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FASCINATION WITH THE BIZARRE

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INTRODUCTION:

I was drawn to the subject of the bizarre through a book on sideshow banners. The dazzling obscurity of these wildly misleading representations of human exhibits instantly fascinated me. Soon, I came to the realisation that fascination often arises from fear. What I had initially found humorous and entertaining, now seemed to represent the more macabre aspects of human behaviour. I became increasingly interested in discovering more about the history of collecting and exhibiting the unusual. **Chapter 1** is an introduction to the "Cabinets of Curiosities", paying particular attention to the "Kunstkammer" of the sixteenth century Russian tsar, Peter I. The Origins of Museums by Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor was particularly helpful to me in this chapter. **Chapter 2** covers the display of "living curiosities" from the English fairs of the early Renaissance to the more recent displays in the American "freakshows".

During my course of research, delving into areas related to the "freakshow", I discovered the work of Diane Arbus and Joel-Peter Witkin, two photographers dealing with "freaks" in their images. I had previously been unaware of either artist's work. My immediate plan was to pursue the art of both photographers, but upon further inquiry into their work, the powerful images of Witkin made more of an impact on me. In **Chapter 3**, I decided to concentrate solely on the taboo-breaking depictions of Joel-Peter Witkin, questioning whether his intention in using explicit material in his work is simply to shock.

THE CABINETS OF CURIOSITIES:

Collections of curiosities emanated in the mid-sixteenth century, containing vast accumulations of "rare, exceptional, extraordinary, exotic and monstrous things" (Cardinal and Elsner, 1994, p.180). European museums owned by aristocrats and princes were known as "Kunstkammer" and "Wunderkammer"(cabinets of "arts" and "wonder"), while erudite and scholarly collectors exhibited their personal displays in "cabinets of curiosities", "theatres of nature" and "closets of rarities". British collecting occurred "lower down" the social scale. The British scholar collected "the curiosities of art and nature, establishing cabinets with less ordered and hierarchical collections than their continental counterparts" (Hall, 1997, p.155). We have become accustomed to associating museums with discovery and there is a "common hope that visiting a museum offers enlightenment" (Vergo, 1989, p.23). The collector's vigorous search for unusual objects was deemed a respectable activity and the collector was perceived as a learned and knowledgeable individual. "To collect curiosities or rarities indicated a particular kind of inquisitiveness: 'curiosity' emerged, momentarily, as a legitimate intellectual pursuit, signifying an open, searching mind" (Hall, 1997, p.158).

The sixteenth century was an age of great discovery and the keen interest in rare and unusual objects derived from a number of sources. The natural world intrigued the Renaissance thinker, inspiring early naturalists such as Ulisse Aldrovandi and Conrad Gesner to collect vast quantities of specimens. In their publications, they mention contents from their own cabinets as well as rarities acquired by contemporary naturalists. The sharing of discoveries through the publications of specimens from fellow scholars' collections was beneficial to all concerned (Impey and MacGregor, 1985, p.1).

The discovery of the New World, (the fourth continent), evoked an intense fascination of foreign cultures. New links had been formed with Africa, south-east Asia and the Far East. The findings of explorers presented the public with startling objects and specimens, previously unknown to them, from lands never visited and cultures never experienced. Animals such as polar bears, cassowaries and dodos were displayed to "an incredulous public" in the form of "raree-shows". Although the inhabitants of these exotic lands were sometimes displayed, collectors were more concerned with

obtaining and exhibiting the items associated with them: objects that were regarded as "tokens or emblems of societies whose very existence was a source of astonishment to the intensely parochial European public". A new picture of the world was being formed and there was an increasing need to define one's place within it. Collectors sought objects of antiquity and elements from their own surroundings with equal fervour in "the desire to establish the position of mankind in the greater scheme of things" (Impey and MacGregor, 1985,p.2).

Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor say that in terms of the function of museums, little has changed throughout the centuries. Along with libraries, botanical and zoological gardens and research laboratories, "museums are still in the business of 'keeping and sorting' the products of Man and Nature and in promoting understanding of their significance". They understand how the early museums of over four hundred years ago may be seen as "quaint", due to the "whimsical" air that terminology such as "cabinets of curiosities" and "closets of rarities" possess. The seemingly erratic display of singular objects of wonder would further emphasise this attitude. "In reality, those very traits of diversity and miscellaneity which serve in our eyes to impair the serious intent of these collections were essential elements in a programme whose aim was nothing less than universality" (Impey and MacGregor, 1985, p.1)

The diverse array of objects found in the "cabinets of curiosities" has driven Anthony Alan Shelton to describe them as being like "miniature representation(s) of the universe" (Cardinal and Elsner, 1994, p.180). Interest in these museums not only attracted visitors from the upper class but also from the general public. Referring to the Tradescant's "collection of rarities", acquired in early European and Barbary Coast visits (seventeenth century Britain), MacGregor commented that:

> MORE SIGNIFICANT IN SOME WAYS THAN THESE DISTINGUISHED VISITORS WERE THE ORDINARY PEOPLE WHO FLOCKED TO SEE THE COLLECTION FOR A FEE-SEEMINGLY SIXPENCE-FOR THE TRADESCANT'S DIFFERED FROM THE MAJORITY OF THEIR CONTEMPORARIES – AND INDEED FROM EVERY COLLECTOR THEN KNOWN OF IN ENGLAND – IN THE GENERAL ACCESSIBILITY OF THEIR COLLECTION. MOST OF THESE VISITORS NO DOUBT SAW THE RARITIES IN THE SAME LIGHT AS HAD THE FOUNDER OF THE COLLECTION – 'THE BIGGEST THAT CAN BE GOTTEN…ANY THING THAT IS STRANG' (Impey and MacGregor, 1985, p.150).

THE "KUNSTKAMMER" OF PETER I:

Exhibits of the strange calibre were certainly present in the impressive "Kunstkammer" of the seventeenth century tsar, Peter I (1672-1725). According to Stephen J.Gould and Rosamund Wolff Purcell, collectors at the time "vied for the biggest, the most beautiful, the weirdest, and the most unusual" objects to adorn their cabinets. Their intentions were not only to educate but also to fascinate. "To stun, more than to order or to systematize, became the watchword of this enterprise" (Gould and Wolff Purcell, 1993, p.17). The Russian leader had an "unceasing thirst for knowledge" and his compelling urge to discover new things is evident in the motto displayed on his private seal in the 1690s; "For I am one of those who are taught and I seek those who will teach me" (Impey and MacGregor, 1985, p.54).

It was during his first journey abroad in 1697-8, that Peter I's interest in rarities of nature and art originated. On return to Russia, he founded a natural history collection in the Moscow Apothecary's Department, where Johann Schumacher was appointed Librarian and Keeper of Rarities. This early cabinet was essentially private and it consisted of "exotic animals, physical monstrosities, anatomical specimens, arms, ambassadors' gifts and ethnographic rarities" (Impey and MacGregor, 1985, p.55). Peter I possessed a definite competitive streak and he went to great extents to ensure that his contemporaries rarely surpassed the quality of his exhibits. In 1711, he sent Schumacher to study the collections in Europe's major cities. In Schumacher's report, he says that he had been instructed "to visit the museums of learned men, both public and private, and there to observe how Your Majesty's museum differs from theirs; and if there is anything lacking in Your Majesty's museum, to strive to fill this gap" (Impey and MacGregor, 1985, p.56).

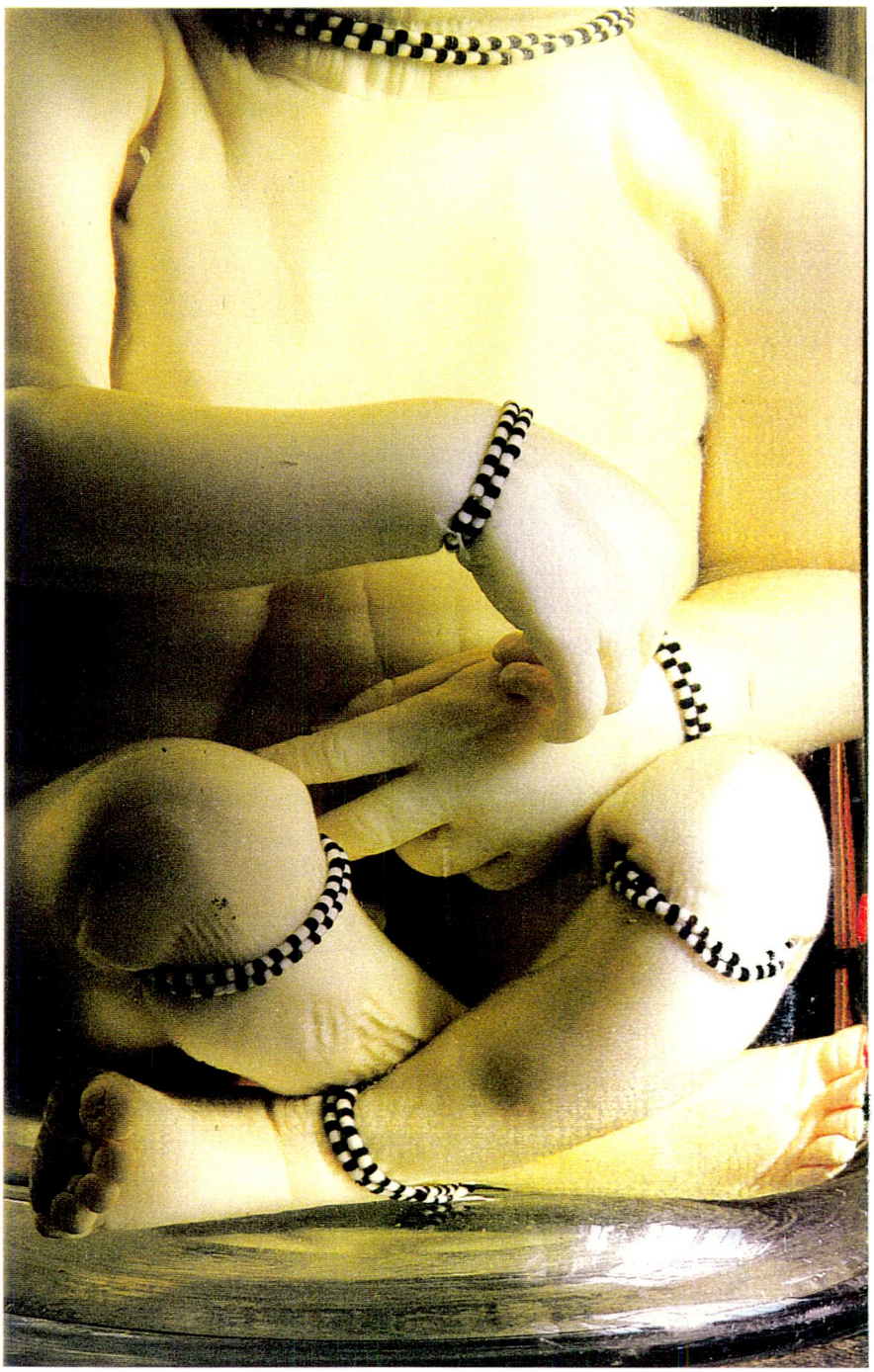
A large quantity of the exhibits in Peter I's "wonder chamber" bore personal meaning to the tsar, such as the death mask of his respected enemy, Charles XII of Sweden or Peter I's collection of teeth, which he had personally extracted from various people. Due to an increasing public interest in technical advances, Peter I dedicated a gallery in his museum to the display of his lathes and cases containing his personal "works of the chisel" and "turned work". The gallery was known as "the Emperor's workshop" (Impey and MacGregor, 1985, p.58). Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor say that items "displaying feats of technical virtuosity proved so irresistible to the collector

that specially made pieces, often with no practical purpose, came to be produced specifically for the cabinet" (Impey and MacGregor, 1985, p.2). Peter I's displays, including meticulous, ivory reliefs and complex, wooden statuettes, celebrated the tremendous advances made in the design of the lathe.

By 1714, Peter I had established Russia's first "public" museum, the St. Petersburg "Kunstkammer", opening the museum with the words, "I want people to look and learn". Oleg Neverov says that "in collecting such rarities, the Tsar was laying the foundations for the country's scientific development" (Impey and MacGregor, 1985, p.55). In 1716-17, Peter I undertook a second journey, where he purchased entire collections from respected scholars. In Germany, he obtained the work of the physician, Gottwald and in Holland, he bought the collections of the apothecary, Albert Seba and the anatomist, Frederic Ruysch (Impey and MacGregor, 1985, p.56). These phenomenal collections were added to the tsar's ever increasing "cabinet of curiosities".

The collection of the Dutch anatomist, Frederic Ruysch, particularly fascinates me. Described by a recent biographer as being "probably the most skilled and knowledgeable preparator in the history of anatomy", Ruysch's preparations, consisting of foetuses, corpses and body parts suspended in jars of alcohol, are visually stunning (Gould and Wolff Purcell, 1993, p.20). Ruysch lived to be ninety-three, in an age usually marked by early death. He taught anatomy in the Amsterdam Surgeon's Guild for more than fifty years. In 1679, he was appointed Doctor to the Court and was granted sole authority to the bodies of executed criminals and to the corpses of babies found in the harbour (Gould and Wolff Purcell, 1993, p.23).

Never being short of material, Ruysch carried out numerous preparations, focussing on "ethnographic curios; and medical peculiarities of all kinds, from siamese twins to skeletal deformities" (Gould and Wolff Purcell, 1993, p.23). He paid extreme attention to detail in each arrangement, giving some faces or figures life-like expressions and poses. He decorated others with fragments of lace or with jewellery. One of his preparations shows a baby adorned "so prettily and naturally" (Ruysch's own words) with beads **[Fig.1].**



[Fig.1] Baby with beads, an anatomical preparation by Frederic Ruysch.

Ruysch also made a number of bizarre "tableaux", compositions assembled with body parts, organs and tissues, some of which dealt with the "allegorical themes of death and the transiency of life". He also made simpler formations, confronting the more obvious moral themes, like his collage of a prostitute's skull being kicked by the leg of a baby (Gould and Wolff Purcell, 1993, p.31). The severe nature of the Dutch anatomist's work might shock or repel many people today and it would be interesting to know how society viewed his preparations and his limited "tableaux". However, we are given no insight by the authors of Finders Keepers as to how people at the time reacted to the experience of visually encountering Ruysch's work.

Stephen J.Gould and Rosamund Wolff Purcell describe Ruysch's collection as being "the centre piece and chief glory" of Peter I's "Kunstkammer". The anatomical preparations made up a considerable part of the "cabinet of curiosities". The Russian tsar's museum also featured exhibits of an equally "strange" nature, in conjunction with the regular offerings of ornaments, portraits and antique coins.

Bizarre exhibits of the animal and human kind played a great part in his Peter I's "chamber of wonders". He displayed stuffed oddities of nature, such as a four-legged rooster and a two-headed sheep (Gould and Wolff Purcell, 1993, p.19). He had also "acquired" a personal footman called Bourgeois on his travels. The giant Bourgeois, who was more than seven foot tall, died in 1724 and Peter I exhibited his enormous skeleton in the "Kunstkammer" (Gould and Wolff Purcell, 1993, p.20).

Collectors' fascination with the bizarre was rapidly moving in the direction of "live" exhibits and Peter I's collection was no different. His museum displayed a hermaphrodite (who later escaped) and the "monsters" Foma, Jakob and Stepan (Impey and MacGregor, 1985, p.60). Foma **[Fig.2]** was a character "who had only two digits on each hand and foot and who walked and collected money for public amusement". When Foma died, Peter I had him stuffed and exhibited next to Bourgeois (Gould and Wolff Purcell, 1993, p.20). I have previously mentioned that humans were sometimes displayed in the "cabinets of curiosities". However, the character of Foma was the earliest named human, who was exhibited for the purpose of entertainment that I could find during my research.

[Fig.2] Foma, one of the "living curiosities" in the "Kunstkammer" of Peter I.

DISPLAYING OTHERS:

EARLY DISPLAYS OF "LIVING CURIOSITIES":

According to Robert Bogdan, the English fairs of the early Renaissance saw the first displays of "human curiosities". The fairs charged their visitors a fee to view the human exhibits, each "oddity" being featured as a single attraction. The human exhibits travelled from fair to fair. During the times when no fairs were held, they exhibited themselves in the rented rooms of taverns or other such establishments. Similar eighteenth century presentations followed in America. A notice in 1738, which appeared in colonial American newspapers, told of an exhibit who "was taken in a wood at Guinea; tis a female about four feet high, in every part like a woman excepting her head which nearly resembles the ape" (Bogdan, 1988, p.25).

Managers or showmen, who were quick to turn the public's fascination with the bizarre to their advantage, now accompanied the human exhibits. They promoted their exhibit, made the various business arrangements and, most importantly, collected the admission fee. If there was a danger that public interest towards their exhibit might be on the decline, the more aggressive of managers would simply recruit a new "sensation". The role of the showman was gradually becoming a defined career (Bogdan, 1988, p.26).

Managers that Bogdan describes as "roving entrepreneurs", were currently travelling from town to town exhibiting "animal curiosities". The animals represented previously unknown species from foreign lands. The lion was exhibited in 1716 and the first elephant in 1796. In 1837, the first giraffes were shown and in 1850, the American public was finally presented with their first view of the gorilla. Animal and human exhibits were jointly referred to as "living curiosities" and notices advertising their display used the phrase, "To the Curious", to arouse public interest (Bogdan, 1988, p.26).

The extreme fascination that "living curiosities" generated is understandable, when we consider the fact that there was a severe lack of scientific explanation available to the public at the time. Most scientists of the day were amateurs and highly limited in their knowledge of endocrinology, genetics and anthropology. "'Scientist' had not yet emerged in America as a full-time occupation" (Bogdan, 1988, p.26).

Towards the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, a number of industrious scientists in major American cities established museums. Originally, these museums displayed diverse and unusual objects and artefacts, similar to those found in the earlier "cabinets of curiosities". The founders intended their establishments to serve as educational and scientific institutions. In 1786, the scientist Peale opened one of the earliest of these museums in Philadelphia and his exhibition included albinos and other "human oddities". He later shunned the idea of displaying "living curiosities", believing that "they attracted too much frivolous attention" (Bogdan, 1988, p.26).

However, public interest in museums that did not feature human attractions "was not always sufficient to keep them solvent". In the previous century, the public held "curious" objects in high regard. Now they marvelled at the presentation of unusual people. For a public that now seemed to crave entertainment, the inclusion of human exhibits was vital for the financial survival of these enterprises. "Human oddities" such as "dwarfs, people born with missing limbs or extra limbs, joined twins, people with excess hair, people with tattoos, Native Americans" and "non-Western people" attracted the paying customer (Bogdan, 1988, p.26).

Henry Moss, a black man whose body was marked by white patches, was a "living curiosity" that remained independent of museums. In 1796, he exhibited himself in taverns in Philadelphia. Moss left an extensive report regarding the public's interest towards him. Members of the prestigious, Philadelphia-based American Philosophical Society "flocked to see him", regarding Moss's condition as important "evidence that might help to answer some of the more pressing scientific questions of the day" (Bogdan, 1988, p.28).

Science was rapidly developing at this point and scientists were becoming increasingly involved in the study of "human anomalies". The visits of physicians and natural scientists spurred widespread debate as to the nature and origin of these creatures and this welcome scientific link enabled the public to justify their fascination with the bizarre: "The fact that reputable scientists were interested in such things legitimised the public's interest in curiosities" (Bogdan, 1988, p.28).

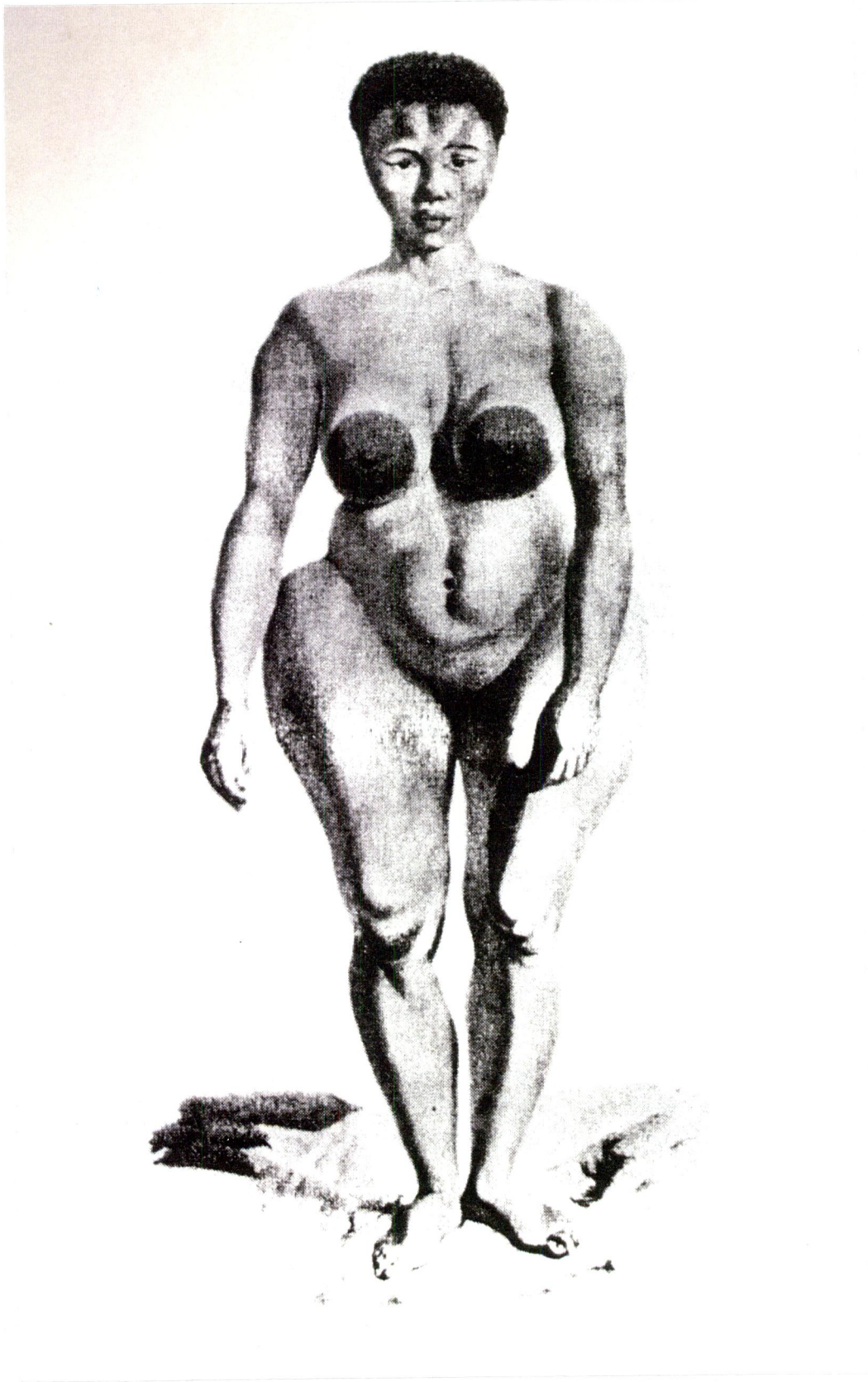
SAARTJE BAARTMAN, "THE HOTTENTOT VENUS":

In 1810, an African woman called Saartje Baartman was brought to England from the Cape region of South Africa. Hendrick Cezar, a Dutch Boer farmer, accompanied her. She became known as "The Hottentot Venus" **[Fig.3]** and was regularly exhibited over five years in both London and Paris, until her death in 1815 (Hall, 1997, p.264). Her physical "difference" attracted a wide range of public attention. Although Baartman was only four feet six inches tall, the emphasis of the public's gaze lay on her "steatopygia" (her protruding buttocks). There was particular interest in what was described as her "Hottentot apron", an enlargement of the labia, that Sander Gilman says was "caused by the manipulation of the genitalia and considered beautiful by the Hottentots and the Bushmen" (Hall, 1997, p.264).

She was exhibited in a manner that Robert Bogdan would describe as the "exotic presentation", a mode of display frequently deployed in the later "freakshow". The "exotic presentation" usually required the exhibits to "play up" to the generally perceived notions regarding the primitivity of people from foreign cultures (Bogdan, 1988, p.105). On a stage three feet above the ground, "The Hottentot Venus" was presented as though she was "a wild beast". She came to and from her cage when ordered, "more like a bear on a chain than a human being" (Bhagat, 1996, p.143).

According to Dipti Bhagat, London was "inflamed by debate on the issue of the abolition of slavery" at the time of Saartje Baartman's presentation. Protests were made on Baartman's behalf, concerning her display, which was regarded by many as despicable and exploitative. Baartman rejected the claim that she was "exhibited to the public under circumstances of peculiar disgrace to a civilised country" (Bhagat, 1996, p.142). Instead she declared herself "under no restraint" and "happy to be in England" (Hall, 1997, p.265).

Stuart Hall says that the audiences that flocked to see "The Hottentot Venus" could be divided into two, "quite different circles": the general public and the members of respected scientific associations. The public treated her as a "spectacle", an object of fascination and they commemorated her in forms of entertainment such as ballads, cartoons, illustrations, melodramas and in newspaper reports. Her display also



[Fig.3] Saartje Baartman, "The Hottentot Venus".

attracted the keen scientific interest of naturalists and ethnologists, "who measured, observed, drew, wrote learned treaties about, modelled, made waxen moulds and plaster casts, and scrutinized every detail of her anatomy, dead and alive" (Hall, 1997, p.265).

Robert Bogdan says that most authors who have written about "human anomalies" (mainly referring to those in the "freakshow"), have concentrated on describing the physical abnormalities of the exhibits. He believes that in his book on Freaks(1978), the humanities scholar Leslie Fiedler, breaks from the mould of writers who focus on "freak" as a physiological condition: "Rather, his mythological, psychoanalytic approach posits that human beings have a deep, psychic fear of people with specific abnormalities" (Bogdan, 1988, p.105).

Our fascination often arises from fear. "The Hottentot Venus" represented an unusual species from an unfamiliar culture, the "unknown" never failing to generate discomfort and anxiety. In Sander Gilman's essay, "The deep structure of stereotypes" from Difference and Pathology (1985), he talks about the common need to create stereotypes as a defence mechanism against the aspects of the human condition that we are uncomfortable with. He says that stereotypes "buffer us against our most urgent fears by extending them, making it possible to act as though their source were beyond our control". By distancing ourselves from those we fear, we have established "difference between the 'self' and the 'object', which becomes the 'Other'" (Hall, 1997, p.284). Those who gathered to see "The Hottentot Venus", viewed her as "the embodiment of 'difference'" (Hall, 1997, p.265). "One pinched her, another walked around her; one gentleman 'poked' her with his cane; and one lady employed her parasol to ascertain all was, as she called it, 'nattral'" (Bhagat, 1996, p.143).

After Saartje Baartman's death in Paris, the anatomists Henri Ducrotay de Blainville and Georges Cuvier, made numerous casts of her body before dissecting it. They presented her preserved genital organs, prepared in such a way so as to see the nature of the labia, to the Académie Royale de Médicine. These casts are presently exhibited in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (Bhagat, 1996, p.144). In both life and death, "The Hottentot Venus" was repeatedly treated as an object, rather than as a "real

person". She was "fetishized" by society and her dismantling is described by Gilman as "a pathological summary of the entire individual" (Hall, 1997, p.266).

The public had always been intrigued by the rumours of the "primitive" genitalia of "The Hottentot Venus", which only became visible to them after her death. Previously, the viewer could only fantasise about the "forbidden" object and now it was there to be seen: Stuart Hall says that "the sexual object of the onlookers' gaze was 'displaced' from her genitalia, which is what really obsessed them, to her buttocks" (Hall, 1997, p.266). When she was alive and on stage, Saartje Baartman was required to wear a tight-fitting garment that closely resembled her skin colour, presumably a method employed to display as much of her body as possible, without offending "respectable society" (Bhagat, 1996, p.143).

Little was known about the culture or the physical make-up of "The Hottentot Venus". Although she was exhibited in a "beast-like" manner, the public could now legitimise their fascination with looking. The exhibit they were viewing was a "scientific curiosity". Had Saartje Baartman been displayed naked, the public mood would have been quite different. As it was, viewers could "'go on looking' while disavowing the sexual nature of their gaze". Stuart Hall says that science, ethnology and the search for anatomical evidence, simply served as a "cover" for the public's desire to stare, for now their fascination was "in the name of Science, of objective knowledge, ethnological evidence, in the pursuit of Truth" (Hall, 1997, p.268).

THE EMERGENCE OF THE FREAKSHOW:

By 1840, most American cities had museums. However, many of these establishments were struggling to survive. Those that were still attracting the avid customer, were the ones that had successfully "made the transition from science and education to entertainment and amusement while still maintaining the trappings of the museum's respectability" (Bogdan, 1988, p.32). In a bid to stay afloat, struggling museums provided what was termed "rational amusement" (enjoyment while learning), introducing more entertainment-oriented attractions, such as drama and musical productions and freaks (Bogdan, 1988, p.30). In 1841, Phineas Taylor Barnum bought a failing museum in the centre of New York City and transformed it into a famous, booming enterprise (Bogdan, 1988, p.32).

The sole aim of "Barnum's American Museum" was to provide entertainment. His skills as a promoter and advertiser later earned him the title of "father of modern day advertising". Freaks were the main attraction and Barnum employed a diversity of human exhibits, which included in 1860: "an albino family (the Lucasies), 'The Living Aztecs' (Maximo and Bartola, brother and sister with microcephaly), three dwarfs, a black mother with two albino children, 'The Swiss Bearded Lady'" and "The Highland Fat Boys". Barnum's establishment received tremendous public acclaim. At this time, his museum was regarded as quite a "fashionable" source of entertainment and by 1850, it was New York's premier attraction (Bogdan, 1988, p.33).

"Barnum's American Museum" was destroyed by fire in 1868, at which point P.T.Barnum resigned from the industry. Dime Museums and circuses emerged in 1870 and both enjoyed over forty years of popularity. The dime museum was modelled on P.T.Barnum's "American Museum", the organizers desperately striving to gain public popularity. New York City was the dime museum capital and the Bowery (an entertainment district) was the most obvious area to find such an establishment. Dime Museums were short-lived set-ups, frequently changing ownership and premises (Bogdan, 1988, p.35).

The display of freaks was the main attraction of most dime museums during the period 1870-1900, and "the human oddity was the king of museum entertainment". Dime museums began to decline at the turn of the century. This was due to a substantial decrease in their standards and also due to an increase in other forms of popular entertainment competing for their custom. Freakshows were now available in circuses, street fairs, world's fairs, carnivals and urban amusement parks (Bogdan, 1988, p.37).

In the freakshow, humans were exhibited as "spectacles", objects of amusement or entertainment. Due to a substantial rise in the publics demand to view "oddities", managers often found that it was increasingly difficult to obtain "genuine" freaks. Failure to find quality acts or exhibits resulted in the showmen fabricating stories about their exhibits, raising "fraud, misrepresentation and exaggeration – the hard sell – to new heights" (Bogdan, 1988, p.37).

Showmen were eager to play on the public's fascinations and fears. Little was still known of foreign cultures and the curiosity towards "exotic" people was still rampant. Therefore, freakshows featured numerous exhibits of "exotic" people (Bogdan, 1988, p.37). Although many of these exhibits had nothing physically wrong with them, they were still deemed "freaks". Showmen recounted the background and life-stories of their exhibits (some of which were slightly misleading, others of which were blatant lies) so as to appeal to the public's interest in "the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial" and "the exotic" (Bogdan, 1988, p.105).

Roland Barthes (1977) "argues that, frequently, it is the caption which selects one out of the many possible meanings from the image, and 'anchors' it with words" (Hall, 1997, p.228). Although Barthes was referring to the use of photographic images in advertising, this can be applied to the combination of an image with text in the freakshow, the image being the human exhibit and the text being either the exhibit's title or the showman's accompanying "spiel". The showman intended the viewer to perceive the exhibit in a particular way. His manipulative style of presentation and his selective choice of words were meant to sway the public's perception.

Organizers of the Great World's Fair intended their displays of "exotic" people to be viewed with anthropological interest. The World's Fairs emerged in the 1850s as enormous exhibitions of commerce, industry, art, history and culture. Soon they began to display other cultures, the first being at the Exposition Universelle in Paris 1889, and the last being at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924-5. "Exotic" people were displayed in "authentic" villages, stage-set reproductions supposedly resembling their native surroundings. They were asked to re-enact normal everyday tasks. The Igorats **[Fig.4]**, a Philippino tribe exhibited at the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904, ate dog meat in front of a gaping audience. Henrietta Lidchi says that foreign exhibits represented "real, authentic exemplars of 'primitive' people, 'survivals' of other histories, 'vanishing races' or genuine 'degenerates.'" During a period of intense world exploration and Western expansion, displays such as the Igorats could only serve to further fuel the public's opinion regarding these people as "primitive" and "savage" (Hall, 1997, p.196).

[Fig.4] Igorats eating dog meat in the Philippine exhibit at the St.Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition, 1904.

THE ART OF JOEL-PETER WITKIN

For over forty years, Joel-Peter Witkin has confronted the public with powerful, shocking and often disturbing images. Compelled to pursue the bizarre, the American artist's chosen method of expression is through photography. His photographs incorporate the use of foetuses, corpses, "the maimed, the ugly and the sadistically erotic" to produce images that break many social taboos (Murray, 1986, p.12). Reintroducing the viewer to the reality of the existence of "freaks", Witkin's graphic imagery is, for many, hard to stomach. He presents us with images that generate discomfort within ourselves, forcing us to deal with subjects that we would rather avoid. Subjects that writer David Lee says, compel us "to confront that side of nature we hide from because we don't understand it" (Lee, 1991, p.516).

Joel-Peter Witkin was born in 1939 in Brooklyn, New York. His father was an Orthodox Jew and his mother was a Catholic. They divorced due to religious differences during his childhood. Religion remained a fascination to him from this point onwards. Another important incident, according to Witkin, that had a considerable impact on his life, was an accident he witnessed when he was six years old. He was on his way to church with his mother and twin brother when they heard an incredible crash. Three cars, all with families in them, had collided. Amid the screams and the confusion, Witkin recalls being apart from his mother and standing at the curb of the road. Something rolled towards him from one of the 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". This incident had a profound effect on Witkin's psyche and it marked the beginning of his inquiry into the morbid subjects of violence, pain and death (Coke, 1985, p.7).

By Witkin's mid-teens, he had taught himself photography through a series of beginners' books. In 1956, he accompanied his brother to a freakshow at Coney Island. His brother, who was studying painting, had chosen freaks as his subject and Witkin had offered to take photographs as studies. These new and wonderful sights fascinated him. He felt considerably at ease with these human anomalies, these "freaks". He photographed a three-legged man, a dwarf called "The Chicken Lady" and a hermaphrodite, with whom he had his first sexual experience (Coke, 1985, p.7).

He photographed his subjects in colour, in the form of slides. Untitled (1956), Witkin's image of a woman with dysfunctional features, is described by Celant as:

> 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 (Celant, 1995, p.15).

Witkin's sense of loss when the freakshow moved south urged him to fabricate his own unusual and theatrical surroundings. Within these fantastic environments, he directed strange events to take place in order to capture them on film, recreating atmospheres that he considered to be his own reality (Witkin, 1985, p.36).

In his article, "Divine Revolt", published in Aperture, Fall 1985, Witkin talks about the visual influences which had the most important effects on him at this time. He admired painters such as Cimabue and Giotto as they dealt with religious and esoteric themes. He was interested in their "depiction of the frozen emotion of the sacred". He held the work of Rembrandt in high regard as he "made the sacred human". The late nineteenth century Symbolists, Gustav Klimt and Alfred Kubin influenced him with their exploration of dreams, perversity and satanism. He was drawn to Balthus for "the erotic and the voyeuristic" qualities of his work and to the art of Max Beckmann as Witkin could relate to his search for what was "real" by dealing with "the melding of pain, lostness and death" (Witkin, 1985, p.36).

During this time in Witkin's development, he has said that he wanted "no personal contact with other photographers", preferring to work out his "own vision in isolation" (Witkin, 1985, p.36). The only photographer whose work he was strongly influenced by at this stage, was August Sander, a German photographer whose portraits included depictions of dwarves and circus-folk. Witkin believed Sander's images "were faithful to the character of his subjects". In Witkin's opinion, Sander worked with the reality of his time, "in the setting of his native land and the reality of its people". Witkin was adamant that his work should possess none of these qualities; "I didn't believe in the reality of space, the consciousness of time was outside my own" (Witkin, 1985, p.36).

In 1961, Witkin worked as a full-time printer of colour photographs, but he attended night classes in New York's Cooper Union School of Art as a sculpture student. As he was not a full-time student, he was drafted into the army during the Vietnam War. He enlisted as a combat photographer and spent three years photographing harrowing episodes of war, including accidental deaths and suicides. After leaving the army, Witkin returned to Cooper Union, obtaining a Bachelor of Fine Art's degree in 1974. During his four years of study, he was intent on producing work that represented his deep fascination with self-exploration. The image of Christ haunted him and he felt driven to create, for himself, what he believed to be the image of God. (Coke, 1985, p.9).

In 1975, he began graduate studies in photography at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, after almost eight years of work in New York. The human subjects in his art became essential elements in the construction of his personal reality. His bizarre reality required bizarre models. The moulding of his unusual imagery and characters was, in part, inspired by his fascination with fictional super-heroes such as Superman, Batman and Wonderwoman. He gave these personalities new and glorified roles, for example, Superman became, to Witkin, "the hero of goodness, the secular Christ" (Witkin, 1985, p.36). His overwhelming impulse to intertwine fantasy with reality urged him to place notices in his local newspapers in a quest to find freaks. Witkin saw freaks as "the manifestation of something exceptional and extraordinary: the infinite will of God" (Celant, 1995, p.15). From 1975 onwards, his frequent and elaborate advertisements circulated the newspapers of New Mexico in search of "any living myth", "anyone bearing the wounds of Christ". Included in his extraordinary and vast request were; "physical prodigies of all kinds", "dwarfs", "active or retired side-show performers", "people who live as comic book heroes", "people with tails, horns, wings, fins, claws, reversed feet or hands, elephantine limbs, etc.", "sex masters and slaves", "hermaphrodites and teratoids (alive and dead)" (Celant, 1995, p.175).

Erotic and fantastic imagery was thriving at this time, mainly through films, an entertainment that attracted an enormous audience. Van Deren Coke mentions three well-known films that were shown on numerous occasions during Witkin's period of development:

> ROMAN POLANSKI'S ROSEMARY'S BABY, 1968, IN WHICH MIA FARROW PLAYS A YOUNG MOTHER PSYCHOTICALLY BENT ON KILLING HER CHILD WHOSE FATHER IS THE DEVIL, FREDERICO FELLINI'S SATYRICON, 1969, FEATURING GROSSLY FAT WOMEN AND LOTS OF LESS FILLED-OUT BARE FLESH AND EROTIC MOMENTS, MOSTLY HOMOSEXUAL, AND WILLIAM FRIEDKIN'S THE EXORCIST, 1973, WHICH DEALS WITH A YOUNG GIRL DEMONICALLY POSSESSED (Coke, 1985, p.6).

Films by the Pop-Artist, Andy Warhol, were popular within New York's artistic circles. Coke describes the film, Andy Warhol's Frankenstein, 1973 (a film directed by Paul Morrissey but inspired by Warhol), as "a particularly nasty porno fantasy film" that was shown for weeks in New York and other large American cities. By 1982, a Variety magazine article showed that nearly fifty per cent of all major films were supernatural horror films or science-fiction films (Coke, 1985, p.6).

Whether Witkin was influenced by these films or not, the material was there and he could not fail to be aware of them. Certainly, his 1976 photograph, Indulgences (Leo) **[Fig.5]**, could easily be passed off as a still from a film of this genre. It features a muscular black man, born without legs, who is hooded and placed in a cage. It is a sinister and unnerving image. During this period of his work, Witkin placed his subjects (people who he believed to be "damaged"), in uncomfortable situations, his intention being to capture their disturbed emotions as they revealed their pain to him. He later came to the realisation that this search for the "truth" could be damaging to the psyche of his subjects as well as being harmful to his own consciousness. (Coke, 1985, p.11).

Throughout the 1970's, there were several American photographers dealing with subject matter similar to Witkin, photographers such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Diane Arbus. However, I would agree with Joan Murray, that Witkin's photographs "assault the viewer more intimately than the work of any previous photographer" (Murray, 1986, p.12). His images are dark, haunting and mysterious. His unique, fabricated environments grant his subjects a dramatic ambiguity that is not apparent in the "documentary representations of Arbus and the idealised, neo-Classical figurations of Mapplethorpe" (Celant, 1995, p.22). As with the previously mentioned photograph, Indulgences (Leo), Witkin's concern is with the "reality" of his subject's existence.

[Fig.5] **Indulgences (Leo), New Mexico, 1976**

by Joel-Peter Witkin.

Unlike the anxieties of past and contemporary photographers, Witkin's intent is not to highlight the inequalities existing between human beings. Celant describes his representation of the condition of abnormality as "a triumph", saying that Witkin "embraces it not as a social, but as an ontological experience" (Celant, 1995, p.15).

From ancient times to the present, "painters have dealt with purgatory, hell and damnation, with ravaged bodies, sadomasochistic sexuality and madness, but the response to photographs of the same subject matter is very different". We react differently to the depiction of our darker sides in painting than in photography; "Painting is experienced as unreal, representing the imagination of the artist, the photograph is 'real'" (Murray, 1986, p.12).

The imagery in painting and photography holds different meanings for us. We can distance ourselves from the "unreality" of the painted image, being comforted with the knowledge that the painting is merely representational of reality. Past artists such as Bosch and Goya concerned themselves with portraying horrifying imagery similar to Witkin's. The violent and graphic depictions rampant in their work do not shock or repel us simply because they are rendered in oil paint. With the acknowledgement that the imagery in Witkin's work is real, his photographs possess the ability to severely shock the viewer. We also seem to have a higher level of acceptance when viewing the imagery of Bosch or Goya. Does our acknowledgement of their status as Great Masters overshadow the fact that many of their depictions of human activities are far more visually shocking than some of the imagery in the work of Witkin? As David Lee quite aptly says, "we tend to overlook conveniently the more sadistic, unsavoury imaginings of great artists. Somehow they are above normal ethical standards" (Lee, 1991, p.516).

When we are confronted with the work of a contemporary artist such as Witkin, who openly deals with the "unsavoury" aspects of modern man through photographic images, our levels of acceptance are thoroughly shaken. The photograph is reality exposed. There is no denying that what we see before us actually exists and the events and situations presented to us have really taken place. E.H.Gombrich says that Bosch's imagery "succeeded in giving concrete and tangible shape to the fears that haunted man in the Middle Ages" (Gombrich, 1996, p.359). Witkin's severe use of imagery gives very definite shape to the fears of modern man. He deals directly with

taboo subject matter. The viewer is abruptly confronted with aspects of life (and death) that are regarded as "abnormal", uneasy topics that we seldom see depicted in photography. With Witkin's bold and courageous undertaking of questionable subject matter, he is clearly "using photography in a way that few others have dared" (Murray, 1986, p.12).

In September 1991, at the Hamilton's Gallery in Mayfair, London, Witkin held his first U.K. exhibition. Included in the showing was his 1990 photograph, Feast of Fools **[Fig.6]**, an incredible composition featuring the corpse of a baby as its centrepiece. The image is constructed in a seventeenth century still-life manner. As with many of Witkin's works, he is drawing inspiration from famous paintings or styles of painting, setting out "in search of the voices of past artists" (Celant, 1995, p.23). The arrangement comprises of severed hands and feet and the slumped and lightly blindfolded body of a dead baby, all nestling in a display of luscious and exotic fruit and vegetables and suggestive seafood. It is a bizarre presentation that Emmanuel Cooper describes as "a perverse dish that only some demented chef would conjure up" (Cooper, 1991, p.39).

The Independent on Sunday published a picture of the Feast of Fools to accompany a review of the show by art critic, Tom Lubbock. The image caused a tremendous public stir. The newspaper received numerous letters of complaint, objecting to the exposure of the image. The extreme response from the newspaper's readers prompted Tom Lubbock to run a second article that David Lee describes as "a muddled apology" (Lee, 1991, p.516).

In the article, Witkin Defends Feast Image, printed on the News page of the British Journal of Photography, September 1991, Lubbock is reported to have said that the use of the image "may have been wrong". He says that Witkin, "at the very least", had "obtained improper access to a dead baby" and concludes by saying that Witkin's activities amounted to "desecration". Witkin reacted angrily to the criticisms towards the photograph, one reader calling the image a "cruel obscenity". Witkin condemned the Independent on Sunday for their incompetence in dealing with "sophisticated topics". He explained to the British Journal of Photography that full permission was granted to him to use the body of the dead child and that he has complete respect for the subjects he chooses to depict:

[Fig.6] **Feast of Fools, Mexico City, 1990**

by Joel-Peter Witkin.

> I DON'T EXPLOIT. I'M VERY HUMBLED BY WORKING WITH HUMAN REMAINS OF ANY KIND...BUT THE SUBJECT MATTER MUST FINALLY BE TRANSCENDED. IF PEOPLE STOP AT THAT LITERALISM, THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND THE POSSIBILITIES OF VISUAL METAPHOR (British Journal of Photography/News, 1991, p.6).

Witkin discovered the subject matter for the Feast of Fools on a trip to Mexico City in 1990. While visiting the morgue of a forensic hospital, one of the doctors opened the wrong drawer by mistake. Witkin has described the experience of viewing the contents of the drawer as "like looking into Hell". Severed body parts floated in the "swill of human soup and pus and degeneration" (Celant, 1995, p.33). Witkin's initial reaction was to reject these findings as being too much for even him to deal with. Yet the thoughts of this discovery continued to antagonise him until he became overwhelmed by the need to face his fears; "I figured if I'm that taken by the possibility of what was there, I should make this photograph" (Jenkins, 1991, p.13).

I was drawn to the work of Joel-Peter Witkin with the knowledge that he was a contemporary photographer dealing with the more "abnormal" aspects of the human condition, or to put it more bluntly, he was an artist obsessed with "freaks". I was immediately apprehensive towards the credibility of his work, but as David Lee says, "it is too easy to condemn without seeing" (Lee, 1991, p.516). The Feast of Fools was my visual introduction to Witkin's work. Granted, my initial reaction was one of disgust and repulsion, fuelling my preconceived notions that the intent of this artist was merely to shock.

However, upon further visual and literal inquiry into Witkin's art, I gained a considerable amount of respect and admiration for his work. For me, the acknowledgement of the fact that his imagery is real is the most shocking element of the photograph. The overall image is always visually stunning, due to his intricate attention to detail and his complex rendering of the photograph. His purpose is not to focus on the "abnormalities" of his subjects but to use the reality of their conditions as components in his work.

The unearthing of the subject matter is the first step in Witkin's arduous formation of an image. Extreme attention is given to even the most minor of details in each arrangement. Further alterations are made to the image during the printing process.

Witkin makes scratch marks on both sides of the negative, deleting certain elements and enhancing others. He prints on warm-toned paper, the brown/yellow glow giving the image a "sense of history". Van Deren Coke says that:

> THE SENSE OF AGE TENDS TO TEMPER THE SHOCK OF ENCOUNTERING EVEN THE MOST DRAMATIC EVENTS. THE RESULT IS LIKE AN IMAGE SEEN IN A SOFT MIRROR AS REALITY AND FANTASY ARE JOINED IN OUR MIND BY HIS PRINTING AND TONING TECHNIQUES (Coke, 1985, p.11).

He is very particular about who or what he photographs, only photographing subjects that he feels are in a "condition of powerful self-revelation". This is exemplified in his photograph, Man with Dog, Mexico City, 1990 **[Fig.7].** A nude portrait of a pre-opp transsexual, elegantly posing with his/her dog, it is a powerful image of a person "committed to a personal reality of existence". Witkin has also rejected taking photographs in some hospitals and morgues that he has visited, where he has felt that there has been no "presence of spirit" from the remains (Jenkins, 1991, p.13).

David Lee says that our attitudes towards photography are "riddled with ethical inconsistencies". While we accept photojournalistic images of the horrors of war, we are repulsed by a billboard image of a new-born baby with its umbilical cord still attached (a Benetton advertisement) (Lee, 1991, p.516). I believe our attitudes towards the photographic images that we encounter are swayed depending on the context in which the image is presented to us.

Photojournalist Francesco Zizola, winner of the World Press Photo of the Year 1996 with his harrowing image of Angolan children traumatised by war, views photography as "a language capable of expressing various levels of complexity, and an extraordinary instrument for documentary and ethical observations" (Zizola, 1997, p.9). The objectives of the photojournalist are to generate public awareness through their images of reality and there is a definite public acceptance towards their work.

The images of Oliviero Toscani, the Milanese photographer responsible for the Benetton clothing company's advertising campaign, create quite a different public feeling. Toscani's controversial images, including a man dying from AIDS and a priest and a nun kissing, are designed to shock and to gain publicity, a clever

[Fig.7] **Man with Dog, Mexico City, 1990**

by Joel-Peter Witkin.

marketing ploy to keep the name of Benetton fresh in the public's minds. Yet the context in which these images are presented to us have frequently come under attack and other advertisers have quite rightly described Toscani's methods as "gratuitous violence used to sell T-shirts" (Di Matteo, 1993, p.54).

Viewing the cutting use of imagery in the art of Witkin will be a visual experience regarded by many as nauseating and offensive. In Charlene Roth's article, "The Stain: Some Issues Related to Abjection", she says that abject art "makes visible what has been kept invisible and/or private because it is repugnant in public" (Roth, 1994, p.17). Witkin's Feast of Fools brings to the fore subject matter that many people will deem as repugnant and sacrilegious, imagery whose use in art is highly unacceptable. While I am satisfied that Witkin's subject matter has not been chosen with the sole intention to shock, I do understand how his work may be "hard on many people's sensibilities" (Coke, 1985, p.6). We each deal with complex personal moralities. What may be acceptable to some will be highly unacceptable to others. I personally do not object to any artist's use of imagery, however disturbing, as long as there is an assurance that it is being used for the right reasons. With his daring manipulation of taboo-breaking images, I would agree that:

> (WITKIN) MAKES PICTURES OF BIZARRE SUBJECTS NOT TO SHOCK BUT TO CAUSE US TO PONDER SOCIETY'S PROHIBITIONS AND TO MAKE US MORE AWARE OF HUMAN NEEDS. HIS PICTURES ARE NEITHER PARODIES NOR THE RESULTS OF FEVERISH HALLUCINATIONS BUT BOLD AND HAUNTING REFLECTIONS OF A WORLD THAT EXISTS ALL AROUND THE GLOBE (Coke, 1985, p.17).

CONCLUSION:

For centuries, people have shared a fascination with the bizarre. The common factor is fear. From the mid-1500s to the late 1700s, society's urgent need to define their position in the greater scheme of things, resulted in the vast and diverse collections of the "Cabinets of Curiosities". Collecting was considered a respected pursuit, representing an open mind, eager to explore the unknown.

The exhibiting of humans as objects of wonder saw a shift in public thinking in the early 1800s. Fear was now being projected onto fellow humans who were perceived as "different". Humans were being reduced to objects, as we saw in the case of Saartje Baartman, "The Hottentot Venus". Scientific interest in human "curiosities" legitimized the public's compelling urge to stare.

From the mid-1950s onwards, the reintroduction of questionable subject matter in the work of Joel-Peter Witkin has generated much fear and discomfort within the public. Witkin's harsh imagery bravely confronts subject matter that most people would shun. His unique use of photography makes the invisible visible, forcing us to confront the side of our being that we choose to avoid.

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