Paris.
Camerawork, San Francisco.
New New York, Fine Arts Gallery, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.
Tendances actuelles. Mois de la Photo, Galerie Texbraun, Paris.

1983

Images Fabriquées, Musée national d'art moderne Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.
Personal Choice. A Celebration of Twentieth-Century Photographs, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Ashes to Ashes, Vision of Death, Alternative Museum, New York.

1984

Content, A Contemporary Focus, 1974-1984, Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C.
The Human Condition, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.
The Directed Image, G. H. Dalsheimer Gallery, Baltimore.
Radical Photography, The Bizarre Image, Nexus Gallery, Atlanta.
Fifth Anniversary Exhibition, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

1985

The Sam Wagstaff Collection, International Center of Photography, New York.

American Images: Photography 1945-1980, Barbican Gallery, London.
Whitney Biennial Exhibition, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Images of Excellence, IBM Gallery of Science and Art, New York;
International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester.
Extending Perimeters of Twentieth-Century Photography, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.
Signs of the Times: Some Recurring Motifs in Twentieth-Century Photography, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

1986

The Sacred and the Sacrilegious: Iconographic Images in Photography, Photographic Resource Center, Boston University, Boston.
Sacred Images in Secular Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Photographic Fictions, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Photography—a Facet of Modernism, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.
The Human Form, Centre National de la Photographie, Palais de Tokyo, Paris.
Itinéraires contemporains: explorations du médium-détournements métamorphoses. Mois de la Photo, Galerie Baudoin Lebon, Paris.
Théâtre des Réalités, Les caves Sainte-Croix, Metz; Centre National de la Photographie, Paris.

1987

Twentieth-Century Master American Photographs 1910 to 1986, Whitney Equitable, New York.
Repulsion: Aesthetics of the Grotesque, Alternative Museum, New York.
Photography and Art; Interaction since 1946, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.
The Photographic Print, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.
True Stories & Photofictions, Ffoto Gallery, Cardiff.

1988

Fabrication, Harvard University, Cambridge.

Apochryphal Images, Metronom, Barcelona.

Life Magazine's Celebration of 150 Years of Photography, Nikon House, New York.

Splendeurs et misères du corps. Mois de la Photo, Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris.

University Art Galleries, Wright State University, Dayton.

1989

The Photography of Invention, National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.

On the Art of Fixing a Shadow. One Hundred and Fifty Years of Photography, The National Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

1990

The Body in Question, Burden Gallery/Aperture Foundation, New York.

1991

Photographie/Sculpture, Centre National de la Photographie, Palais de Tokyo, Paris.

1992

Objects Trouvés d'Artiste, Galerie Urbi et Orbi, Paris.

The Crucifixion through the Modern Eye, Hearst Art Gallery, Saint Mary's College of California, Morgan.

Quotations, Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Delaware.

1993

Mexico Through Foreign Eyes (1850-1990), Museo de Arte Contemporaneo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City.

Magicians of Light. Photographs from the National Gallery of Canada, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

1994

Still Pictures/Still Life, University of Rhode Island, Providence.

Photo Dessin/Dessin Photo, Espace Van Gogh, Arles.

After Art: Rethinking 150 Years of Photography. Selections from the Joseph Elaine Museum Collection, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle.

The Camera i. Photographic Self-Portraits from the Audrey and Sydney Irmus Collection, Los Angeles County Museum, Los Angeles.

Selected Permanent Collections

Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio.

Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid.

Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris.

High Museum of Art, Atlanta.

Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City.

Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Princeton Art Museum, Princeton, New Jersey.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

Seattle Art Museum, Seattle.

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

The International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester.

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu.

The Kinsey Institute, Bloomington.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

The National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.

The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

University of Arizona, Tucson.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Selected Bibliography

Books by Witkin

1985

J.-P. Witkin, *Joel-Peter Witkin*, Twelvtree Press, Pasadena.

1987

J.-P. Witkin, *Masterpieces of Medical Photography*, Twelvtree Press, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

1989

J.-P. Witkin, *Gods of Earth and Heaven*, Twelvtree Press, Altadena, California.

1991

Joel-Peter Witkin, *PhotoPoche*, Vol. 49, Centre National de la Photographie, Paris.

1994

J.-P. Witkin, *Harms Way*, Twelvtree Press, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Catalogues (Individual Exhibitions)

1983

Joel-Peter Witkin, text by E. Barents, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

1985-87

Joel-Peter Witkin. *Forty Photographs*, text by V.D. Coke, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

1988

Joel-Peter Witkin, text by A. Dupuy, A. Saura, J.-P. Witkin, Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid.

1989

Joel-Peter Witkin, text by A. Saura and J.-P. Witkin, Centre National de la Photographie, Palais de Tokyo, Paris.

Joel-Peter Witkin, text by A. Dupuy, A. Saura, W. Stemmer, Museum für Fotografie und Zeitkunst, Bremen.

1991

Joel-Peter Witkin, text by G. Cogeval, Galerie Baudoin Lebon, Paris.

Catalogues (Group Exhibitions)

1982

Mois de la Photo, text (for Joel-Peter Witkin) by J.-P. Witkin, Paris Audiovisuel, Paris.

1983

Personal Choice. A Celebration of Twentieth-Century Photographs, text by M. Haworth-Booth, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

1984

The Human Condition. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Biennial III, text by D. Martinson, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

Content. A Contemporary Focus 1974-1984, text by H. N. Fox and M. McClinic, Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, D.C.

1985

Extending the Perimeters of Twentieth-Century Photography, text by D. Vandersteel, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

American Images: Photography 1945-1980, text by G. Badger, L. Baltz, J. Green and B. Jay. Penguin Books Ltd., Middlesex.

Signs of the Times: Some Recurring Motifs in Twentieth-Century Photography, text by D. Irmas. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

1986

Photography, a Facet of Modernism, text by D. du Pont and V.D. Coke, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

Sacred Images in Secular Art, text by M. Grynsztajn, B. Kamin, L. Suzuki, J. Twabuchi and H. Woodall, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Photographic Fictions, text by R. Feistein,

The Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County.

Mois de la Photo, text (for Joel-Peter Witkin) by P. Borhan, Paris Audiovisuel, Paris.

Théâtre des Réalités, text by P. Lacoue-Labarthe, C. Meatyard and P. Rogiers, Metz pour la Photographie, Metz.

1988

Splendeurs et misères du corps. Mois de la Photo, text (for Joel-Peter Witkin) by P. Borhan, Paris Audiovisuel, Paris.

1989

The Photography of Invention, text by J.P. Smith, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

On the Art of Fixing a Shadow, text by S. Greenough, J. Snyder, D. Travis and C. Westerbeck, The Bulfinch Press, Boston.

1990

The Body in Question, text by N. Richardson et al., Aperture Foundation Inc., New York.

1991

Photographie/Sculpture, text by M. Frizot and D. Paini, Centre National de la Photographie, Paris.

1993

Da Brancusi a Boltanski, text by A. de Gouvion Saint-Cyr and A. Sayag, Charta, Milan.

Magicians of Light/ Photographs from the Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, text by J. Borcoman, National Gallery of Art, Ottawa.

Mexico Through Foreign Eyes (1850-1909), text by C. Naggar and F. Ritchin, W. Norton and Co., New York.

Photo Dessin/Dessin Photo, text by S. Bramly, A. de Gouvion Saint-Cyr and A. Sayag, Actes Sud, Arles.

After Art: Rethinking 150 Years of Photography. Selection from the Joseph Elaine Monsen Collection, text by C. Bruce and A. Grundberg, University of Washington, Seattle.

The Camera i. Photographic Self-Portraiture from the Audrey and Sydney Irms Collection, text by D. Irmas and R. Sobieszek, Abrams, New York.

Articles and Reviews

1980

G.Thornton, "Photography View," in *The New York Times*, New York, 24 August.

1981

J.B.Harris, "Joel-Peter Witkin," in *British Journal of Photography*, n.6311, London, 10 July.

1982

D.-L.Phillips, "Assembling Personal Realities," in *Artweek*, n. 13, San Jose, 24 April.

1983

G.Thornton, "Life as Seen as an Earthly Hell," in *The New York Times*, New York, 3 April.

P.E. White, "Joel-Peter Witkin at Kansas City Art Institute," in *New Art Examiner*, Vol. X, n.6, Chicago.

T. Albright, "Perversely Fascinating Nightmares," in *San Francisco Chronicle*, San Francisco, 30 July.

O. Edwards, "Dancing with Death," in *American Photographer*, n.2, New York, August.

J.Decter, "Joel-Peter Witkin at Pace/MacGill Gallery," in *Arts Magazine*, n. 66, New York, 13 August.

G.Indiana, "Joel-Peter Witkin at Hardison Fine Arts Gallery, N.Y.," in *Art In America*, n.11, New York, September.

G. Badger, "Beyond Arbus and Bacon/The Photographs of Joel-Peter Witkin," in *Zein*, n.45, Rotterdam.

1984

M.Kozloff, "Contention between Two Critics about a Disagreeable Beauty," in *Artforum*, Vol. XXII, n.6, New York, February.

J.-P. Witkin, "Witkin by Witkin," in *The Manipulator*, n.1, Düsseldorf, June.

A. Jan, "Religion: 1984," in *Images and Issues*, Santa Monica, July.

J.Saul, "Joel-Peter Witkin at Pace/MacGill Gallery," in *Flash Art International*, n.118, Milan, Summer.

D.Berger, "Violent Images," in *Journal-America*, Seattle, 16 September.

M.I. Chester, "Joel-Peter Witkin's Photographs," in *Bay Area Reporter*, San Francisco, 8 November.

J. Jordan, "Chaplin in Hell. Joel-Peter Witkin at Fraenkel Gallery," in *Artweek*, San José, 10 November.

H.Fischer, "Joel-Peter Witkin: The Dark End of the Spectrum," in *Fotografie*, n.32/33, Stoccarda.

1985

J.-P. Witkin, "Today's American Works," in *Photo Japan*, February.

D. Fahey, "Modern Masters: Joel-Peter Witkin," in *Interview Magazine*, New York, July.

J.-P. Witkin, "Divine Revolt," in *Aperture*, n.100, New York, Fall.

O. Edwards, "Joel-Peter Witkin," in *American Photographer*, n.5, New York, November.

1986

J. Bloom, "Joel-Peter Witkin and L'Amour

Fou at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art," in *Photo Metro*, San Francisco, January.

J. Murray, "Overstepping traditional Bounds," in *Artweek*, n.17, San José, 25 January.

A.Foerstner, "Reflecting on Life with Joel-Peter Witkin at the Abyss," in *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago, 28 March.

P. Borhan, "Les abus de l'homme, les signes des Dieu," in *Clichés*, 29, Brussel.

D. Lévi-Strauss, "An Alchemical Disturbance," in *San Francisco Camera Work*, n. 1, San Francisco, Spring.

A.Jan, "Joel-Peter Witkin at Museum of Modern Art. San Francisco," in *Flash Art International*, n.127, Milan, April.

B.Berkson, "Joel-Peter Witkin at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art," in *Artforum*, n.24, New York, April.

K. Hixson, "Joel-Peter Witkin at Columbia College Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago," in *New Art Examiner*, n.13, Chicago, May.

G. Thornton, "A Gothic Vision of Man Seen with the Camera's Eye" in *The New York Times*, New York, 24 August.

G. Badger, "Towards a Moral Pornography," in *Creative Camera*, n.6, London, September.

T. Cohrs, "Joel-Peter Witkin at Brooklyn Museum," in *Arts Magazine*, New York, October.

K. Wise, "The Unconventional and the Brooding," in *The Boston Globe*, Boston, 17 December.

W.Yu, "Great Books," in *American Photographer*, n.6, New York, December.

B. G. Short, "Joel-Peter Witkin at the Brooklyn Museum," in *Women Artists News*, n.11, New York, Winter.

1987

M. Mullarkey, "Joel-Peter Witkin at the Brooklyn Museum," *Hudson Review*, New York, Spring.

M. Kozloff, "The Wizard of ID," in *Vogue*, New York, April.

T. Cohrs, "Joel-Peter Witkin at Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York," in *Arts Magazine*, New York, May.

L. Wells, "True Stories and Photofictions," in *British Journal of Photography*, n. 6620, London, 26 June.

D. Gadd, "Beautiful Monsters," in *San Francisco Sentinel*, San Francisco, 18 September.

1988

M. Coutler, "Joel-Peter Witkin: A Mid-western Visitation," in *Dialogue*, New York, January.

T. Barrett, "Joel-Peter Witkin at University Art Gallery, Wright State University Dayton, Ohio," in *New Art Examiner*, n. 15, Chicago, January.

D. Bonetti, "Notes From The Underworld," in *The Boston Phoenix*, Boston, February.

K. Wise, "Finding Beauty in the Grotesque," in *The Boston Globe*, Boston, 11 February.

M. K. Rombout, "Dialogue with the Ineffable," in *Views*, Boston, Summer.

J.-P. Witkin, "150 Years of Photography, Pictures that Made a Difference," in *Life Magazine*, New York, September.

G. Loren, "The Photography of Cruelty: Artaud and Witkin," in *Michigan Photog-*

raphy Journal, n. 1-2.

L. Fontanella, "From Matters of Fact to Matters of Value," in *Photovision*, n. 19, Madrid.

1989

K. McKenna, "Joel-Peter Witkin: Peering over the Abyss," in *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles, 1st January.

H. and R. Kenner, "The First Photo," in *Art and Antiques*, n.5, New York, May.

S. Kandel, "Joel-Peter Witkin at Fahey/Klein Gallery, Los Angeles," in *Arts Magazine*, n.64, New York, November.

1991

S. Jenkins, "A Gallery Talk by Joel-Peter Witkin," in *Artweek*, n.22, San José, 2 May.

D.H. Wright, "Illuminations from the Dark Side," in *Artweek*, n.22, San José, 2 May.

K. Baker, "Joel-Peter Witkin at Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco," in *Artforum*, n.29, New York, Summer.

E. Heartney, "Joel-Peter Witkin at Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York," in *ArtNews*, n.7, New York, September.

J.-P. Witkin, "Witkin Defends Feast Image," in *British Journal of Photography*, n. 6839, London, 26 September.

A.D. Coleman, "Schlock Horror," in *British Journal of Photography*, n.6839, London, 26 September.

D. Lee, "Joel-Peter Witkin," in *Arts Review*, n. 43, London, October.

D. Brittan, "Torn Curtain," in *Creative Camera*, n. 312, London, October/November.

E. Cooper, "Vanity and Vanities," in *Creative Camera*, n.312, London, October/November.

K. Johnson, "Joel-Peter Witkin at Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York," in *Art in America*, n.11, New York, November.

1992

n.n., "Joel-Peter Witkin," in *Switch*, n.10, Tokyo, November.

1993

A. Serrano, "A Darker Light," in *Blind Spot*, n.2, New York.

R.B. Woodward, "Forbidden," in *Vanity Fair*, New York, April.

A.D. Coleman, "Joel-Peter Witkin & Duane Michals," in *Journal of Contemporary Art*, n.1, New York, Summer.

K. Seward, "Joel-Peter Witkin at Pace/MacGill Gallery," in *Artforum*, n.10, Vol. XXXI, Summer.

n.n., "Joel-Peter Witkin," in *The Magazine*, Paris, October.

R.H. Cravens, "Joel-Peter Witkin," in *Aperture*, n.133, New York, Fall.

K. Kugelman, "Photographic Tricksters," in *Artweek*, n.17, San José, 25 January.

1994

D. Schonauer, "Photography's Top 100," in *American Photographer*, n.1, New York, January-February.

General Publications

1987

A.H. Hoy, *Staged, Altered and Appropriated Photographs*, Abbeville Press, New York.

M. Kozloff, *The Privileged Eye. Essays on Photography*, The University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, N.M.

1989

P. Rogiers, *Neuf entretiens avec des photo*

graphs, 1984-1989, Paris Audiovisuel, Paris.

1990

F. Hovart, *Entre vous*, Nathan/Image, Paris.

J.-M. Rausch, F.R.A.C. Lorraine: *Oeuvres Photographiques, Acquisitions 1984-1989*, Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain, Metz.

1993

J. Bloom, *Photography at Bay*, The University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, N.M.

H. Chapier and V. Esders, *A la recherche du Père*, Paris Audiovisuel, Paris.

1994

M. Frizot, *Nouvelle Histoire de la Photographie*, Adam Biro, Paris.

1995

F.K. Davis, *An American Century of Photography. From Dry-Plate to Digital*, Abrams, New York.

DATE DUE

OCT 21 1997		
FEB 27 1998		
JAN 06 1999		
OCT 21 1999		
DEC 13 1999		
MAR 21 2000		
DEC 10 2001		
MAY 15 2004		
APR 21 2004		
DEC 08 2011		
OCT 15 2013		

DEMCO 38-297

Lewis and Clark College - Watzek Library



3 5209 00639 7158

TR 647 .W58 1995
Witkin, Joel-Peter, 1939-
Witkin

AUG 23 1997

