



NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

FINE ART SCULPTURE

Sublimating the diabolical:
A Critical Study of the work of Joel Peter Witkin

by

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Introduction

Joel Peter Witkin, the extremely provocative photographer/artist of the 1970s, 80s and 90s remains remarkably little known. In terms of his image-making Witkin is more provocative than Robert Mapplethorpe, and has transgressed a great many taboos. Where Mapplethorpe chose a stylistic approach akin to the commercial/fashion genre of photography, Witkin has endeavoured to situate his work very much in a fine art painting/sculpture framework. This may explain Witkin's almost total absence from mainstream culture and indicate mainstream culture's reluctance to engage in inaccessible, or what some might call, 'arty' issues. His photographs are at once seductive and repulsive; seduction stemming from his mastery of the photographic medium, his labour intensive composition, meticulous lighting, not to mention the detailed re-working he applies in the darkroom. His subject matter is mostly, however, deliberately repellent, ugly, shocking and for some, downright pornographic. Though, as I intend to show, these very attributes are seductive in themselves for other reasons.

He has photographed people with missing limbs, disembodied heads and beheaded bodies, pre-operative transsexuals bearing the genitals of both genders. He has gained access to corpses (adult and child), body parts, fetuses and dead animals. He has persuaded models to pose nude with crucified dead monkeys, severed heads; to pose being crucified; to pose whilst inserting phallic objects into every imaginable orifice... Witkin orchestrates his macabre vision with the commitment of someone on a mission from God, relentlessly realising his imagination by combining elements of the physical world. Witkin represents the antithesis of the current trend for computer aided photographic manipulation, creating his dark tableaux directly before the camera, degrading but not re-arranging the images. This practice suggests a justifiable scepticism towards digital image manipulation: the fact that it was not created directly

before the camera, no matter how convincing the rendering, it can never possess the label so easily attached to Witkin's work - *everything depicted actually occurred*.

There can be no doubt, however, that Witkin has been realising another mission of his own, propelling himself into the much coveted (and clichéd) role of the 'artist'. It is ironic that the very information which Witkin generates to give his role credence is the one thing that does his work the most damage. Using standard themes, a childhood trauma, 'deviant' adolescent sexual experimentation, bohemian passage through art school, difficulty in relating to 'ordinary' people, unorthodox familial arrangements (his wife's lesbian lover lives at their home) etc, Witkin has forced his acceptance onto the art-world and ensured his place in art history. His projected public image is almost like a laminated coating on the surface of his prints, and to that end, a protective shield over a vulnerable product. Similarly, his esoteric statements regarding his motivation can reduce the cynic to peels of laughter, his jaded musings on the discovery of 'self', his striving to find a vision of God, finding what is ugly unimaginably beautiful and the express desire to make his pictures as powerful as the last thing a person sees before they die, are just a shade too dubious to provide any real insight into his work. That is not to say that the work is not powerful, on the contrary, Witkin's work, to his credit, is powerful enough to exist independently of the artist's vapid interpretations. I have therefore decided to utilise as little of Witkin's own musings as possible throughout this thesis, with the intention of producing a less sentimental exploration of the key issues and concepts discussed in, and raised as a result of his work.

It is impossible to enter any discussion of Witkin's work without first encountering the problem of pornography. The work's proximity to hardcore pornography can be seen as both a working characteristic, and a point of major objection. The first chapter of this thesis is centred around an investigation of the

photographs in relation to the issues surrounding pornography. It is necessary to look at legal parameters to provide a framework for this discussion, so the chapter utilises the findings of the much quoted *Williams Report* on obscenity and film censorship. The *Williams Report*, first published in 1979 (Kappeler, 1986, p.19) presented a primarily liberal view of pornography. It has been criticised by feminists for its rather narrowminded sense of feminist concerns with pornography. The *Williams Report* is important only as a commissioned text, which presents a fuzzy picture of pornography, failing to reach definitive conclusions despite the earnest endeavours of its prestigious committee members. Pornography is to a large extent a problem of representation, although much of the most interesting writing on the subject has come from feminist writers such as Susanne Kappeler, Lisbeth Goodman and Rosemary Betterton. Given the nature of Witkin's work, the main problem with the feminist approach is its exclusivity; the way it marginalises any form of pornography not directly involving women. Obviously there are many conflicting definitions of what constitutes a pornographic image, and it is my objective to test some of these criteria against the work of Witkin.

This chapter also deals with the 'thorny' issue of the exploitation of his subjects, a frequent worry encountered when analysing Witkin's pictures which, as I have already pointed out, involve corpses, body parts and on some occasions children, not to mention countless nude men and women, the anorexic and the obese. I intend to focus on one particular controversy during this discussion, namely the situation which arose in Hamilton's Gallery in 1991, when the publication of one image, *The Feast of Fools* (Plate 2), caused a major public outcry. The use of human body parts, and in particular the use of a baby's corpse, provoked readers of *The Independent on Sunday* to complain, and reviewer Tom Lubbock subsequently felt obliged to print an apology, citing the use of such items as a 'desecration' (Lee, Oct. '91, p.516). It is impossible to arrive at a strict and unwavering opinion on the pornography issue, it is comprised of many

varying arguments and viewpoints - rather I hope to establish an awareness of the issues from which a more productive investigation of the work can be attempted.

The second chapter deals with the components which endow Witkin's work with its immensely disturbing power. The seductive nature of his photographs, in terms of their technical mastery and the subject matter, which is seductive in itself because it plays on voyeuristic urges and the seedier side of our subconscious. The large photographic print is now well recognised by many artists for its irresistible appeal, which can utterly sublate the spectator's reading of the work. This aspect of the work highlights an area of desire present in all humans, a fascination with looking, which lends itself to theories of spectator identification with the subject matter and to the work of Jaques Lacan in relation to the 'Mirror Phase'. While discussing these theories, it shall become clear that pleasure in looking can also be linked to the subject matter, which in Witkin's case, appears to suggest the concept of Abjection, a physical reaction to taboo signifiers which Julia Kristeva, the French psychoanalyst, brought attention to in the 1980s. My aim in this chapter is to establish a possible link between the abject and seduction - that what is abject *could be* seductive and possibly, that we might very well desire this seduction as a reactive catharsis against the cultural repression of libidinal drives.

The final chapter extends on the theme of abjection and is intended to demonstrate a link between abjection and sadism, and to, hopefully, reveal a symbiotic relationship between the two. This has a special relevance in Witkin's work, since pain and pleasure (the key elements of sadomasochism) are core issues in his work. However, Witkin also incorporates a desire for extremity, both in his subject matter and in the way he executes his work. I intend to show how viewing a Witkin photograph could be sadomasochistic in its affect on the spectator, and I will include specific examples from his work, analysed independently to clarify the points.

Chapter 1

The Pornography Question

Pornography could be loosely described as any representation which violates or offends a viewer's moral code. The Williams Report uses the term, 'reasonable person' as a gauge of the viewer's moral standing. Pornography is consumed both privately and publicly, and it is the latter which legislators are concerned with controlling, the private domain being the realm of the so called 'free individual'. Any discussion on pornography is inevitably weighed down by the sheer diversity and lack of convergence of opinion in contemporary analysis. How we deal, or more accurately, how we fail to deal with the images Joel Peter Witkin produces raises much larger questions about what it is possible to represent in the 'art' context, and signifies an urgency which obliges those engaging with such concerns, to fully discuss the issues their activity raises.

Surprisingly, Witkin emerged relatively unscathed through the art-censorship controversies of the 1980s in the United States, and apart from an unsuccessful attempt to close his show at Hamilton's Gallery in Mayfair, London in 1991, debate surrounding his work has remained peculiarly low-key. The nature of Witkin's photography, his focus on the 'abnormal,' his use of human and animal remains, his graphic portrayal of strange and 'perverse' sexualities all appear to locate him firmly within the realms of the pornographer. Does Witkin exploit his models through their insecurities, their 'abnormalities', their perversions? Witkin is at pains to state the purity of his intent and the integrity of his work. While we know he will spend some time coaxing his models into posing for him (Witkin, 1985c, p. 11), little material is available describing the nature of, or indeed, how much information they are given. They are paid quite well, the artist presenting them with a signed print of his work (Witkin's prices rank high among contemporary photographers - his image *Le Baiser*, 1989, sold for

\$27,500 in 1990). It is an indisputable fact that Witkin has persuaded people to share very real and private emotions with his camera, enduring real pain and suffering, real pleasure - real humiliation:

In one case he placed a large muscular black man born with no legs - leaving him there masked and helpless while Witkin sought to find the 'truth' in the viewfinder of his camera. (Witkin, 1985c, p.11)

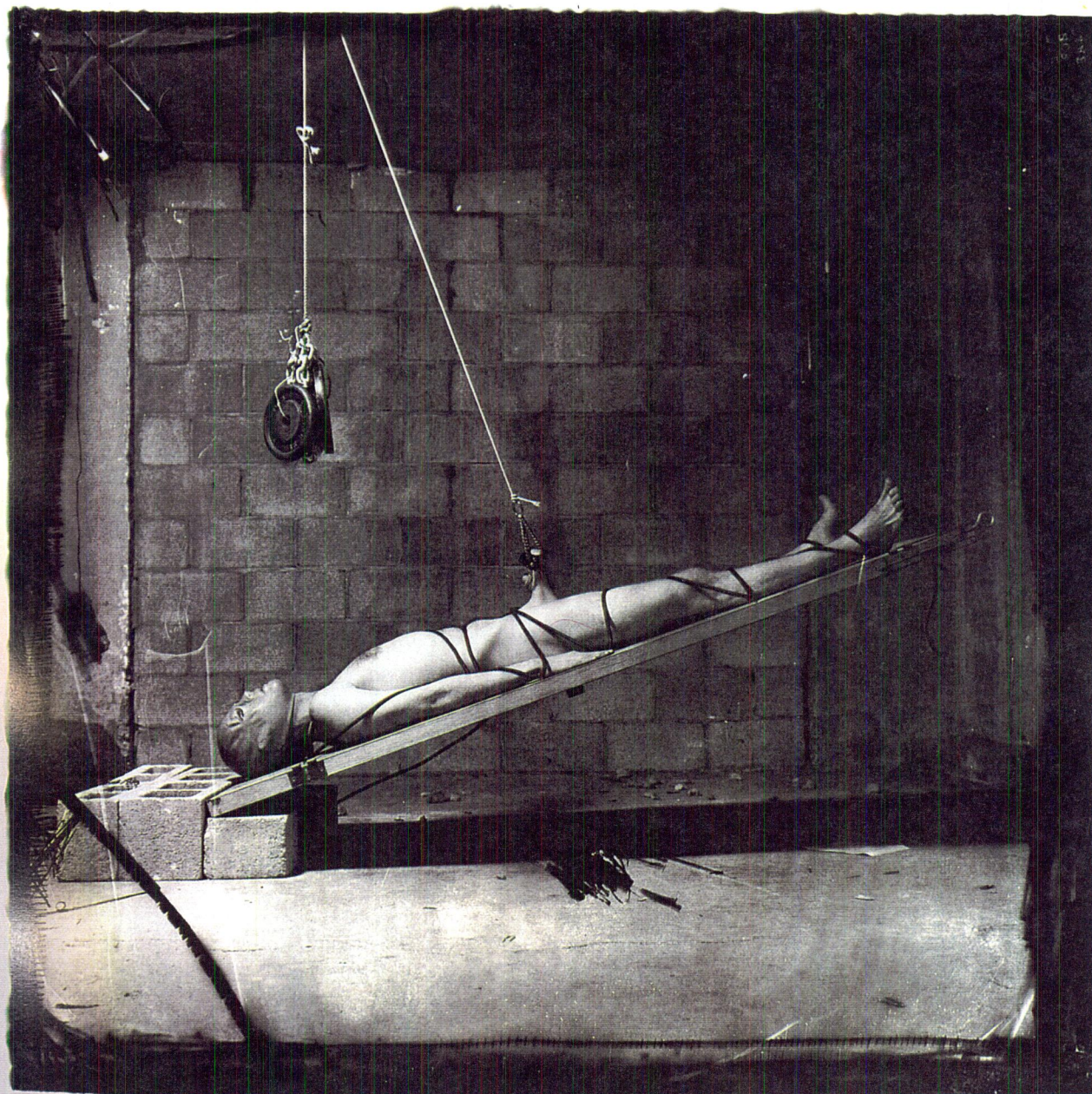
Possibly most disturbing of all, Witkin has used infants in his images; blind-folded, wearing collars, in the arms of their gagged mothers etc. Surely these images are near impossible to justify? Young children (particularly babies) lack all the sensibilities necessary to understand Witkin's obsessions - they have absolutely no power over their self image, and it would seem, in Witkin's hands, neither do their parents. Witkin's use of children is comparable to his use of human remains, though infinitely more questionable. For one subject matter, life has stopped, all that is left is a decaying physical representation of what once belonged, the other is very much alive and represents, even through masked identity, the potential to object to their usage. It appears that for Witkin, his position as an artist ratifies his ability to transcend such earthly concerns, however this ethos is rapidly showing its fractures in much contemporary art.

Admirers of Witkin's work dismiss its pornographic implications on the grounds that, "Pornography is a substitute for actual experience and tends to trivialise and focus narrowly on the sexual urge," (Witkin, 1985c, p.6). There is also the notion of Witkin's unique stylistic interventions, deriving his compositions from infamous artworks, the rich quality of the prints and the illusory time-barrier he evokes by artificially ageing his work - all seeming to reflect a more noble purpose, deflecting and re-directing the viewer's impulses away from their shocking conclusion. Susanne Kappeler argues that, "The definition or categorisation of something as 'literary' or artistic relies crucially, and in the end circularly, on the successful association of it with something else already classified as literary..." (Kappeler, 1986, p.84). By situating work in the 'art'

environment, it obviously becomes more difficult to discriminate between the value of its artistic intent and the problems of its pictorial content. This would appear to be the case with Witkin, however it in no way accounts for the extent to which his work disturbs one's sensibilities, an undeniable facet of the work.

The gap between art and obscenity is a hotly contested debate, particularly when it involves the use of public monies, as in the Mapplethorpe/Serrano controversy; "The idea of the gap being a thin, wavy and changing line is too hard for many to even consider," (Beal, Nov. 1990, p.320). Witkin's work is similar to the work of Mapplethorpe and Serrano in terms of its apparent determination to shock. But for the purposes of this debate, the lack of publicity surrounding Witkin points to an hypocrisy within the systems which were at work against the art of Mapplethorpe and Serrano. The factor which seems to have grated so intolerably for the likes of Senator Jesse Helms (Beal, Nov. '90, p.318) was that this work had the 'audacity' to enter the public arena, raising questions of homosexuality, right-wing religion, racism etc, rather than stick within the quiet confines of the art world. Witkin, in contrast, has very much remained anonymous in mainstream culture (with some minor exceptions) preferring to engage in the very much safer world of artistic debate. In terms of the work's content, Witkin has committed much the same 'offenses' as Mapplethorpe and Serrano. Ironically by 1993, Witkin was receiving his fourth National Endowment for the Arts grant.

It may be useful here to examine Witkin's motives when constructing his work. He deliberately sets out to find 'damaged' models, scarred both physically and emotionally. His interest in the subjects is derived from their status as taboo objects, the repulsive, the undesirable - generally people one would ordinarily be unable to look at for a sustained period. Some prints exhibit examples of what are essentially people's private sexual fantasies with an emphasis on sado-masochistic practices, for example *Arm Fuck*, 1982 and *Testicle stretch with*



1. Testical Stretch with the possibility of a crushed face.



the possibility of a crushed face, (Plate 1); the former is self-explanatory, the latter features a masked man, strapped to a board which is levitated at an angle by a single rope attached to the man's testicles. This rope is connected via a pulley to a collection of weights, hanging precariously over the man's head. Yet it is not the actual events which are so disturbing, it is the grim, calm tranquillity of the pose, the man's lack of identity and the general murky quality of the print which, coupled with the implication of sexual pleasure, cause such an image to haunt the viewer long after their initial exposure. We are also, as in any act of looking at a representation, transported into the mind of the author, who in this case is not some seedy photographer, but appears to be an extremely dark and melancholic individual who possesses a strange empathy and fascination for forbidden objects. I assume that Witkin would not fall into the category of 'reasonable person' as prescribed by the Williams Report, and therefore, to be in contact with such a mind would produce a strong reaction in the minds of the vast majority of 'reasonable' people. Yet it would seem that Witkin is "feeding our desire to peer inside the tent of the Elephant man, to touch death and misery with our eyes," (An eye...,1993, p.102). If such a desire exists it is clearly manifested in our tolerance of images of brutality and violence in the media, from the decrepit suffering in third-world countries to hellish accounts of war, terrorism and cruelty, so much a part of our 'Information' culture. There is however a huge displacement of intent between such operations and the work of this artist. Witkin is not a documentarian, rather his pre-meditated theatrical constructions portray a dark area of the human subconscious and he deliberately enhances the surreal quality of his work to sublimate its impact.

The photograph which caused controversy in Hamilton's Gallery, London, *The Feast of Fools* (Plate 2) is of particular importance in this discussion. This image is of a different nature to Witkin's more aggressively sexual work, and stems from a body of work/still lifes featuring lush and corpulent vegetable produce with human remains. The same seductive attention to detail and lighting pre-



2. *The Feast of Fools.*



vails - the craftsmanship is exemplary. The source of the controversy was its publication in a mainstream newspaper. The reviewer was forced to issue an abject apology for his error of judgement in answer to a massive reader reaction. The centre of people's revulsion surrounded the use of a dead child's body, its chest sewn up after an autopsy. The presence of other body parts appears to have been less revolting but nonetheless objectionable. Perhaps it was the baby's positioning which was so offensive; cast aside like a broken toy, half heartedly blindfolded, expressionless. Having come to the realisation that what they were seeing was a real dead baby, perhaps it was the sheer fact that creating this image was possible, that the cadaver of what was once an innocent human being was made available in the first place. Did the sumptuous still-life setting trivialise the idea further? In fact it is precisely all the above elements which, not only make the image objectionable, but also form the structure of its meaning and imbue it with its very power. The compositions alarmingly muted rendering works in a totally contradictory manner, grimly clawing away the viewer's responses. The gruesome body parts are cushioned by the most sensual fruits, introducing the even more disturbing concept of necrophilia - "a perverse dish only some demented chef would conjure up," (Cooper, Nov.1991, p.39).

It is illogical to say that Witkin's subject matter is intrinsically repellent, rather we have come to repel what Witkin shows us, and through repelling and repressing any desires for such objects, we have forced them into the realms of the taboo. The English sociologist Geoffrey Gorer once declared: "Death has become the new pornography, replacing sex as society's greatest taboo," (Seward, Summer 1993, p.107). What criteria could be deployed to designate *The Feast of Fools* as a pornographic image? The image has been made, and it is technically a masterpiece of photography. It presents deep questions, philosophies and concepts. The body parts and the dead child have no identity and some would say possess no soul, indeed one could argue that they are essen-

tially pieces of meat. The image inspires no rash reaction, it does not arouse one sexually or violently - neither is it intended to. If it did arouse such reactions, it has been argued that such a person would be very much disturbed in the first place. But it does offend - did offend the readers of *The Independent on Sunday*. Without knowledge of what was inside, they could be termed an involuntary audience, which, of course, even in liberal terms (ie. *The Williams Report*) affords them the right of protection against 'pornographic' material. The blame undisputedly lies with the newspaper, Witkin had only to give his permission to reproduce the image.

The Williams Report makes a distinction between a voluntary and an involuntary audience. To address this distinction properly in relation to art, one must attempt to define the art-audience. Obviously anyone can enter an art gallery and view the work on display, but the question remains: Does just *anybody* go to see work in galleries. If one were a regular visitor, it is reasonable to assume that one is aware that contemporary art presents greater challenges to the human mind than say, a bowl of fruit or picturesque meadow. And is it not also true that these people who adamantly reject contemporary art on the grounds that it is alienating, would not, generally, include a visit to the local gallery as one of their regular pastimes. It would therefore seem plausible to suggest that the audiences attending galleries - including public ones are indeed a voluntary audience and not a potentially terrorisable public.

In her essay *The Pornography Problem*, Lizbeth Goodman recognises that it is possible to take several positions at once. One may find certain images utterly objectionable - indeed one may wish them banned, while at the same time finding copious artistic merit in other images. It appears to be extremely frustrating deciding what is censorship and what is 'reasonable' intervention into the Fine Art/artistic marketplace. Such frustration can lead to "a public hesitance... to engage in the pornography debate," (Bonner (ed.), 1992, p.279). Indeed it

appears that the prosecutors in the Mapplethorpe/Serrano case relied on the presiding judge's decision to uphold their request that seven offending images be tried independently of the artists' other work, thereby eliminating or diminishing the work's artistic context. Here we can see that whilst the prosecutors (who represented right-wing groups) were fully aware of the complexity of the issues at stake, they were unwilling to allow such complexity to cloud their 'gut' feelings on the work. Such a lack of commitment, renders their opinions useless in the larger debate. On the other hand, the liberal approach fails to work because it is overwhelmed by the complexity of the debate, but prefers to leave the issue to fester indefinitely.

In terms of the structure of representation, Susanne Kappeler argues that the distinction between one spectator or reader and a whole 'mass' audience is irrelevant. No matter where or how an image is consumed, the 'privacy' of the pornographic scenario is violated by the very presence of the viewer, "the alter-ego of the author of the scenario," (Bonner (ed.), 1992, p.261). This brings us back to the question of whether Witkin's work is pornographic, and in effect, back to 'square one'. In erotica for example, the subject of the representation is assumed to be an active participant in the events depicted; one who chose, or had some control over their representation. This would appear to be applicable in Witkin's case were it not for the fact that he is not producing 'erotica'.

It is precisely this inability (as demonstrated throughout this chapter) to categorise, define or typify Witkin's work which suggests that we are not looking at pornography, but something altogether different. Does this alone suggest that Witkin's work is 'art'? It would be wholly unsatisfactory to base one's opinion on the basis of being unable to reach conclusions, however, by 'playing down' the deployment of pornographic signifiers in the work, the viewer is released from a set of obligations which may inhibit their experience of the work. This may be why the placement of Witkin's work in the context of the art establish-

ment is the only viable option for the work. Within questions areas of our moral understanding for which we have no answers. The question is ultimately an impossible one, and as one admiring reviewer ruefully added at the end of his article: "I only hope I'm right about him", (Lee, Oct '91, p.516).

Chapter 2

The Seduction of the Object

1: The Seduction of the Photographic Surface.

When Witkin presents us with a piece of work, a number of reactions take place. Perhaps the most intriguing of these is the irreconcilable contrast between the repugnant subject matter and the irresistible lustre of the photographic surface. It would be wholly simplistic to describe this as a mere glorification of the subject, because the loving technique employed by Witkin in making these prints is perhaps the most honest and sincere action in his entire process. Instead we drool over the sumptuous quality, allowing it to sublimate the subject matter into a more consumable form. By comparison, the staging of the picture seems to be far less important than the printing process for Witkin. His lighting is deliberately simple, preferring to modify the placement of highlights and the general distribution of tones during printing. Witkin possesses that obsessive attention to detail which graces only the most committed artists and: "his direct staging of the horrific forces the viewer to become a witness to stark and relentless events,"(Kugelman, Dec.'93, p.24).

Witkin's technique is an arduous process, starting with the development of a contact print. He then studies it to determine where alterations will appear; scratchings, markings. He will also note where to tone down or clarify sections of the print. This is achieved by placing tissue paper directly onto the unexposed paper, which he subsequently cuts into in selected areas. He will make scratches on both sides of the negative before printing, further altering the final image. When the prints are dry, he will often use several toners to make the print glow with the browns and yellows of aged parchment. Witkin is not alone among photographers in this drive for perfection, Mapplethorpe and Serrano both share it (although, admittedly to very different criteria). The power of the large photographic print seems unlikely to ever lose its seductive appeal.

When one looks at Serrano's *The Morge* series, the most striking feature is the lush quality of the prints. The colours are so vivid, one could almost sink into them. The shock value is almost completely obliterated by the sheer virtuosity of the work. In her essay *The Heroism of vision*, Susan Sontag writes: "Nobody exclaims 'Isn't that ugly! I must take a photograph of it.' Even if they did say that all it would mean is: 'I find that ugly thing... beautiful', " (Sontag, 1973, p.77). Whether this can be applied in such a general way is questionable, however it does correlate with the propaganda emitted by all these artists - that they find profound beauty in what is socially perceived as ugly. One cannot help but wonder at the lengths they must go to in order to realise this beauty for us. And this is perhaps, in part, because the photograph itself and *not* what it represents, is the true source of their and our fascination.

Witkin's *Portrait of a dwarf*, (Plate 3), is perhaps, a good example of the methods he employs to seduce his audience. The subject matter, though abnormal, is delicately lit in a fashion which reduces real perspective and enhances the flat quality of the picture plane. The attention to detail, like the folds in the satin which appear to provide the backdrop, the classical sculpture at the dwarf's right hand and the subtle dirtying of the image provide the viewer with classical compositional associations. The forms appear to glow from the prints black surface, as if they are part of its slick flatness. We may speculate whether *Portrait of a Dwarf* could be described as beautiful, however the term is problematic and, in general, inadequate. The viewer's perception of beauty alters dramatically according to age, education, cultural positioning, race and gender. The image draws on the established conventions of painting and fine-art photography and may be accurately described as aesthetically pleasing to those whose visual education has taught them to appreciate the values of those conventions. However, *Portrait of a dwarf* can be as quickly labelled beautiful by one individual as it may be labelled 'ugly' by another.



3. Portrait of a Dwarf



It is arguable that the 'seductive' component of an art object can be pivotal in defining the success or otherwise of a piece. The most admired work is usually seductive in some way, so to say that skill is no longer a requirement in fine art is, to my mind, a severe falsehood. This applies to both the general public's desires and those of the art audience and is indicative of an interesting social phenomenon. Not only does this signify a general desire to be seduced, but that seduction is vital for the successful assimilation of information - particularly, as in Witkin's case, when that information violates social and moral structures. This is also manifested in Western cultures' need for cathartic release of suppressed urges. The most obvious example of this is, of course, modern cinema, where violence and sexual activity are mediated by several different factors; cinematography, special effects, sound, music and drama. The overwhelming sensory scope of the cinematic product is difficult to equate with gallery art as such, artworks must follow different routes of seduction.

In her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* Laura Mulvey cites several possible reasons for our fascination with looking. She discusses scopophilia as an instinctual drive which involves taking other people as objects and subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze (Screen(ed.), 1992, p.24). With cinema, by presenting an hermetically sealed world, indifferent to the presence of the audience, a sense of separation is produced which plays with the voyeuristic fantasies of the audience. Mulvey argues that the physical position of the spectator (in the cinema) forces them to suppress their exhibitionism, thereby encouraging "the projection of the repressed desire onto the performer" (Screen(ed.), 1992, p.25). It is also true that the art gallery is a similar site of repressed 'exhibitionism', so it follows that a similar transaction would occur between the spectator and the artwork, particularly in figurative works.

The second theory she proposes relates to Lacan's 'Mirror Phase': the moment when a child realises its ego through recognition of its own (mirror) image.

Because this moment occurs at a time when the child's ambitions out-weigh its abilities (motor capacity), the ego perceived in the mirror is somehow more perfect than the child's material body. This conflict between image and self-image has, according to Mulvey, found an "intensity of expression" (Screen(ed.),1992, p.26) in film, due to the inherent similarities between the screen and the mirror:"the framing of the human form in its surroundings" (Screen(ed.), 1992, p.26). The interesting point of this theory is the idea that the audience's level of fascination is strong enough to cause a temporary loss of ego while in the same instant reinforcing *the* ego. When this is applied to the work of Witkin, we realise that not only is the spectator projecting repressed desire *onto* the image, they are also identifying *with* the image, and thus we have a paradox, a contradiction between libido and ego. According to Mulvey, the presence of these two responses articulate a desire within the spectator: "Hence the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content..."(Screen(ed.), 1992, p.26).

To illustrate this point, I shall look specifically at Witkin's photograph *Sander's Wife* (Plate 4), a print featuring a masked woman holding two fetuses with gloved hands, the gloves pierced all over by viscerously medieval looking nails. The image is an expression of power, one eye stares defiantly through the mask. The woman appears to exude incredible evil, a demon of some kind, the zip covering her mouth is like a grim parody of a hideous smile. The impact of seeing this devilish creature could, theoretically, generate a temporary loss of reason, a moment when one's own existence is fleetingly forgotten. At this point we may be projecting a level of desire onto this woman, who reeks of power and domination, but who is also to all intents and purposes, the victim of a grim fantasy. Instantaneously we identify with her and with her two agonised babies. This seems to be an untenable situation, however it would seem to occur with many works of art, Witkin included.

The proposition that ego can be lost while the ego is reinforced can be related to



4. Sander's Wife



a theory proposed by Ernst Van Alphen in relation to the work of Francis Bacon. Van Alphen recommends an 'affective' reading of Bacon's work, condemning narrative readings as ineffective. The 'affect' of Bacon's work on Van Alphen causes "a momentary loss of self" (Van Alphen, 1992, p.9). He explains that this involves the spectator's ability to reflect being temporarily neutralised, which results in the intensity of the experience of looking, of being seduced, immobilising any reflection upon one's emotional state.

The photographer couple, Akin and Ludwig, who work in very similar ways to Witkin, produced the following comment in an exhibition catalogue for the show *Grotesque* :

The contrast between the discordant subject matter and the seductive character of the renderings was aesthetically disturbing, as many viewers had to struggle with the dichotomy of beauty and its opposite. When they merge, socially conditioned responses are shattered. (Thijssen, 1989, p.11)

The pleasure of looking, mobilised by the artist's powers of 'seduction' may force the viewer into an almost 'cliffhanger' situation, undoubtedly cathartic in affect, where they would teeter on the brink of identifying with the subject of the image. This would appear to be one type of seduction effectively at work in photography by Witkin and others.

2: Irresistible Abjection.

Witkin deliberately utilises the most bizarre scenarios coupled with the blackest of humours to evoke the responses outlined earlier. The images themselves concentrate on areas of the so-called repressed imagination, the socially conditioned and restrained portion of the Freudian mind. Essentially, Witkin toys with our darkest secrets - our most abject fears and fantasies. Julia Kristeva's much celebrated work, *Powers of Horror*, extends Freud's position in *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilisation and its discontents* where he proposes that civilisation is based around the expulsion of pre-oedipal pleasures (e.g. anal retention) and

impure involvement with parental figures. Kristeva's view is that these 'aberrations' are never fully obliterated, but instead lurk at the edge of human identity, posing a constant threat to the tenuous structures which maintain the ego. Abjection is a reaction or series of bodily signifiers to the realisation of the subject's corporeality, in essence, the recognition of the body (the container of the ego) as something which must constantly absorb, expel, shed and excrete material in order to clear a space for itself. The cyclical nature of this process ensures the sustenance of the subject but also its insurmountable impurity and mortality. Abjection occurs because this process, due to social boundaries set during infancy, is according to Elisabeth Gross "incapable of social recognition and representation" (Benjamin & Fletcher (eds.), 1990, p.88). The subject's reaction is visceral, often involving retching, vomiting, spasms and mental disgust. The concept of Abjection can be extended to Witkin because his work attempts to directly incite a response to one or more forms of abjection.

Elisabeth Gross defines three forms of abjection as; 1, oral abjection, 2, corporeal waste (including the most sickening of wastes, the corpse) and 3, sexual difference (Benjamin & Fletcher (eds.), 1990, p.90-93). Oral abjection arises from the psychological division between the edible and the inedible. Kristeva uses the example of the skin of milk; she says that because the subject identifies the skin with his own skin or boundary, he chokes and retches - effectively on his own corporeality. This is not a wholly successful metaphor, but it suggests that our seemingly irrational fear of certain foods is tied to some identification between the material quality of the food and the material quality of the body, for example a child's fear of onions could be linked say, to the onion appearing like the gelatinous tissue of an eye. Witkin uses food - particularly fruit in many pieces juxtaposing it with the living and the dead, being defiled by internalisation in *Angel of Carrots*, cushioning the corpse of a baby in *The Feast of Fools* and presenting us with a severed head on a plate in *Head of a Dead Man*, a piece which plays on the total inedibility of human matter - the cannibalism taboo.

Corporeal waste is portrayed to a large extent indirectly by the dirt of the prints, their murky aesthetic and also by the use of cadavers, human heads and limbs. The corpse represents, for Kristeva, the most abject corporeal waste of all:

The corpse seen without God, and outside science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object (Benjamin & Fletcher (eds.), 1990, p.92).

Witkin's *Man Without a Head* (Plate 5), illustrates abjection of the corpse with chilling economy. A man is seated in a relaxed position, absurdly wearing black socks, his shrivelled penis and sagging flesh enhance the ugliness of the pose, an ugliness which terminates in the meaty stump of his neck. It is abject, but does not produce those abject responses so violently described by Kristeva. The core reason this work is so disturbing is because it highlights our inability to react to a brutal human condition.

Witkin's study of an anorexic transsexual, *Leda* (Plate 6), is a poignant meditation on the human desire to be beautiful, to belong. This strange mise-en-scene occurs in a chamber which resembles a cave. In one corner a broken egg lies, discarded, its contents, two dead babies lie on the floor in front of it. *Leda* appears to be referring to the impossibility of the transsexual's situation, his/her grossly malformed body has suffered the further abuse of starvation, self inflicted - almost as a punishment for its shortcomings. The two dead babies indicate Leda's inability to conceive children, the egg is almost like a malignant tumour, a fantasy of something which will never work for the transsexual's body, a shattered dream. He/she clings to the neck of a beautiful swan, an obvious reference to the 'Ugly Duckling' fable; it serves to reinforce Leda's desperate situation - her efforts at transformation have failed, leaving a twisted reminder of what once was. Witkin has muddied this print to quite a degree, with markings and stains. He has also provided very clear metaphorical con-



5. Man Without a Head





6. *Leda*



nections for the viewer to bolster a particular response. One does not know whether to laugh or cry, and one is horrified at the lengths to which social unhappiness has forced this piteous creature to go to realise their dream. The image leaves a residue of creeping melancholy in its wake, perhaps because Witkin has used his skills to focus on the misery which the human condition is capable of reaching. *Leda* features two corpses, but I believe that the transsexual's situation implies a third. The corpse is particularly abject, and this piece manages to form a connection between the corpse and sexuality, death and sex.

The third category of abjection, sexual difference is explored almost to extremity by Witkin, who has himself admitted feeling a certain ambivalence toward women. Kristeva's theories rely on "the horror of menstruation" (Benjamin & Fletcher (eds.), 1990, p.92) and the castration complex. Through Witkin's use of hermaphrodites, cross dressers, transsexuals and all manner of sexually obscure *others*, the issue is broadened considerably. What becomes abject here is the absence of male and female, of definable divisions. We are presented with aliens.

Earlier, I spoke of the 'cliffhanger' situation Witkin's work places the spectator in. If one subscribes to Kristeva's theories this 'cliffhanger' could be defined as the edge of identity, and what lies beyond the edge is abjection, and the possibility of psychosis brought about by the collapse of identity. According to Elisabeth Gross: "Even at times of its strongest cohesion and integration, the subject teeters on the brink of this gaping abyss, which attracts (and also repulses) it" (Benjamin & Fletcher (eds.), 1990, p.89). That we are attracted to this abyss signifies that we lack something by not acknowledging it. This is the most plausible reason why we desire to be seduced by the abject, to activate a catharsis in which supposed unconscious impulses are brought to the surface. The suppressive nature of our culture demands that 'impure' notions remain hidden, a fact which invests this type of art (Witkin's) with a great deal of

power, of which Witkin is all too aware. The next chapter deals further with the concept of sexual difference, with the explicit sexual practices depicted by Witkin and with their connection to the forces of Abjection, Pain and Pleasure.

Chapter 3

Pain/Pleasure

The term 'perversion' is used repeatedly by critics discussing Witkin, it is thoroughly ubiquitous throughout his artwork. Sustained references to 'inventive' sexual practices; sado-masochism, fetishism and the portrayal of all forms of sexuality, gender and cross-gender, place these issues firmly at the centre of Witkin's work. Each are closely linked to abjection and Witkin's blatant approach has forced critics to constantly reconcile his pieces with their pornographic potential. These implications appear to be unavoidable for those artists who prefer an 'up-front' approach to exploring the nature of sexuality, and, as demonstrated earlier, momentarily bypassing them constitutes a major step towards gleaning a more productive insight into the work.

Abjection is a key theory in this discussion of sexuality, as it forms both a possible precursor for many of the practices portrayed and is central to this discussion's response to Witkin's graphic style. The connection between abjection and sadism is clearly demonstrated in Herman Rapaport's essay *Theories of the Fantasm*, (Rapaport, 1994, p.20). Rapaport sees abjection as a reaction to the primal scene by an onlooker who cannot accept either the father or mother and is repulsed by them. Quite apart from psychosis, he cites three distinct behaviours as the constituent reactions to abject stimuli; obsession (the inability to look away and the compulsion to repeat), phobia (fear arising from something which has already taken place) and perversion, most notably sadism. According to Freud in his essay on the sexual 'aberrations'; "A sadist is always at the same time a masochist, although the active or the passive aspect of the perversion may be more strongly developed in him...", (Freud, 1977, p.73). This would seem to strongly suggest that sadomasochism is firmly rooted in the abject, an idea which is strongly implied in Witkin's work. There is also strong visual evidence to suggest that Witkin is grappling with the forces of shame

and disgust which oppose what I believe is his own obsession, his own *scopophilia*. He is at pains, at times, to erase identity, to obscure reality and sublimate the true character of his vision.

The desire for extremity is another aspect of Witkin's work which is relevant to his portrayal of sexuality. Witkin never works in 'half measures', he is constantly battling with our moralities, but also feeding a potential desire within us - for extremity: the furthest permutation of an idea or concept. Freud used the term 'extreme instance' to describe the point at which a harmless sado-masochistic inclination becomes a perversion, it being the point at which the subject's gratification is wholly dependant on either the mistreatment of the sexual object or on suffering pain at the hands of the object (Freud, 1977, p.71). According to Freud; "The sexuality of most male human beings contains an element of aggressiveness...", (Freud, 1977, p.77). Does this then suggest that sado-masochism is latent in all males? This is perhaps too drastic a conclusion, though if we accept the view that what we cannot express is subsequently repressed, this then correlates with the human experience of violent impulses which would be repressed by most but unleashed in others for various reasons. Similarly, as with violent impulses, the need for cathartic release would have to exist for these sadomasochistic drives, however their opponent reactions, shame and disgust would be much more potent forces than any opposing violence. This suggests a possible reason why Witkin's images might affect the viewer in such a profound way. They actively endeavour to evoke feelings of shame and disgust in the spectator.

There is certainly a streak of sadism in the way Witkin shocks his audience, his commitment to pushing our moral boundaries is often difficult to justify. But there is also an element of shame and disgust embodied within the prints, in the way they are almost mutilated, scarred and muddied, almost like graffiti on a toilet door. It almost appears as if, for Witkin, his brand of aesthetic perfection

may only be achieved through a systematic degradation of his original image by distancing its origins with ageing tricks and blackened spaces. Witkin's photographs are a truly haunting account of the darkest depths of imagination, and the deepest shame of the conscious mind.

Witkin's work fulfils a complete mobius strip incorporating subject matter and psychological impact. Sadomasochism, abjection and death produce wholly connectable reactions within the viewer. As Germano Celant said:

They draw from the cauldren 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, (Celant, 1995, Berlin).

It is no accident that part of the pleasure of looking at these prints is derived from the pain of their initial impact. The fact that one finds it difficult to stop looking (obsession) underlines one's abject response to them, and there is a certain level of phobia experienced too. I say this because, even though the events necessary for the construction of a phobia may not have been experienced in the real world, they *have* very possibly been explored subconsciously and remained suppressed by social and religious moral systems. It is therefore possible to have a phobia of an imagined situation, just as one may be afraid of spiders. Our fascination with what is different makes us feel both pain and humour (pleasure) in the same instant. Witkin draws out these emotions with the expertise of a skilled surgeon, while leaving a remarkable quantity of information hidden, masked or unexposed. In an essay entitled *Divine Revolt*, Witkin states: "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" (Witkin, Fall 1985a, p.36). To fully understand the influence of pain and pleasure on Witkin's work, it may be useful to look at some pieces in greater detail.

The 1993 photograph, *Man Without a Head* (Plate 5), raises all the usual dubious

questions regarding its creation one would expect to find in Witkin's work. He obtained the body in a morgue and requested that its head be removed. Witkin specified his desire for a large muscular man and was told to return in two days to make the print. The corpse is seated quite casually on a steel art-deco chair, the drab surroundings resembling a filthy kitchen or bathroom. The man is still wearing a pair of black socks, a feature which is significant for Witkin:

Had he not been wearing them it would have been too raw and punishing, but the fact that he still had those socks on meant that he was still in a very, very contemporary circumstance, (Witkin in Celant, 1995, p.38)

I have already discussed this picture briefly in relation to abjection, however the image is capable of suggesting much more. It is an extraordinarily erotic pose, almost like an exhausted and drained man taking a break from some decrepit sexual experience. The socks appear to be a reference to an almost homoerotic tableaux - why cover the feet, instead of the shrivelled genitals or neck stump? They infuse life back into the corpse, re-animate it with a black, sadistic humour but also in an horrifically painful way. Were we to identify (as we inevitably do) with the man, we would feel the pain of his gaping wound, but also the exhausted pleasure of his pose. Like *Feast of Fools*, we are confronted with the ultimate question of how the artist accomplished this feat. Its extremity belies an intentional intrusion into an inaccessible world - this man embodies death, pain and sexuality, even though his experience of all three has been extinguished.

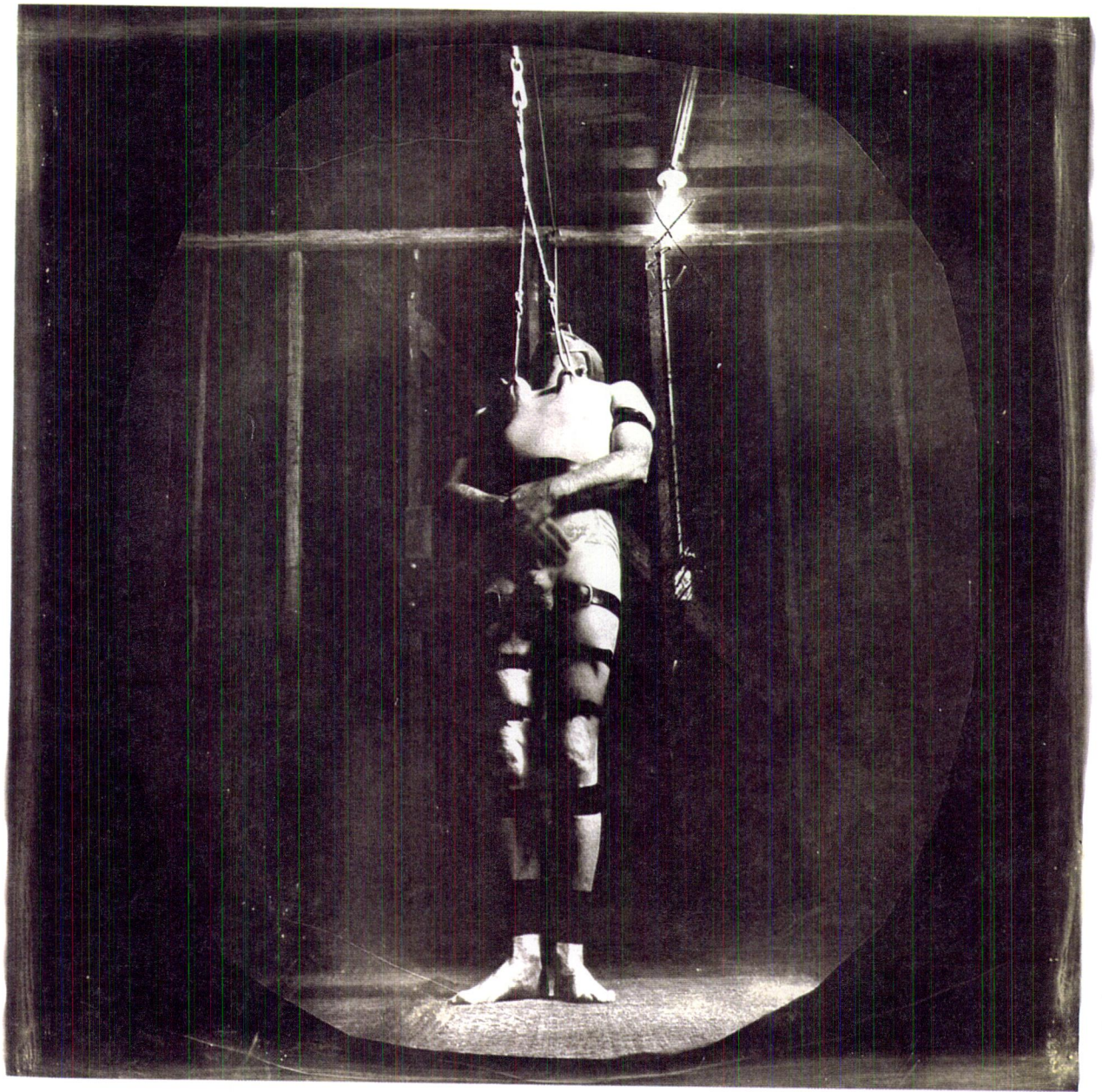
There is also a connection between death and the orgasm suggested in this piece, and mentioned in the work of Ernst Van Alphen: "The death of the body which is so often associated with the orgasm (la petit mort)..." (Van Alphen, 1992, p.184). Van Alphen also asserts the opinion that death is not an event which comes after life; it is an experience which lurks within the living body. Many sado-masochistic practices symbolise this idea, for example auto-erotic strangulation, etc. The tension between sex and death is played out in other

pieces by Witkin, where many of the practices depicted are underlined by the active possibility of death or serious injury.

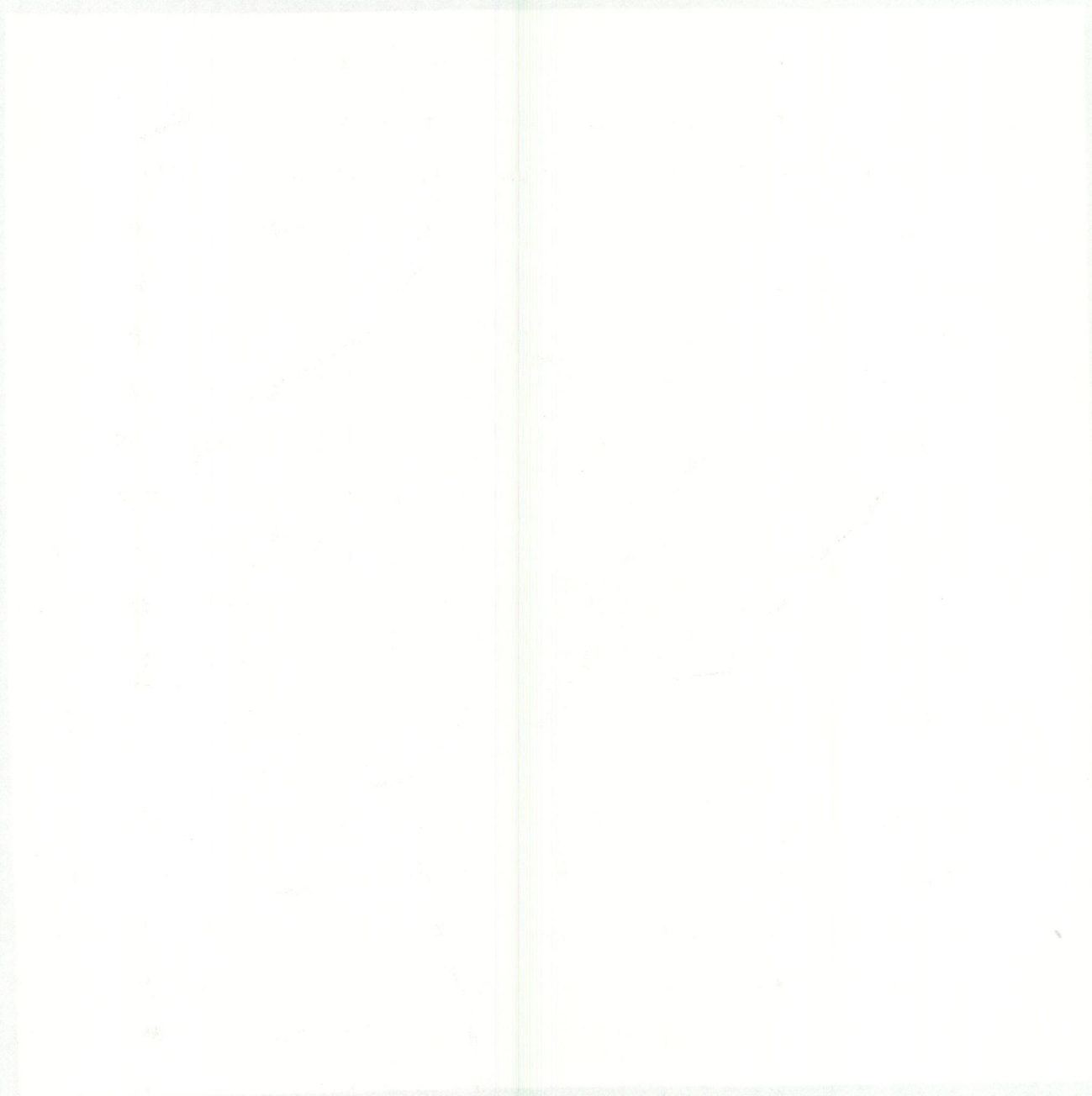
The 1981 piece, *Mandan* (Plate 7), is another such image. Its composition is derived from a painting by George Catlin. Witkin visited the man represented, who lives in San Francisco, and was shown his garage which contains the elaborate rigging for his performance. The man had been developing holes in his chest muscles since he was a boy, and by inserting hooks into these holes he would elevate himself with rope. Many people have found this picture particularly disturbing, which is surprising considering its obvious 'freak show' connotations. On *Mandan*, Gus Blaidsdell writes:

I was stunned. As numbing sensations of leaden excitement radiate from my solar plexus, my breathing becomes rapid and shallow, my abdominal muscles tighten, and my testicals retract...
(Witkin, 1989, catalogue essay)

This picture is one of the least cluttered of Witkin's works; it features a man, bound with leather straps, hanging in a lonely, basement-like room. His chest muscles are unnaturally stretched by the hooks which levitate him; he is masked and dimly lit by a single lightbulb which tentatively picks out the buttresses of the room. One is reminded of a Nazi punishment chamber or some such place. It actually hurts to look at this man, whose pleasure is siphoned from the very pain he inflicts upon himself. Its proximity to death and sexuality is suggested by the leather strapping and cold metal appendages. Witkin has scratched an 'X' over the single light source, almost as a statement of foreboding - as if the subject barely deserves to be lit. Like many of the 'creatures' Witkin photographs, one is reminded of the devils which inhabit hell, their alien emotions are almost totally incomprehensible to the 'normal' mind. Although his pain is self-inflicted, it is very much sadistic, re-directed in a masochistic way: "The acts of violence inflicted on the victims are a mere reflection of a higher form of violence to which the demonstration testifies," (Deleuze, 1989, p.19). Here the man is both the perpetrator and the victim. He is a masochist waiting



7. Mandan



for a pleasure he can only obtain through pain.

"The anxiety of the masochist divides therefore into an indefinite awaiting of pleasure and the intense expectation of pain," (Deleuze, 1989, p.71). Does this not hold true for our expectations as viewers? The act of looking at a Witkin print could almost be described as self inflicted torture. The reasons which force us to go on looking are partially explained by the theory of scopophilia, an obsessive inability to look away. We may be frightened by what we see, but we are willing to endure it due to the possibility of experiencing something else, some beauty or pleasure must be gained as a result. This is similar to the actions of the masochist, expecting pain as a pre-condition to an inevitable pleasure. The duality of sadism and masochism is fully encompassed in Witkin's work, for there is a sadism intrinsically linked with how we look upon the subjects depicted because it ultimately leads to a seductive pleasure. Masochism is generated because we identify with the subject's pain simultaneously and again, the result is the same seductive pleasure. This echoes my earlier point where the audience's level of fascination could be powerful enough to cause a temporary loss of ego while at the same time reinforcing our projected egos.

The melancholy experienced after this pleasure is abject in its manifestation. It is also rooted in the realm of abjection itself - we do not wish to consciously acknowledge our repressed desires but when the opportunity presents itself, as when looking at a Witkin print, or the work of Robert Mapplethorpe or Cindy Sherman and others, those of us curious enough find it impossible to resist. What is being achieved is a systematic liberation of fantasy and a realisation of fantasy's importance to the human psyche. These fantasies are always present, whether we possess the ability to recognise them or not. According to Serge Leclair, the French psychoanalyst, what the subject lacks is a signifier, a key to knowing his or her desires:

The mise-en-scene, therefore, reflects a linking of 'signifiers' (words, sentences, scenes, images, actions) which discloses the

fantasm's relation or attachment to the body (the erogenous zones) (Rapaport, 1994, p.21).

Witkin is a master of mise-en-scene, he provides the signifiers we lack and provides the material necessary to reveal hidden desires. The resultant melancholy is not a product of Witkin's practice, it is encased within our cultural upbringing. However the melancholy does pass, it is transient, just as our reactions to almost all signifiers, however powerful, are brief and fleeting in the media literate western world. The capacity of the human mind to adapt to even greater challenges eventually nullifies the impact of any image, thought or experience.

Conclusion

This thesis has been primarily concerned with providing an analysis of the possible impact Witkin's work has upon the viewer. It has been essentially derived from theories laid down in psychoanalysis, much of which may seem difficult to apply in a wholly universal sense. It is not within the scope of this discussion to account for every eventual response to the work, therefore generalisations, however undesirable, do occur. To conclude it would be appropriate to give a brief overview of the arguments developed throughout, and thus to show their interdependency therein.

By establishing in the first chapter that one must release oneself from initial moral obligations in order to progress anywhere with Witkin's work, the role of seduction was discussed as a key facet of his work. It was shown that through various techniques, Witkin enables the viewer to be drawn into a state of fascination with the physical attributes of the picture. This was seen as pivotal to the success of the piece as an effective vessel of communication. The reasons for this 'fascination' were not restricted to purely superficial concerns, but were also linked with theories of spectator identification and projected desire as explored by Laura Mulvey (Screen(ed.), 1992, p.24). The idea that the spectator identifies *with* the object while at the same time projecting desires *onto* the object presents a paradox which, according to Mulvey, represents an articulation of desire.

It was also shown that the subject matter itself could be perceived as seductive due to its very repulsiveness - its *abjectness*. I proposed that the potential to release the emotions which constitute abjection within Witkin's work was irresistible to the viewer, and that Witkin was probably well aware that his work contained this potential. Finally I proposed that not only was looking at one of these photographs painful (initially), but that the viewer actually might desire

this pain in the expectation of pleasure in various forms. These forms would have been cathartic by nature, humorous, sexual and violent and they were released by signifiers contained within the work.

The idea that a photograph could be so powerful may seem incredible, however I do not pretend that these reactions implicitly take place every time one looks at a print, or that they manifest themselves as violently as some rather melodramatic psychoanalytical writing suggests. The only tangible evidence which indicates that something important is happening within the viewer's mind is the feeling of melancholy which one may feel after exposure to this work. The final chapter also makes some discussion of a link between death and sado-masochism, and the human desire for extremity in sexual relations. This clearly demonstrates that Witkin's work thrives on exploiting several drives simultaneously and thus, by tapping into the combined force of these drives, his work reaches a level of effectiveness few artists attain.

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