National College of Art and Design.

Fine Art Sculpture

Re-Representing Death
Serrano: The Morgue Series.

by
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Submitted to The Faculty of History of Art & Design and Complimentary Studies in candidacy of the degree of Fine Art Sculpture 1998

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the staff at the National College of Art & Design library, and my thesis supervisor Niamh O'Sullivan for their time, patience and co-operation.

Sandra Ellison

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INTRODUCTION

It is death that consoles and makes us live, alas!
Death is the goal of life, death is our only hope,
Which like an elixir cheers and intoxicates
And gives us heart to live another day..
It is the famous inn inscribed in the book,
Where we can eat and sleep and take our ease.

Charles Baudelaire
Oeuvres completes, 1951.

Death is an experience that unites mankind. It is unique in that it is the only experience which nobody lives to tell the tale. There is no knowing death, no experiencing death, and no returning to write about death. No one can claim an authority on the matter. Without first hand experience, one can only imagine when death will come, what guise it will take, and how it will feel. However, because of the universality of death we are all able to uniquely reflect on death and what it represents for us. Death and its representation has pervaded all disciplines and cultures.

My reasons for choosing this study are many. There has always been a profound social taboo against looking at the dead, injured, and deformed. However, the interest in death is so deeply ingrained in humans as to be almost instinctive. It is natural to want to see, and to be curious, about death. There is an innate need (although none will admit it) to stare at the dead, at scenes of accidental death or criminal violence. It is the need to experience another's fatal end through eyes and imagination, to wonder in what way 'it' will come for us, and how we might protect ourselves from such an end. We measure the situation against our own living, breathing, warm selves; our responses dictated by the representation of death.

Many artists have shown us various representations of death. Most portray the grotesqueness of the situation or the taboo. Andres Serrano offers a fresh representation of death, in that he aestheticises the corpse. Born in New York, the son of a Cuban mother and a Honduran father, he has made his career out of photographing the bizarre, the macabre, and what some perceive as the offensive. His representation of death in his 1992 Morgue Series is of particular interest in that it challenges preconceived notions of fate and mortality.

The primary purpose of this thesis is to provide the reader with an overview of death and its representation through the work of the artist Andres Serrano. The thesis outline is as follows:

Chapter 1 introduces death and representation and charts the changing representations of death throughout the ages.
Chapter 2 introduces Serrano the artist, his work and biography.
Chapter3 examines the Morgue Series and explores the underlying themes of fragmentation, aestheticism, anonymity, religious iconography and morality.
Chapter 4 concludes this study by commenting on Serrano's representation of death in the light of the historical background, as presented in Chapter 1.

CHAPTER 1

Death is both a moment in time and a ritualised process; it is also a physical transformation and a social phenomenon. It is probably fair to say that everyone finds death difficult. Society expects historians, like scientists, to reveal the truth about contradictory phenomena; but death resists such an interpretation. Death can only be represented.

There are many histories of death and its representation, many of which fall beyond the scope of this thesis. However, I have chosen to look at some of the ways in which art in the past has treated death. This chapter will chronologically explore the representation of death and its evolution from the beginnings of Christianity right up to the twentieth century. This is important in order to put Serrano's Morgue Series into context.

Death with the arrival of Christianity.

The facts of Medieval death were largely, if not entirely, based on Christian beliefs. Christianity placed death at the centre of its drama of salvation, that of Christ who redeemed the world on the Cross and subsequently rose from the dead. Its central sign was in effect an implement of lethal torture. But to sophisticated first-century contemporaries of Christ and St. John, whether Jew, Gentile or Greco-Roman Pagan, the idea of being raised from the dead was supremely abnormal and transgressive. To Judaism the corpse was a sight of impurity, (Numbers 19:11-16) specifies that, He who toucheth the dead body of any man shall be unclean for seven days'. To the Pagan Roman world the dead body was an abomination, abhorred by the Gods. The dead were to be honoured but to the notion of honour was attached that of appeasement, leading to the idea that the dead should be distanced and placated. As a result of this, the dead were deliberately kept out of the sanctuaries and were buried *extra muros* (Binski 1996, p10), outside the city walls.

Some Pagans believed that there was an underworld of the dead ruled by Pluto and Persephone, with gates at various strategic places which were opened periodically to give the dead access to the world of the living. Rome possessed one such gate

covered by a stone the *Lapis manalis*, which was raised three times a year during the infernal *adits* (ritual openings of the entrances to the underworld). The dead were widely thought to linger in their souls near their bodies for three days, hoping for joyful access to life; yet at the same time were completely separate. The modern word "Funeral" is related to the Latin *funestus*, implying profanation by the dead.

Up to now the bodies, including the Christian dead, had been concentrated in burial complexes outside cities, well removed from the living. Then, with the growing importance of the Christian profession of faith through confessional and martyrdom, the sainted dead and 'very special dead' were admitted within; especially into the churches of the newly Christianised Latin empire. The saints were the first to enjoy this special protection because they were not entirely dead: they had ambivalent identity; on one hand being physically present on earth through their bodies, on the other hand they were already received into Heaven. From then on, every church had tombs inside its walls and a cemetery next to it. The relationship between the church and the cemetery was now definitely established.

An explicit new conception of the sanctity of the dead replaced that of antiquity. The pagans who were buried anywhere at all were compared to the Christians who were buried only in venerated and public places designed for that purpose. Only social outcasts were left in the fields or, as the place was later called, the dump. Those who had been excommunicated or prisoners who had been executed and not claimed by their families were left to rot with no more than a block of stones laid over them to preserve the appearance of the landscape.

Anonymity: Tombs and Epitaphs

Ancient Roman graves dating from the early centuries AD, whether Pagan or Christian, were objects designed to mark the exact spot where the body had been laid; either a container housing the bodies ashes or a chamber in which bodies are kept. On the tomb an inscription of the deceased indicated the name of the deceased, their position in the family, profession, age, date of death, and the relationship to the relative responsible for their burial.

The tomb was a memorial. An inscription was often accompanied by a portrait of husband and wife, the dead children, or simply the bust or head of the deceased in a

scalloped frame. Besides designating precisely the site of funerary worship, the tomb was also intended to transmit the memory of the deceased to later generations (hence the name *monumentum* or *memoria)*. The tomb was, and indeed is, a memorial.

There were, however, a great many miserable graves with neither inscriptions nor portraits (for example, at the cemetery of the Isola Saara at the mouth of the Tiber), which were all anonymous. ".....one senses the desire of the poorest persons, even slaves, to escape this anonymity that is true death, total and definitive annihilation".(Aries,1981, p.203)

Anonymity persisted until the eighteenth century at least among the poor, who were first deprived of coffins and later of memorial tombs. The rich tended to have individual tombs to preserve the memory of their bodies, while the poor had none. The bodies of the poor and young were sown into shrouds made of cheap sacking and thrown into big common graves. Charitable men of the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, offended by the physical and spiritual abandonment of dead paupers, in a society that was already urbanised, sought to remedy the absence of help from the church. They found this abandonment intolerable and so formed the confraternities in order to provide these people with burial on church soil and the prayers of the clergy.

The Macabre

The word macabre is often used as an extension of the term *Danse Macabre*, to refer to the realistic representations of the human body in the process of decomposition. The medieval fascination with the macabre began with death and stopped with the skeleton. In the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries the imagery was dominated by repellent iconography of a hidden world infested by corruption disease and deformities. The culture of the macabre, which arose in late-medieval and especially northern Europe, is one of the oddest and most compelling phenomenum in the history of contemporary representation. According to Binski, the Christian notion of the body as a sign is deeply implicated in the emergence of the Macabre. Christianity was the first exclusive universal religion to mark out the body as an object of veneration, both in its central sign, the Crucifixion, and in its Pantheon of witnesses, the saints. Though body and soul were in some sense incomparable (the

soul was in a sense a body, and to many represented the form of the body), the body became a central means by which late medieval religion articulated many of its important ideas (Binski 1996, p 123).

Each of us in must face our own death alone, and in spite of the almost infinite variety of forms death takes, we might surmise that in essentials the experience is the same for all. As Holbein's Dead Christ (fig1.01) showed us, Christ too suffered death alone, in solitude. In our mortality all we face is ourselves; and macabre themes are essentially mirrors of mortality which lie at the heart of what the critic Walter Benjamin called, "the allegorical ways of seeing".

Holbein's painting represents a corpse laid out by itself on a slab covered with a cloth that is hardly draped. Life-size, the painted corpse is seen from the side, its head slightly turned toward the viewer, the hair spread out on the sheet. The right arm is in full view, resting along the emaciated, tortured body, and the hand protrudes slightly from the slab. The chest bears the bloody mark of a spear, and the hand shows the stigmata of the crucifixion, which stiffen the outstretched middle finger. The martyr's face bears the expression of hopeless grief; the empty stare, the sharp-lined profile of the dull blue complexion is that of a man who is truly dead and without the promise of resurrection.

Julia Kristeva has the following to say about Holbein's Dead Christ:

> ...the unadorned representation of human death, the anatomical stripping of the corpse convey to viewers an unbearable anguish before the death of God, which here is mingled with our own death because there isn't the slightest suggestion of transcendence (Kristeva, 1989, p.245).

In the painting, the tombstone, which is merely twelve inches high, intensifies the feeling of permanent death; this corpse will never rise again. Holbein's Dead Christ is inaccessible, distant, and without a beyond. Holbein's originality lies in this vision of death that is devoid of pathos, and is intimate on account of its very banality. Such a humanising gesture puts Christ on our human level.

In *Danses Macabres* prior to the sixteenth century, the encounter between man and death is not violent. The gesture of death is almost gentle:

> You, Labourer who in care and pain
> Have lived your whole life
> Must die, that is certain...
> You should be happy to die,
> For it frees you at great care.
> (Aries 1961, p 117)

The *Danse Macabre* is an eternal round in which the dead alternate with the living. The dance came equally to all and was an allegorical means of both reinforcing and subverting the late -medieval hierarchy of estates or classes. The dead lead the dance. Each couple consists of a naked mummy rotting sexless and highly animated the man or woman dressed according to his or her social condition and paralysed by surprise. Death holds out its hand to the living person whom it will draw along with it, but who has not yet been dealt the summons of death. The moral purpose was to remind the viewer both of the uncertainty of the hour of death and of the equality of all people in the face of death.

The success of the Macabre subject matter in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries could be co-related with the high mortality rates caused by the plagues. These great demographic crises are believed to have depopulated certain regions and brought about an agricultural recession and general economic tension. Death was so commonplace that people were unaffected by their representations. The clergy at that time always tried to arouse fear, fear of hell more often than the fear of death. The preachers talked about death in order to remind their listeners about hell. They tried to impress people's imagination with powerful images of death.

The *Danse Macabre* is a sign of a passionate love for this world and a painful awareness of the failure to which each human life is condemned. In all these scenes with their well-known themes, the new element of eroticism is but one aspect. If the *Danse Macabre* of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were chaste, those that were created in the sixteenth century are both violent and erotic. In Durer's Four

Horsemen of the Apocalypse (fig1.02), the fourth man is mounted on an emaciated animal who is all skin and bones, but his leanness emphasises the size of the genital organs in a contrast that is certainly deliberate. In Nicolas Manuel's, Death and the Young Woman (fig1.03), death no longer merely points out a woman, his victim, by approaching her and drawing her away by an act of the will; he violates her by plunging his hand into her vagina. Death is no longer the instrument of necessity but is driven by a desire for pleasure; death has become sensuality. The skeleton now becomes the principal figure in this imaginary world, he rules unchallenged over the seventeenth century themes.

Anatomy and punishment

The emergence of the skeleton as a dominant feature is largely due to the development of anatomic science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In early modern Europe, the people who were present at dissections were not solely composed of members of the medical profession; rather they were merchants, administrators and fashionable elite. The anatomy theatres were places in which to see and be seen. Anatomy, the recording of our knowledge of the human body, was not merely a moment of high intellectual excitement, instead the discovery of the body was grounded in older traditions. Instead of being a mere object of investigation, the corpse was invested with transcendent significance. The human body was indeed a temple, ordered by God, whose articulation the divinely sanctioned anatomists were now able to demonstrate.(Sawday 1994, p 75) The popular dread of dissection has been traced by Jonathon Sawday in his book The Body Emblazoned. The "Murder Act" of 1752, was introduced to allow Penal dissection as a response to the rampant crime at the time. This allowed the offender's corpse to be dismembered after execution for the utilitarian investigation of the body's internal structure. The punishment was meant to ensure that potential criminals, who on hearing the appalling fate that awaited after execution, would desist from breaking the law. Following the execution of the offender, the body was immediately taken away by the sheriff and his deputies to the hall of surgeons. The act was designed specifically to evoke horror at the violation of the body and to deny the body a burial. In keeping with a rational punishment two birds were to be killed by one stone, the demands of justice were met while equally the needs of science could be fulfilled.

Well educated men would have their pictures painted grouped around a dissection table. In addition to Rembrant's Anatomy Lesson, Thomas De Keyer's Doctor Sebastien Eqbertsz's Anatomy Lesson (fig1.04), and Pieter Michielz Von Mieroveld's Doctor W. Vander Meers Anatomy Lesson in Delft (fig1.05), show groups of Dutch medical science students grouped around a skeleton or the latter an opened cadaver. The dead body with its layers of veins muscles and bones aroused no revulsion in people of that time particularly since science and death and a kind of fascination with the two combined to inspire an interesting and informative subject.

Good deaths and bad deaths

In the eighteenth century, natural (good) deaths were taken as subjects by trained academic painters. Lady Venetia Digby, for example, died suddenly in her sleep during the night of the first of May 1633. According to Nigel Llewelleyn the deathbed portrait of Lady Digby, was painted the second day after she died (fig1.06). Sir Kenelm Digby asked his close friend, Anthony van Dyck, to depict her in his painting. His painting was delivered by June 19th. Van Dyck succeeded in creating an extraordinarily powerful depiction of what might be termed as Lady Digbys "monumental body". Sir Kenelm Digby described how the artist "brought a little colour onto her pale cheeks" by "rubbing her face", yet the image clearly denies the unpleasant processes that death must have been having on the natural body.(Llewellyn, 1991, p.31)

At the same time, pictures helped point out the dangers of bad deaths. Deaths by accident, whereby the body was lost and never buried, were of special concern. The full horror of such an image has been recorded by Rowlandson in two late eighteenth century watercolours. In one, the artist has concentrated on death by shipwreck and starvation. The skeleton, stripped of its flesh but not yet of all its ragged costume, suffers the final indignity of losing its brains to scavenging birds (fig1.07). In the other, an unfortunate victim is shown, against a threatening sky, being dragged on his back by one stirrup after an accident in a hilltop gallop (fig1.08).

Post mortem daguerreotypes

In the nineteenth century, it was not an uncommon practice to picture the dead. For example, nineteenth century daguerreotypes (which are portraits taken by early photographic process) show dead infants, fully clothed and posed. The Polish emigré, studio photographer Taismir Zgovedzi, made elegiac portraits of dead babies, as if asleep in their cots. Sir Bengamin Stone, as part of his vast turn-of-the-century photographic documentation produced meticulously detailed studies of English funeral rituals. The function of this early photography was to provide historical records or keepsakes. Photography played an important role in helping people come to terms with the devastation caused by the early deaths of loved ones. Post-mortem images of children were used to console, to share the death with others, and to help preserve memories of the child. If the surviving quantities of such photographs are anything to go by, it would seem that almost every family wanted to have such a photograph and was able to afford one. Photographs meant that you could somehow keep the dead child with you (fig1.09).

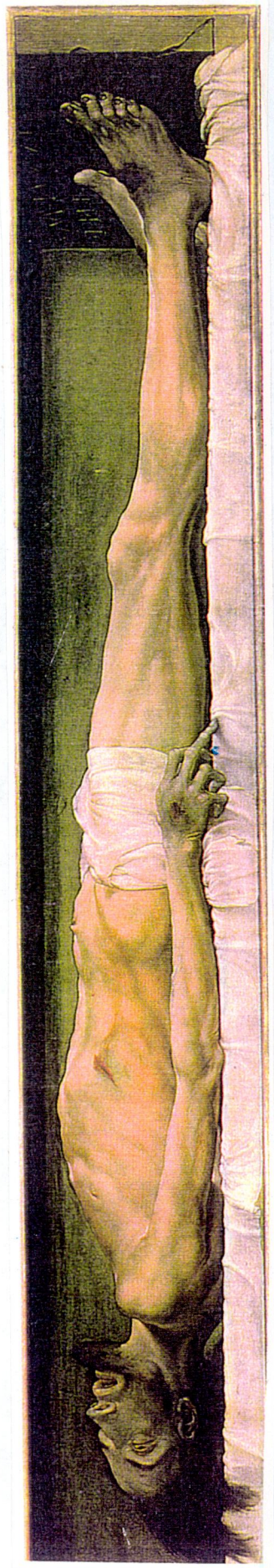
Since there was little that people could do to prevent death, they accepted it as an important part of everyday life. It was God's will. There was an intimacy with death: Death from Illness occurred at home, not in a nursing home or hospital. The very act of dying gave importance to the person. His or hers last words were listened to with care. Above all, memorial photographs were produced for a specific bereaved family and showed a specific individual and often displaying anecdotal content. One of the most striking nineteenth-century memorial photographs is reproduced in a history of American clothing and fashion. A boy in a sailor suit sits on a porch stairs surrounded by a large, carefully arranged display of expensive toys; only the telltale set of the face, the heavy eyes and stiffened left foot show he is not alive. It is at once a memorial and a statement of social position.

Present day attitudes towards death

Attitude to death has undergone radical change with the advent of the twentieth century. Advance in health care has extended life expectancy, and it is now seen as a failure of medicine if someone dies prematurely from illness or disease. The movement of death from the home to the hospital means that it is rare to experience caring for the dying or dead. The embalmment and burial of the deceased are performed by professionals. Consequently, the ability to openly discuss the nature of death and mourning has become lost to many.

Another significant change in the representation of death has come about with the development of technology and the media. The images of death to which we are exposed in our daily lives have had an important effect on us. Newspapers, photographs, and media stockage of butchered and emaciated bodies have made us immune to horrific scenes of death. Film and television have further exposed us to countless scenes of murder and mayhem, thereby increasing our tolerance for explicit and gruesome death. Played out by actors, these scenes are unreal and therefore somehow acceptable. Moreover, there are those who gain a voyeuristic and salacious thrill from them. Images of abused, disfigured or rotting victims have become the new representation of death, which is fictionalised and trivialised.

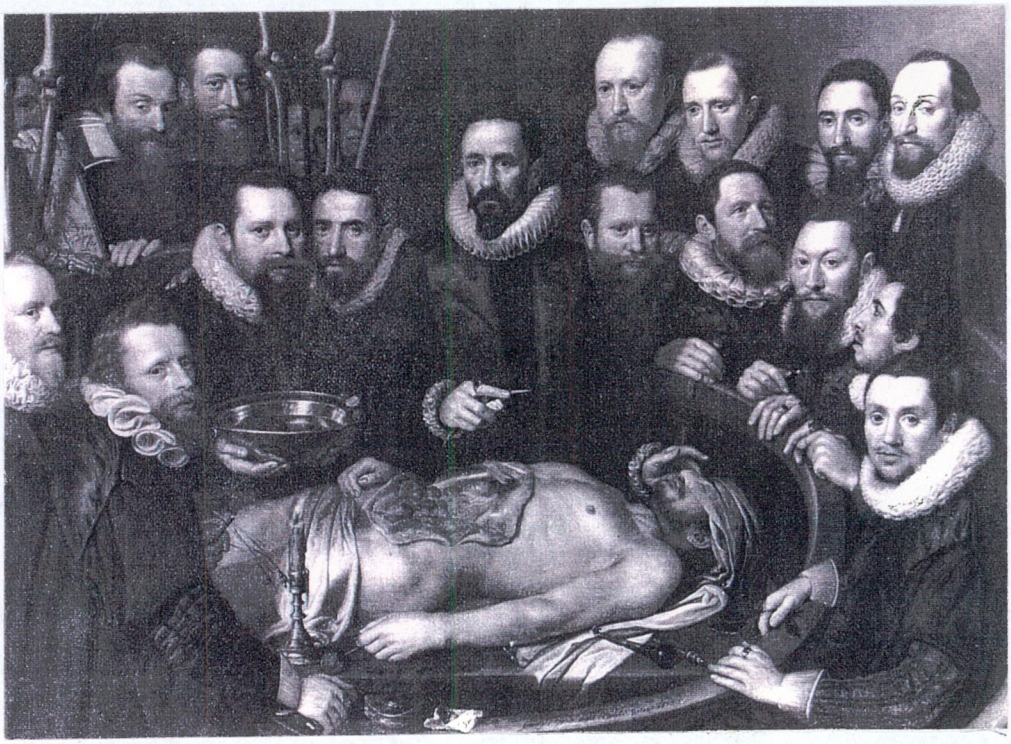
It is clear that artistic representations of death have changed as attitudes towards death have changed. Art has played a key role in representing images of life and death, which have been in a constant state of flux over the past millennium. Society is once again re-evaluating death and art is at the fore, provoking and challenging social ideas.



Holbein, Hans The body of Dead Christ in a Tomb 1522. Fig1.01

Durer, Albrecht The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse 1498. Fig1.02

Manuel, Nicolas Death and the Young Woman 1517. Fig1.03



De Keyser, Thomas — Dr. Sebastien Egbertsz's Anatomy Lesson 1619 — Fig1.04

Von Mieroveld, Peter — Dr. W.Vander Meers Anatomy Lesson in Delft 1619 — Fig1.05

Van Dyck, Anthony	Venetia Digby on Her Deathbed 1633	Fig1.06
Rowlandson, Thomas	Death on a Desert Island 1791	Fig1.07
Rowlandson, Thomas	Death in a Riding Accident 1791	Fig1.08

Burns, Stanley Post-Mortem Photographs 1846. Fig1.09

CHAPTER 2

"I am drawn to subjects that border on the unacceptable because I have lived an unacceptable life for so long".

Serrano (1993)

Before I introduce Serrano's Morgue Series, it is beneficial to look at the artist and his life. Serrano considers himself more artist than technician photography. Repeatedly he states that, as far as he is concerned, photography is really painting: "I want to use a photograph in the way that a painter uses a canvas, and to involve myself less in traditional photographic concerns like space and perspective" (Serrano quoted by Hooks, 1995 unp.) Serrano is generally unconcerned with the process of photography and uninterested in developing prints. This chapter exposes Serrano the artist and the development of his work.

Serrano's "unacceptable" life began soon after his birth in 1950 when he was abandoned by his father, a merchant marine, who had three other families living in his native Honduras! Serrano was brought up by his pious African Cuban mother in the predominantly Italian section of Brooklyn, New York City. His mother, who did not speak English, was hospitalised on a number of occasions for psychosis. Not surprisingly, Serrano quickly learned the meaning of being marginalised and emotionally on his own.

His childhood was spent seeking refuge. One of his favourite haunts was the Metropolitan Museum of Art; where he could spend hours looking the Renaissance paintings. It was this intense experience at the tender age of twelve that made him decide to become an artist. At the age of seventeen, Serrano undertook two years of painting study at the Brooklyn Museum School. Serrano's style at this time was similar to Fernand Leger in that his work centred round broad areas of colour. He was also influenced by Picasso and other abstract expressionists.

Disillusioned with his progress in painting, Serrano turned his hand to photography. For two years he walked the streets of New York City taking black and white shots. He worked with still lifes, tableaux, and portraiture, genres that continue to interest him today. It was not long before Serrano found himself a drug dealer and junkie and got rid of his camera. After seven drug induced years, he stopped taking drugs altogether and went back to photography. He was twenty-eight. Serrano's experience as a drug dealer and addict has deeply affected his outlook on life: Addiction, he says, is "like going through a war and coming out a bit shell-shocked. You do not really come out the same as when you went in" (Hobbs, 1994, p18)

When he started taking photographs again, Serrano's first pictures were tableaux that recall the Surrealism of Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali, in particular the use of Catholic imagery and icons. Many of these images deal with Serrano's unresolved feelings about his Catholic upbringing. According to Serrano (Hobbs, 1994, p.18), exploring Catholic iconography helps him to redefine and personalise his relationship with God. By the early 1980s, Serrano had achieved an underground reputation for provocative photographs that combined religious imagery with staged metaphors of violence - slabs of meat, butchered cows' heads, blood. But his pictures remained relatively unknown. From the early tableaux, the next step was to develop a Bodily Fluids Series based on taboo liquids such as blood, urine and semen.

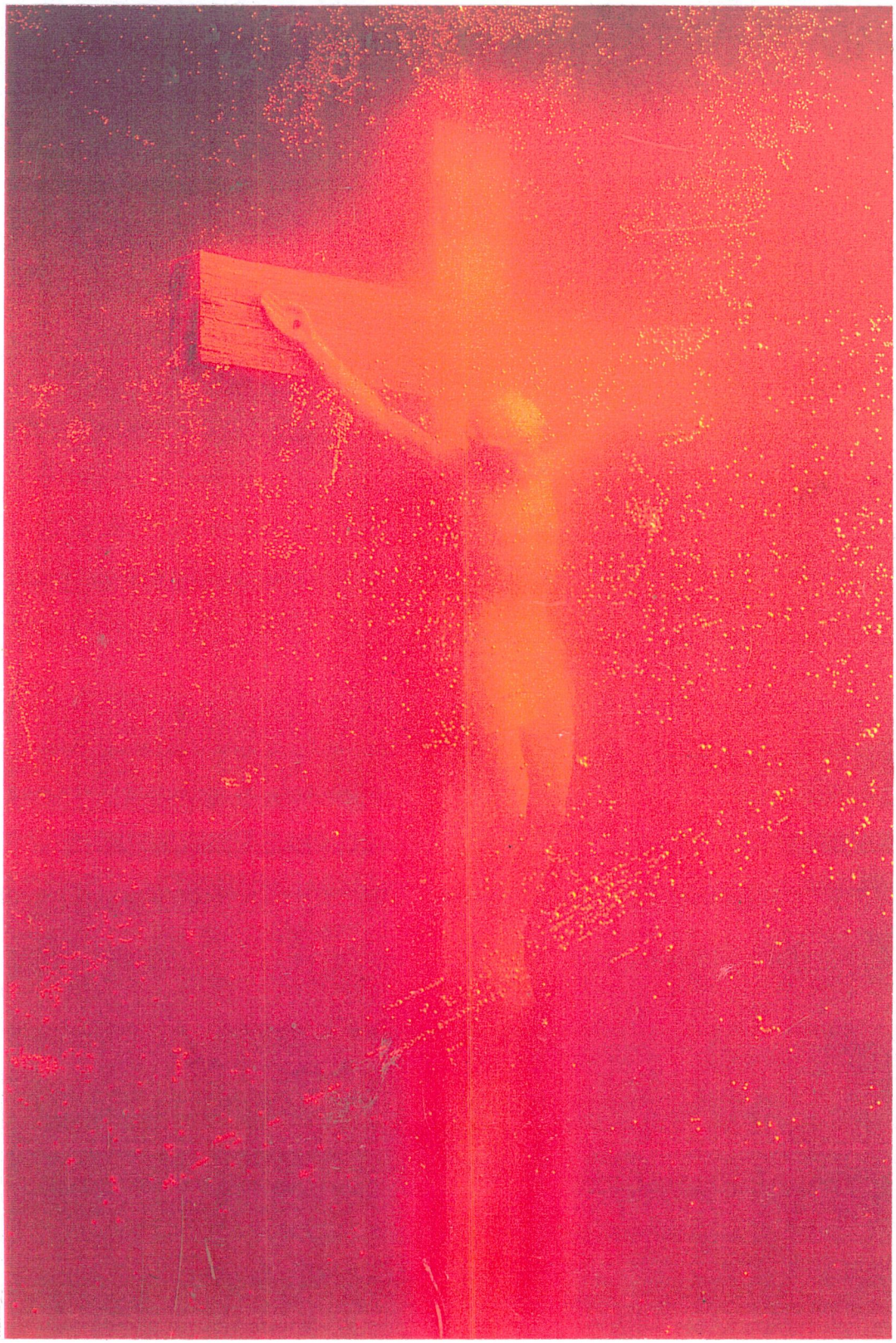
It was not until 1989, when his photograph Piss Christ (fig2.01) was singled out for public attack, that Serrano's name first became known to the wider public. Piss Christ, which features a crucifix immersed in a jar of urine, enraged congressmen in 1989 and sparked a national debate over Federal funding for the arts. Senator Jesse Helms had the following to say about Serrano: "I do not know Mr Andres Serrano and I hope I never meet him because he is not an artist. He is a jerk". Senator Alphonse D'Amato launched a "culture war" when he ripped up a copy of Piss Christ in the chambers of the U.S Senate on May 18th 1989, saying "this so called piece of art is a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity".(Hagen,1991,p.68) Serrano suddenly became the subject of public condemnation (even from Art critics), hate mail and even death threats. Now a hot ticket on the lecture circuit, Serrano appeared on ABC's *Face the Nation* and spoke at museums and universities. Not surprisingly, his notoriety saw a significant boost to his prints and exhibitions round the world.

Serrano maintains that the attention Piss Christ received was a complete surprise to him: "People hadn't seen any provocation in my work until Piss Christ. I have to say that to me, what it stirred up seemed like a total fluke. Piss Christ had been shown on a number of occasions before all the controversy without a commotion". (Lebor 1995, p.45) Certainly, with Piss-Christ Serrano wanted to shock, but this was not the only intent.

Serrano claims that he has been "unofficially blackballed". (Fusco 1991, p.44) Since 1989, he has not received any federal grants. In 1994, the National Council for the Arts (a panel of advisors appointed by the President) rejected a grant application for the Morgue Series, despite an endorsement from the Visual Arts Advisory Panel (a peer group composed of photographic experts from around America).

After the Piss Christ controversy, Serrano turned to new subjects - the homeless and the Ku Klux Klan, while continuing to produce work based on Catholic iconography. Serrano's Ku Klux Klan Series trades on the mere fact that Serrano has dared to represent evil and sinister men, a taboo subject. His portraits of these traditionalists are seen by many as purely sensationalist. Serrano's 1990 Nomad Series consists of massive wall-size prints of homeless people in flattering studio lighting, bringing to his subjects a sense of what he terms "heroic monumentalism". Serrano's "obsession" with religion continues to pervade his work. His Brooklyn apartment has been transformed into a kind of shrine, surrounded by ecclesiastical furniture, Russian icons, church statues (including a large wooden carving of Saint Anthony), stained glass windows and a wall of crucifixes. "Look at my apartment. I am drawn to the symbols of the Church. I like the aesthetics of the Church. I like Church furniture. I like going to the Church for aesthetic reasons, rather than spiritual ones, In my work I explore my own Catholic obsessions". (Heartney, 1997, p.34)

The 1992 Morgue Series, which we will examine in detail in Chapter 3, continues in the same vein; exploring themes of heroic monumentalism, religious iconography and the representation of taboo subjects. Like Serrano's earlier works, this latter series has proved provocative. Some critics have attacked it as exploitative, others have praised it. Whatever the opinion, Serrano does not apologise for his obsessions: "An artist is nothing without his or her obsession, and I have mine".(Serrano, as quoted in Heartney 1997, p.24)



Serrano, Andres Piss Christ 1987 Fig2.01

CHAPTER 3

Serrano has never revealed the exact location of the morgue in which he began his photographic 1992 Morgue Series. Rumour has it that it could be situated in France, or alternatively New York City. During his three-month project, Serrano photographed ninety-five percent of the bodies that passed through the morgue. Many of the bodies were there for autopsies, but others were merely awaiting removal to a funeral home. Serrano worked with the freedom of a studio artist: he had permission to take light and backdrops into the morgue. His only constraint was that he could not physically touch any of the bodies slated for autopsy, for fear of disturbing the evidence.

The Morgue Series comprises thirty-six 49½x60 high saturation colour prints bound onto plexiglass. The subjects are all unidentified and anonymous people without documents and nobody to claim them. All we know are their causes of death: some violent (multiple stabbing, shotgun, suicide), some accidental (pneumonia, burns), and some natural (cardiac arrest, meningitis, pneumonia, AIDS).

There are a number of common elements and themes portrayed in Serrano's Morgue Series. This chapter explores some of the more important ones, namely fragmentation, anonymity, aestheticism, religious imagery and morality.

On Serrano's first visit to the morgue, he encountered the body of an eight year old child with red hair and freckles. After watching the child being disembowelled during the autopsy, he realised that he would have to begin photographing immediately or he would never be able to continue the project. At first he made shots of entire sections of the bodies that were laid out face up. He then decided to focus in on certain areas and photograph fragments. This fragmentation was the aesthetic choice of Serrano; he did not want to shoot complete images of individualised bodies.

Linda Nochlin in her book The Body in Pieces posits that it is the artist who determines whether and how an image should be cropped. "It is their will and aesthetic choice"(Nochlin 1994, p.37). The results of Serrano's work included framed fragments of enlarged sores, burns, a calcified skeleton, a gaping throat, knife wounds and cracked or scalped skulls. It is shocking to see the dead portrayed in such graphic detail.

Serrano's close-ups bring to mind the anatomic fragments of severed arms and legs which Gericault used as art material.(fig3.01) Gericault kept dissected limbs in his studio to observe and paint their decay. His interest in the intimate aspect of death went considerably beyond ordinary nature study. Pictorial realism made him turn his studio into a morgue, much to the discomfort of his friends and models. Gericault wanted to gain such insight so as to give authenticity to his work. Nochlin describes Gericault's work as a shattering of the human entity:

> The fragments are then rejoined at the will of the artist in arrangements both horrific and elegant, dramatically isolated by shadow, their sensual veracity both as individual elements and as aesthetic construction, intensified by what seems like candlelight spotlight.
>
> *(Nochlin, 1994, p.39)*

This shattering of the human entity is also evident in Serrano's striking images. For example, in Knifed to Death I (fig3.02) and Knifed to Death II (fig3.03), Serrano's subjects are the left and right hand of an unidentified murder victim. The hands are scarred, a little skin has been cut off the wrist on the left hand. A small trail of blood has run down from the wound. The wrist of the right hand has a similar cut, though much smaller. The hands are illuminated by the stark studio lighting.

With respect to Gericault's work, Nochlin further contends "that the moods of these works shockingly combine the objectivity of science - the cool clinical observation of the dissection table - with the paroxysm of romantic melodrama"(Nochlin, 1994, p.19). This could equally be said of Serrano's work. Both Gericault and Serrano use the Body in Pieces to represent historical reality. While Gericault's medium was pigment, Serrano uses photographic tools to portray the dead. Both show close-ups of fragmented dead bodies in such a way as to be shockingly observed.

As I have stated earlier, the corpses that Serrano photographed were all unclaimed and unidentified. His subjects are thus not merely fragmented parts of the body, but also discarded parts, thereby suggesting a lack of regard by society for fellow human beings. In this way they can be seen in terms of what Esmond de Goncourt describes as non- value:

> As societies advance, or believe themselves to advance, so the cult of the dead, the respect for the dead diminishes. The dead person is no longer revered as a living being who has entered the unknown to the formidable *je ne sais quoi* of that which is beyond life. In modern societies the dead person's simply a zero, a non-value.
>
> *(Goncourt, as quoted in Nochlin, 1971, p.60)*

Anonymity is the very soul of Serrano's creation. All he knows about his models is their cause of death, their sex, the colour of their skin. He knows neither their name, their language, nor their religion. As Serrano himself explains: "My relation is born with them in so far as they are dead"(Arenas, unp.) The one common element is that these people have been gathered together by their respective deaths in a city morgue. By focusing on anonymous and indifferent details, Serrano is showing that "death is that of everyone's and anyone's" (Serrano, as quoted by Arenas,1995, unp.).

The sense of anonymity is further heightened by a number of techniques used by Serrano. First and foremost is the obvious facelessness of the dead subjects. By choosing to photograph fragments at close range, Serrano prevents any coherent identification. Another technique used by Serrano is to mask any faces photographed. With the exception of Jane Doe, in Jane Doe Killed by Police (fig3.04) and perhaps the fire blackened skull in Burnt to Death (fig3.05), Serrano covers the face either partially or fully with cloth.

Even with the Morgue Series, Serrano is reluctant to give up on beauty, which is an essential component in his work: "When one works with difficult subjects it is necessary to put beauty back into the accomplished work" (Hobbs, 1994, p.20.). It is Serrano's belief that "maybe it's easier to dismiss the work when you know you're turned off by it completely, as opposed to when you're seduced by it. No matter how repugnant his subjects are, Serrano's constant is the sheer beauty which is

projected using photographic techniques such as light and colour" (Hobbs, 1994,p.20).

In Fatal Meningitis II (fig3.06), Serrano hones in on particularly poignant details: a baby's face is partially veiled by a white sheet, the light catches the soft shining skin of the forehead, wisps of hair and gentle eyelashes. Serrano plays with light to present the warm image of a seemingly sleeping baby. The title of the work, however, focuses the audience back to the reality: a dead baby.

Aside from beauty, Serrano's work has also concentrated on achieving what he calls "heroic monumentalism". For the Morgue Series, Serrano took photographs of one old woman. He partially draped her head in red cloth, exposing only the mouth and tip of the nose. This romanticised image, which is titled Infectious Pneumonia (fig3.07), appears to give the dead old woman the grandeur of monarchy. Serrano says that when he first saw her, he found her ugly and wanted to give her back some dignity and beauty.

Critics such as Peter Schjeldahl and Ben Lifson reject such interpretations as "sanctimonious urbanity". They believe that the Morgue Series takes advantage of the taboo of death and, to some extent, the subjects of his photographs. David Deitcher in Cumulus from America (Deitcher, 1990, p.20) observes that Serrano's photographs are seen as insupportable by many, as they find beauty in substances that have always made people recoil in horror and embarrassment. In Below Skin-Deep, Wendy Steiner posits that the "flawlessness of the bodily form is a reassurance of mortal safety and a denial of death"(Steiner, 1994, p.11).

Serrano's explanation for the reason behind aestheticising his work is that people are "seduced and then they feel tricked when they realise what they're seduced by. To me, that's the work's saving grace - that it does not repel altogether, that it works on more than one level"(Serrano, as quoted in Hobbs, 1994, p.21).

Serrano's photographs have been compared to those of advertising. Technically, they have the same flawless characteristics of high saturation colour and are large scale ($49^1/_2$x60). By flaunting such a controversial taboo subject, his work is comparable to that of Benetton's in-house graphic designer, Oliverero Toscani, who has shocked many with his provoking images, such as a newly born unwashed baby

with umbilical chord still attached, or the infamous poster of aids campaigner David Kirby. The latter, showed an AIDS hospital deathbed scene (fig3.08), with a distraught man holding the dead/dying body of his starkly emancipated son, while a younger and an older woman comfort one another at the foot of the bed. The intent of this advertisement was to link Benetton with social issues with which young purchasers of woollens are concerned. Like the Benetton ads, many scorn Serrano for the sensational presentation of horrific images. Bart de Baere's review of the exhibition for Flash Art akins Serrano's Morgue Series to selling death. While de Baere's analogy of selling death appears to be somewhat extreme, there can be no doubt but that Serrano has made a conscious effort in the Morgue Series to aesthetically transform his subjects and turn upside down the taboo representation of death (Baere's, 1992, p.70).

Serrano's Morgue Series represents much more than a study of colour and form. There is a revealing use of religious imagery to connect the individual pieces in his Morgue Series. There are a number of parallels between Serrano's photographs and, Holbein's Dead Christ, which is a faithful representation of a man who has undergone unbearable torture and torment. Gun Murder (fig3.09) is a shot from above looking down at the shoulders to the feet. The white nappy resembles Christ's loin cloth. Like Holbein's Christ, Serrano's face in Broken Bottle Murder (fig3.10) is contorted in the extreme. The close up of the male torso Homicidal Stabbing (fig3.11) is reminiscent of Christ's lance wound. Serrano's Christ, like Holbein's, is completely alone and appears forsaken.

The causes of death in many of the photographs are both tragic and violent. Knifed to Death I and Knifed to Death II show the hands of what Serrano calls "a criminal" because of the obvious mark of police taken fingerprints. These images are particularly interesting because they have been reversed, thereby resembling Michaelangelo's fresco The Creation of Adam.(fig3.12)The pathologists surgical probes are akin to the stigmata of Christ.

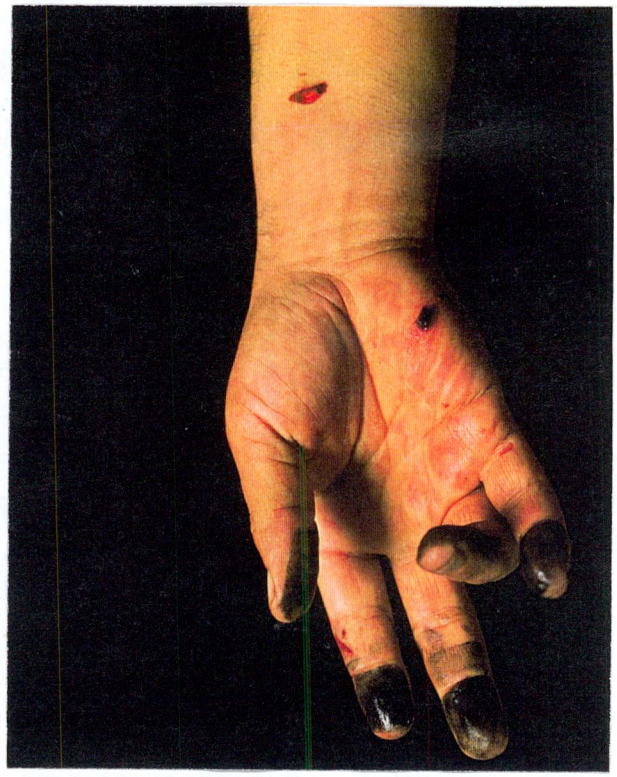
Serrano has himself showed reverence towards his subjects. He makes it very clear that he made a conscious decision not to physically alter or touch the corpses. The photographic image is a record of the body as laid out in the morgue. He did not stage the rosary beads, nor did he have anything to do with the shaved masculine

genitals in Death by Asphyxiation.(fig3.13) He has merely confirmed and recorded the scene. The fact that the actual reality ties in with Serrano's exploration of religious imagery is a mere coincidence.

As early as 1995 Geoffrey Gorer used the term "the pornography of death"(Arcand, 1993, p.249) to describe how death had become a subject of scandal in contemporary society. Although pornography is associated with sex, Berard Arcand has discovered that obscenity has shifted from sex to death, explaining that death has subsided from being a public event to a private act. The expression "in strictest privacy," which once referred to sexual relations, is now applied to funerals. There is a struggle to look at these pictures again and again before the initial terror and horror subside. Gorer explains the extent of how death is now considered as taboo. Contact or even proximity to a dead body brings about fear. With The Morgue Series, Serrano has pushed death into the public arena by blatantly publicising the privacy of death.

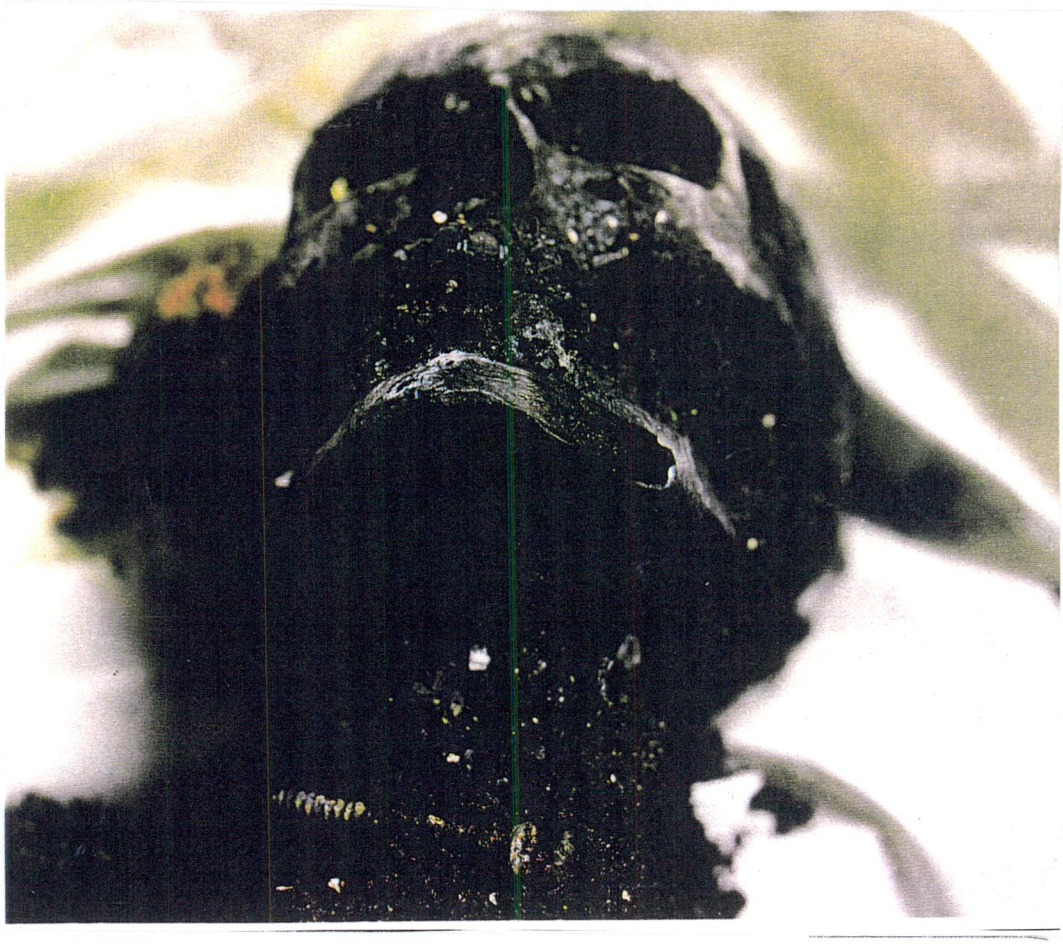
We have looked at the Morgue Series and some of the more important underlying themes, which together make Serrano's representation of death unique. The final chapter will compare and contrast Serrano's treatment of death with death as represented in pagan times right up to the present day.

Géricault Study of Disected Limbs 1818-19. Fig3.01



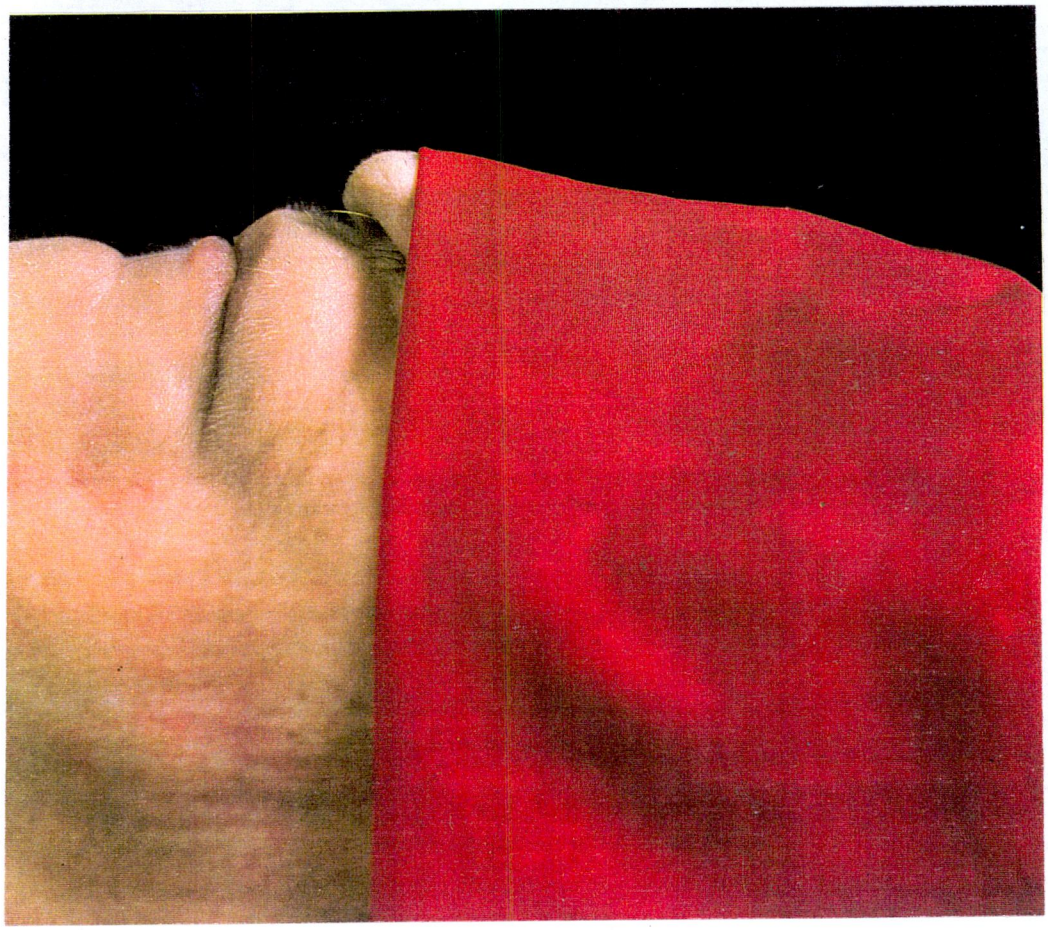
Serrano, Andres	Knifed to Death I 1992.	Fig3.02
Serrano, Andres	Knifed to Death II 1992	Fig3.03

Serrano, Andres Jane Doe Killed by Police 1992 Fig3.04



Serrano, Andres Burnt to Death 1992 Fig3.05

Serrano, Andres Fatal Meningitis 1992 Fig3.06

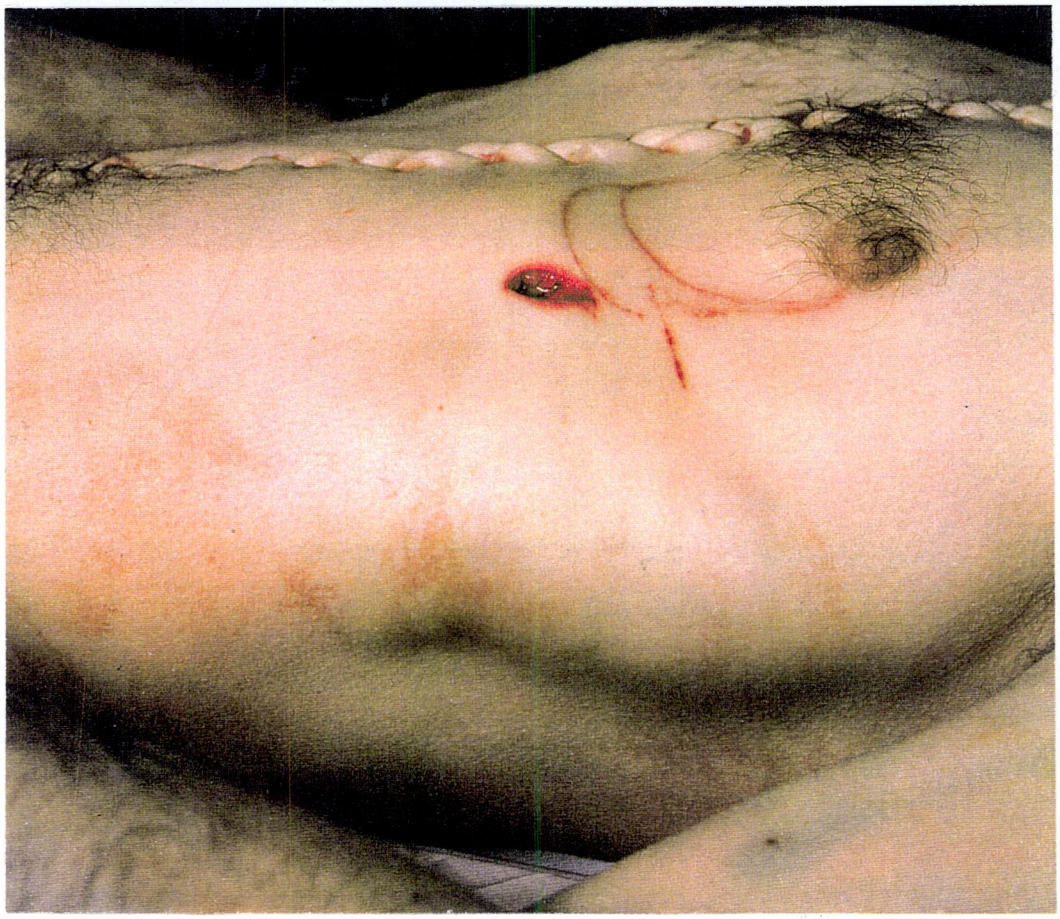


Serrano, Andres Infectious Pneumonia 1992 Fig3.07

Toscani, Olivero AIDS Pieta Fig3.08

Serrano, Andres Gun Murder 1992 Fig3.09

Serrano, Andres Broken Bottle Murder 1992 Fig3.10



Serrano, Andres Homicidal Stabbing 1992 Fig3.11

Michaelangelo Creation of Adam Fig3.12

Serrano, Andres Death by Asphyxiation 1992 Fig3.13

CHAPTER 4

> My own agenda has been clear and simple from the beginning. I am just an artist, and I just make art, so I find myself absolutely surprised that I am controversial.
>
> *(Serrano, as quoted by Gooding, 19, p.13).*

The circumstances surrounding the initial reception of Andres Serrano's art requires a consideration of that work within a broad cultural and social context. It is no coincidence that Serrano's rich visual work in photography opens onto a curious political landscape at one moment in a troubled national history, and also provides a glimpse of strange and enduring aesthetic forces. There is a symbiosis to be found in his work between the political and the aesthetic; these elements inform and problematize one another. The photographs are increasingly real; the politics seem surreal, or even unreal (Ferguson, 1995, unp.). But, above all while Serrano's work is the result of a specific social history, it is also the product of an individual struggling to define issues of personal identity through representation. Any consideration of the work's social context only encourages further questions regarding artistic biography. These have been explored in chapter 2. What remains to be looked at, is Serrano's series in relation to other representations of death. This final chapter puts Serrano's controversial representation in the context of other representations of death and explores why his series is considered so sensationalist.

When Andres Serrano's Morgue Series was first exhibited in 1992, there was a critical furore in response to what many perceived as a violation of the sanctity and privacy of death. Yet as we saw in Chapter 2, there is nothing revolutionary about the living gazing at images of the dead. The convention of recording the aspect of death goes back to pagan times. The fact that Serrano exposes what is hidden and kept in the morgue calls to mind representations in pagan Roman times. The dead body was considered a sign of impurity and therefore was kept separate from the living. Serrano, likewise, shows the separation of death by showing his subjects as they are separated from society, in the morgue.

We can also liken Serrano's series to old masters paintings, where beautiful women contemplate themselves in mirrors; so too, the images of these corpses are a reminder of our own certain fate. The Morgue Series also brings to mind the traditional Christian preoccupation of the middle ages; where the images of a baby, a lovely maiden, a hag and a skeleton warn us of the inevitable path towards mortality and heed us against vanity. However, Serrano illustrates that same process of impending decay through his photograph of a baby that is already a corpse. Serrano's use of religious imagery, as discussed in chapter 3, reminds us of religious imagery used by great masters such as Holbein and Michaelangelo. The use of religious iconography endows the Morgue Series with a sacred element, one of human transcendence.

In the seventeenth century, we saw how painters focused their attention on 'good' deaths, so that those left behind would have sweet memories of their loved ones. Serrano's images are similarly quite beautiful, despite the fact that they represent death in some horrific guises. This is due to Serrano's exploitation of his medium: he plays with scale, light and fragmentation to aestheticise the gruesome Series. His camera seems to hunt for gestures and angles that bring to mind familiar memories: the sleeping child, the dignity of old age. This effect is reinforced by the photographer's distance from his subjects. Our proximity to these unfamiliar bodies is so upsetting because we witness the clinical details of charred, ripped, and bloated flesh. Overwhelming emotions for familiar dead friends and relatives, generally override our observation of the physical form of death.

Like the early anatomists, Serrano appears to treat the unidentified and anonymous as people of non-value. The Murder Act of 1752 and the 1832 Anatomy Act gave the anatomists permission to use the bodies of criminals and paupers for dissection. It could be said of Serrano, as it was said of the early anatomists, that he is violating the special domain that belongs to the dead.

Serrano's photographs call to mind the common nineteenth century post-mortem photographs of children, where the artists at that time recreated scenes of everyday life, ironically making the telling signs of death more vivid. So too, Serrano's subjects are life-like in appearance. The major difference between Serrano's work and the nineteenth century photographs lies in the use and reason for their existence. Post-mortem photographs were keepsakes and reminders for those intimate

moments, to be alone with a deceased loved one. Serrano's photographs are not for private contemplation, but for exhibition. His pictures bring death into the public domain. They are obnoxiously large and on show for all to see. There can be no private grieving.

Throughout the twentieth century, the western world's attitude to death has undergone radical change, largely due to advancement in science, technology, and sanitation. The ability to openly discuss the nature of death and mourning has become lost to many. Serrano's Morgue Series challenges us to open the debate on death in our society. The twentieth century has also overexposed us to violent images of death, in particular through the media, such that we have become immune to some of the most brutally enacted scenes on camera. Because we somehow disassociate these from reality, they are quite acceptable. And yet, when an artist such as Serrano shows us the reality of death, there is outrage and public condemnation.

Serrano explains that the motive behind his series is to provoke questions and discussion and to test both personal and societal limits. This was quite an undertaking, given the almost obscene level of exposure to death that most people are given by the media. Serrano has achieved the seemingly impossible through the use of a number of techniques. First and foremost, he flaunts realistic images that most people prefer not to see or acknowledge. He has not altered the natural state; there is no makeup, no stage and no props. Instead of heightening the ugliness of death, as is normal in films and media, Serrano aestheticises the morgue and his subjects through his use of fragmentation, light and angles. Serrano also uses religious imagery to play with our innermost sense of human transcendence and respect for sacredness. Another technique he has used is that of advertising death, such that there is the feeling that he may be 'selling' death. Serrano heightens the idea of the separation of death and life, by situating the corpses in the morgue. Finally, Serrano reminds us that death is inevitable. It comes to all be it violent, natural or accidental.

Death confronts us so blatantly and directly in Serrano's Morgue Series. The photographs are too elegant for the police photographer, and too relentlessly factual for the artist. They have been castigated as controversial and sensationalist, yet as we have seen, there is nothing particularly new in the way that he has represented death. Serrano's representations of death, however, are bigger, more explicit, and more naked than anything we have ever seen. They challenge.

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