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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF JOEL-PETER WITKIN

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CHAPTER I

(INTRODUCTION)

JOEL-PETER WITKIN

Born: Brooklyn, New York 1939,
Studied at Cooper Union School of Art, New York
and University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

"I consider myself a protraiturist; not of people, but conditions, of being
..... my hope is not only to show the insanity of our lives, but also that
this work will be seen as part of the history of diverse and desparate
times."

Joel-Peter Witkin.

It has often been argued that the work of Diane Arbus, rather than the
laconic social landscapist, Friedlander and Winogrand or the superficial
mercenaries of look or "Life", who reflect best the heart-felt, if
temporary angst of a society racked firstly by an unpopular foreign
adventure and then the chastening revelation of contamination at the
nation's political core. It was Arbus rather than the ascetic mystics or
Rochester or the freaked out psychedelics of California, who probed best
the psychological flotsam of an era and a generation of whose primary

tenets were "do your own thing, and let it all hang out - laudible precepts if psychologically strong, disaster if not. Somehow it just had to be Arbus, sucked into the vortex herself, who stands as the summation of sixties photography that tremulous, anguished, yet heady decade of experiment and achievement.

However it can be argued that the widespread impact of Arbus has not been entirely to the good. It can be said also that this negative influence largely stems, not from the photographer herself, but from misreadings of her work, from a desire on the part of less committed followers to gain ready access to her undisputed imagistic potency. Arbus is perceived simply as a photographer who dismantled taboos of acceptable subject matter. She is seen - by many who should know better - merely as a voyeuristic coloniser of a twilight world of sexual foible and genetic perversity. Her real impact, her complex, subtle exploration of the neurosis of stigma, is traded casually for the cheap frisson elicited from playing with forbidden fruit. Arbus's subject matter is confused with her subject - and preferred to it.

When Arbus herself first encountered the freaks that she was later to photograph she was attracted to them as much as she was repelled by them, and some of them really frightened her. This was part of her motivation for coming to Hubert's Freak Museum, at Broadway - she wanted to get so scared that her heart would pound and sweat would pop out on her brow, and then she would conquer the fear and stay for hours, scrutinising the fat lady's smelly waddle, the armless man's dexterity as he lit a cigarette from the match he held between his toes.

When she first approached the freaks offstage with her cameras, they stared at her blankly; they seemed haughty, taciturn; they did not feel comfortable with a "normal" in their midst. She was gentle and patient with them, coming in every day, talking with them until they got used to her and once she felt they trusted her, she asked them to pose.

In a conversation between Arbus and Joseph Mitchell, they talked about freaks and she referred to Mitchell's definition of "class distinctions among freaks" which had appeared in his masterful portrait of Lady Olga, the bearded lady. "Born freaks are the aristocracy of the sideshow world". Mitchell wrote "Bearded ladies, siamese twins, pinheads, fat girls, dwarfs, midgets, giants, living skeletons, men with skulls on which rocks can be broken. Made freaks include tattooed people who obtain sideshow engagements, reformed criminals, old movie stars, retired athletes like Jack Johnson.

Again and again, in their conversations Diane returned to Mitchell's distinctions among fraks, and one assumes that her own celebrated comments about freaks were inspired by him. She said: "Most people go thorough life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've passed their test in life. They're aristocrats".

Mitchell urged her not to romanticise freaks, and told her that they could be as ordinary and boring as so-called 'normal' people. He told her what he found interesting about Olga, the bearded lady, was that she yearned to be a stenographer, and kept geraniums on her windowsill, and that the 450-

pound wrestler, he once interviewed cried piteously from homesickness for his native Ukraine.¹

In her wake the detritus of society has been scoured almost exhaustively in the desperate effort to out-Arbus Arbus. Every two-headed, tattooed carnival exhibit, every kind of psychological misfit, every demented creature in a demented world would seem to have been stared at by a generation of goggle-eyed, card carrying members of skopophiliacs incorporated. Every kind of sexual practice has been brought out of the closet by its photographic practitioners and those on the leering sidelines. We have had images of masochism, mutilation, fetishism, flagellation bondage, bestiality, coprophilia, paedophilia, homosexuality, and 69 varieties of heterosexualy.

And inevitably, as the sexual taboo has been exhausted some photographers have turned to that other great taboo subject - death. A whole school of photographic necrophiliacs may now be discerned. We have had photographs of cadavers, young and old ancient and modern, clothed and unclothed, in pasive and even active relationship to the living.

This has not been confined to photography, alone. The genre of sado-masochistic chic appear almost simultaneously during the seventies in film, fashion and painting. Some have viewed this trend as a vicious male counter-offensive against the gains of the womens movement. Others see it as a symptom of the terminal decline of bourgeois Saturnalia. And, some have viewed more positively, as a radical challenge to sexual role playing

and stereotyping, a challenge therefore to the power structures, underpinning our sexuality and our social being.

Positive and negative aspects of course co-exist. On one hand, questions of sexuality and psyche should be aired, free from that hypocrisy and cant which habitually accompany, this subject. Yet, on the other hand, such issues should be examined with extreme caution, and above all with responsibility. Sex and violence are potent forces, wide open to abuse and exploitation. For example, one New York enfant terrible is enjoying a current 'succes destime' with images of bestiality. (Trying, no doubt, to out Witkin Witkin?). We hardly need this. So much of it is reactionary nonsense amounting to little more than a festering voyeurism that has reinforced rather than subverted the malaise bedeviling this fundamental area of human existence.

Angela Carter stated that - "The moral pornographer would be an artist who uses pornographic material as part of the acceptance of the logic of a world of absolute sexual licence for all genders, and projects a model of the way such a work might work. A moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes such a pornographer would not be the enemy of women, perhaps because he might begin to penetrate to the heart of the contempt for women that distorts our culture even as he entered the realms of true obscenity as he describes it".²

We seem to be as far away as ever from Angela Carter's moral pornography. By conventionalising pornography - everywhere from soft-core 'art' to the

harmless display of tabloid breasts - it is made to seem far more innocent than it really is. It becomes all too easy to make, all too easy to take. It is all too easy, alas to fabricate shock without horror, perversity without passion, deviance without direction, effect without cause. It is all too easy to perpetuate a singularly gross obscenity - the obscenity of the falsely authentic.

This is the overwhelming question to be asked of the work of Joel-Peter Witkin. And the answer, to my mind, is in the affirmative. The authenticity seems to be in little doubt.

He is authentic because he mediates. He creates an imagery that evokes intellectual as well as purely visceral responses. His photography not only shocks, or titillates, but puzzles, teases, provokes, and questions. He mediates, supplementing his raw subject matter with metaphor, allusion, myth, allegory, constructing a dense contextual narrative for each image, without entirely obfuscating their initial impact. He refers beyond hermetic personal obsession, beyond a universal, natural condition, to engage - however obtusely - a political, historical condition. As Angela Carter wrote: "The more pornographic writing acquires the technique of real literature of real art, the more deeply subversive it is likely it is to effect the reader's perception of the world".

Like Arbus, Witkin has elected to deal with the torment of his existence, what Bruno Bettelheim termed, the night side of Janus-figure that we call identity. Whereas Arbus' torment derived from her sense of dislocation within society, her sense of being "other"; alone, or freak, Witkin

confronts an altogether more metaphysical issue, pains of bodily existence and the anguish of death.

His photographs deal directly with his sexuality and his personal agonised spirituality. They explore connections between two states of consciousness that would seem diametrically opposed, both in terms of motivation and cultural acceptance. He postulates a direct affinity between the spirit and the flesh, between religion and sado-masochism, and other sexual practices. To the open mind, of course, the connection is fairly obvious. Compulsions driving the masochist, for example, are not far removed from those of an ascetic scourging at the flesh for spiritual gratification. Religion and sex both grope towards a release of the ego, from the body, attaining this Nirvana by means of ritual and purgation. As Carter says, "the annihilation of the self, and the resurrection of the body, to die in pain and to painfully return from death is the sacred drama of the Sadeian orgasm" 3

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

It is instructive, to know additionally of Witkin's background when judging his work. In 1970, he began the series of photographs given the name "Insurrection" for they were personal revolts against the idea of mysticism. The pictures objectified what his mind imagined. This series started on the grandest scale to deal with God and Woman. He has said these pictures, "They are concerned with the fear of my being, the unknown of myself". To understand them, we must be aware that his psyche was severely shocked when he was six years old. He recalls, "It happened on a Sunday when my mother was escorting my twin and myself down the steps of the tenement where we lived. We were going to church. While walking down the hallway to the entrance of the building, we heard an incredible crash mixed with screaming and cries for help. An awful accident had taken place involving three cars, all with families in them. Somehow in the confusion, I was no longer holding my mother's hand. At the place where I stood at the curb, I could see something rolling from one of the overturned cars. It stopped at the curb where I stood. It was the head of a little girl. I bent down, to touch the face, to speak to it - but before I could touch it - someone carried me away".⁴

Witkin felt this experience influenced his turn as a photographer to subjects involving violence, pain and death, and his recurrent bruising dreams. In his mid-teens, he, like most thoughtful teenagers, was seeking answers of life's riddles. He was possibly more confused than most young

people for his father was an orthodox jew and his mother a catholic. His parents had divorced due to religious differences. He lived with his mother but also kept in touch with his father. Both sides of the family had little money for much beyond the essentials. This explains in part why we find in Witkin's photographs echoes of a sense of deprivation and insecurity.

In the mid-1950's Witkin obtained a twin-lens reflex Rollicord camera which he learned to use by reading books on photography. His first serious photographic effort was to make studies for his twin brother who was studying painting and had taken for his subject, freaks at Coney Island. The pictures Witkin took were of a three-legged man, a dwarf called "The Chicken Lady", and a hermaphrodite, with whom he had his first sexual experience. The freak show was fascinating to him, but it moved south soon after he discovered his emphathetic response to the unusual people in the show. In the late 1950s Witkin not having available freaks to photograph fabricated environments where he directed strange events to take place, which he then photographed. Sources for his imagery came from looking at reproductions of paintings. Rembrandt was a favourite, for Witkin felt he made the sacred human. He has acknowledged his debt to the Divine Marquis, and also to such figures as Felicien Rops, Gustav Klimt, and Alfred Kubin, because their work dealing with dreams, perversity, and satanism, somehow challenged the sacred, yet seemed an unavoidable part of the sacred. Yet, it would seem, clear from his imagery that he neither seeks, in the words of Gray Watson, "to reduce the sacred to the carnal, nor, for that matter, to elevate carnal to sacred". Rather, he seeks to illuminate both areas of experience where they touch him personally. Witkin acknowledges myth,

utilises myth, but also perverts and subverts myth. For if myth does give some consolatory gratification, it is spasmodic, won at the expense of obscuring the realities of being. And Witkin's art at root, is a realist, deeply pessimistic art, albeit cloaked in a highly romantic mystic veil.

Comic strip depicting contemporary myth-heroes played a role in shaping his imagery. Superman to him the hero of goodness, the secular Christ; Batman was the Lord of the Bird World and Darkness, the Anti-Christ; Wonder Woman, the Amazon who was related in his mind to the virgin Mother. Out of this mix he concocted a very romantic notion that he wanted his photographs to be as powerful as the last thing a person sees before death.

Myths of violence and eros to which Witkin relates intimately are those of Roman Catholicism. Its compelling central iconography of martyrdom - the sanctified figure martyred - the sanctified figure nailed to the cross, his body scourged and pierced with wounds - forms the perfect scenario for the sado-eroticist's wet dream. The particular inflection of Witkin's catholicism too, reinforces sado-erotic flavour. He lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where catholicism has been imbued with a fundamental sanguinary Mexican/Indian flavour. New Mexico, houses the Penitente, that shadowy sect which pushes violent penance to the limit by annually crucifying one of their members in a bizarre and dangerous re-enactment of Christ's Passion. Witkin could hardly fail to be intrigued by that.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK AND IDEAS BEHIND IT

His work certainly evinces something of the ferocious contrition demanded by the Penitente. Much of his oeuvre falls within the rubric of an early series - "Evidence of Nameless Atrocities". The structure of these images is generally consistent. Single figures, sometimes two or more, inhabit a rigorously contained space. This space is contained by a backdrop, by the black edges of the picture frame, by linear patterns frequently scribed round the image boundaries, and by the veils of tissue paper, thrown over the picture surface. Witkin favours a square negative, and though perspective is seldom utilised, his subtle use of frame edge suggests the cube of a room, perhaps a glass tank or a cell. Within this contained space (perceived readily as a close relation to/of Francis Bacon's "Room"). Witkin's subjects are both confined and displayed. Sometimes they indulge rather half-heartedly, in esoteric sexual activity. In the main, they are passive. They are quite clearly victims - to be stared at, punished, or violated. And violated they are; by what in the artist's own words is a twisted, cruel, fiendish imagination". They are blinded and depersonalised, either by scratching out eyes and faces in the negative, or by actual hooding and masking. They have limbs amputated, again by Witkin's retouching, knife and brush. They are bound and gagged, and costumed in leather or surgical corset; the impedimenta of sado-masochism. Often they wear, or are seen to interact with even more grotesque items from Witkin's mythological armoury.

The following examples should indicate something of the flavour, in one piece, "Penitente" (see figure 1) a body, a myriad of small cuts is

crucified alongside two mummified monkeys. He says of this photograph "The nice thing about these Rhesus monkeys is the fact that they had numbers put on their chests as codes. I really found that very appealing visually. I put numbers on my model's chest. There are also appendages coming from his body. There are seeds from a tree that was growing outside my studio. I made the cross; it took me two days to make because it had to be strong enough to hold up this guy who weighs almost 180 lbs. Then I crucified the monkeys on the crosses. I had done this with cats, that is, driving nails through their hands, and it's a very strong thing when you take a nail, and put it through tissue. I'd be an evil person if I got pleasure out of doing this to a live person. However, if a person gets self-realisation from having this done, and a person said, "I want you to do this. and I agreed to the idea, I wouldn't hesitate to do it".⁵ In Witkin's picture the man's hands were not penetrated but held to the cross by leather straps, and his weight was held up by a footrest. He explains: "He was screaming and wearing a skeleton mask that I modified to carry out my plan. I want to make it clear that I think it's a waste of real energy, real feelings, to demean yourself physically to suffer when there are different ways of generating a spiritual awareness. The picture in part is about the cruelty of crucifixion".

"Mandan", (see figure 2) done in 1981, is derived from a George Catlin painting. Of this photograph Witkin says: "Like "Penitente" this image is about self-realisation, but has an altogether different reference because it was done by Indians. The person photographed for the picture is a man who lives in San Francisco. I went to the man's house where he showed me in his garage the elaborate rigging he uses to help him carry out his

performance during which he elevates himself with rope connected to hooks inserted in holes in his chest muscles. He began making holes in his chest muscles as a boy and progressively widened the holes with pieces of bone which were worn under his clothes. This was the beginning of his way to get closer to the origins of life".

"Woman Breastfeeding an Eel" (see figure 3) was taken in 1979. In this photograph he wanted to take a photo-booth type of situation. "My reality was of a very voluptuous woman finding herself walking, let's say, into a k-mart with an eel and posing in front of an automatic coin camera behind a curtain. I wanted to be that machine. The picture was made in the wintertime in New Mexico when it is very hard to get an eel. However, I acquired one through suppliers of gourmet food for the restaurant where I was working as a waiter. The scratching in the background I drew in with chalk before the exposure. Later I also added scratching in the negative. it connects with this internalisation quality that interests me - that is, people putting things in their bodies or to their bodies. It's a form of personal dialogue that is inaudible in the sense that they're feeling sensations. My problem is to also feel those sensations and visually make them happen in a photograph".

One of Witkin's most powerful images is "Sanitarium" (see figure 4) done in 1983. He said briefly of this photograph: "The tubes indicate the transfer of fluids running from the monkey's mouth and genitalia to the human. The wings are bird wings, and the mask is an old mask turned inside out. I was reading some estoeric literature at the time about breathing in fumes and how such a sensation affects us. We cannot see such sensations, but I wanted to indicate them. I put this very large woman, who reminded me of the full-bodied women in Maillot's or Lachaise's work, in a languid pose. There is for me in this situation a strange, terrible sense of being forced to view the events in rooms of asylums or places of torture. But most importantly, it is a depiction of an egoless being a shaman in existence here and beyond".

Referring to Baron Von Gloeden's photographs of young boys, Witkin comments on his 1984 picture, "Von Gloeden in Asien" (see figure 5): "Von Gloeden is my connection with male beauty, which we more and more realise has been with us from the time of the Greek pagan gods. My image is homoerotic but a person who is not homosexualk can also love the male body. I am interested in historic references, social references and esthetic references. A photographic reality has a connection through a painting - a painting to a photograph again - that's a double value to me. And it's interesting how people's perception as viewers and creators of work change just because of the viability that they're exposed to by way of the quality of images they're

addressing".

"I.D. Photograph from Purgatory: Two Women with Stomach Irritations", (see figure 6) from 1982, is one of his eeriest images. Witkin explains what he had in mind: "One of these two women is obviously pregnant and the other had an operation because her spleen had burst when she ran into a parking pole, which is why her stomach was buttoned up. The masks used came from some drawings I was making at the time that I felt would change the shape of the human figure if used with the addition of the photographically made eyes I glued to them. There's a connection here with Miro, African masks, and shields, for a face basically is what we project to the world or a shield is used as a kind of weapon of love or hate. I lit my models very much like a mug shot, or like an I.D. photograph is usually lit. The curious thing about this photograph and many of the photographs I make, is that I can believe in something so crazy and preposterous as this image that exists only as a photograph".

"Crucifix 1987" (see figure 7) is based on 14th century Pisean (Italian) type crucifixes. The corpus is based on Danatello's Mary Magdalene. Witkin says that the photographs at the four points of the cross represent "Our confused desire to understand belief", (top): "Our unfunctional anatomy - what we've secretly made of the world and ourselves" (right hand): "The dark triane of hatred, war, and death, which longs to understand life" (base), and "All the aberrations of love" (left hand). It is a twelve feet wide by fifteen feet tall, gold-leafed cross with a

lead-sheathed Christ-figure at it's corpus. At the head, feet and arms the four photographs are silkscreened on sheet lead. the Christ-figure is a life cast made of plaster and papier mache - the material of department store mannequins - and is covered with over one thousand 2 and a quarter inch square contact prints also silkscreened on lead. The contact prints are photographs documenting every inch of the figure's body. These are nailed onto the figure in their exact original location sheathing it in a photographic lead skin.

Witkin's imagery, by his own admission, represents his confusion of his existence. Often the psychological tenor of the work is in doubt. It is difficult to ascertain with certainty whether we are dealing with agony or ecstasy, abhorrance or delectation. Unlike Parsifal that perfect Wagnerian, Christian fool, it seems Joel-Peter Witkin cannot, or will not make up his mind between the Temple of the Grail or Klingsor's magic garden. His predilection for the androgyne, a sexual ambiguity that is a constant and telling feature of his work, mirrors the conflict of his own sexuality. Sado-masochistic pobrities are a more specific leitmotif expressing the classic love/hate he feels towards woman. This attitude he puts in metaphysical terms. Witkin reveres woman yet is envious of woman because woman is closer to the great mystery than man. He sees power manifest in woman, the power to give life, and is jealous of it. Yet life is a vale of thorns, ending only death, so woman's power is as repugnant as it is compelling. Woman must be pitied as well as

envied.

Witkin is both sadist and masochist (imagistically, that is, for it is still far from certain, despite Freudian orthodoxy, that they are but facets of a single entity). It is made clear in his writings that Witkin's images reflect not only attitudes towards his subjects but attitudes towards himself. He inflicts a sense of suffering and degradation to suggest his own suffering and degradation. Each aspect is represented by one pole of the sado-masochistic duality. Witkin the sadist, choreographing the punishment and deprivation of his victims, is repaying woman for the crime of bringing him into his tormented existence. The masochistic aspect, on the other hand, is assumed when the image - object is seen, not as the 'object' of the photographer's violations but 'subject'; the photographer as victim of his own self-abuse, the penitent assuming the burden of the suffering allotted to woman.

Witkin's imagery might be read as a series of variations on the theme of transfiguration. Witkin becomes the Christ that man has consistently rejected - the Lamb of God, who 'taketh away the sins of the world'. Witkin feels the weight of his own and our sins weighing heavily upon him, and calls for their expiration by bearing witness, confession, penance and punishment. Man must be banished to inner and outer darkness, locked away, hooded, chained, tortured and degraded.

Mankind is punished for sins by Witkin/God, the instigator of these fearful tortures. Witkin/Christ bears the torment and

guilt of a cruel world. But Witkin is neither Christ nor God. He is a man- human, moral, fallible. The atrocities of which we view the mute yet persuasive evidence, have been perpetrated upon his victims and himself by himself - in other words by mankind upon mankind. That is Witkin's despairing message, God is Dead. We are alone, probably without any redemption, only a brutalising, and brutalised mankind, or perhaps a brutalising man, for the implication is there in the work.

In the 1984 photograph, "Choice of Outfits for the Agonies of Mary" (see figure 8), Witkin recalls: "I came across a book of paper dolls, that told readers how to dress dolls - I do that, too, I dress people. I see everything in reference to the life of Christ - I see my own life, I see the different things I go through, not in a direct parallel but in a kind of medieval form of good/evil and how a person seeks pleasure, and what that enjoyment means to them. I also can't forget that my mother's name is Mary. For this photograph I made sketches in San Francisco with all those S and M toys. I had boxes of them loaned to me with different kinds of weapons as well as devices of love and nourishment."

Many will see this religiosity of Witkin's as bogus, but then any aspect of religion seems bogus to the non-believer. Fortunately, there is much more to his imagery than High Court and High Camp. Amidst the pain, for example, there is the pleasure, Witkin's unabashed acknowledgement of the earthly paradise of the flesh.

This paradox might alienate some potentially sympathetic viewers yet in this he is only being catholic. For if there is contrition in Witkin, it is not accompanied by shame. He is free from the prurient guilt of Calvinism or the perpetual angst of Judaism. Sin hard and repent hard. Witkin is an open and honest artist and much of what he deals with relates to death and sexual deviations from accepted modes. Such subjects shake up the residual puritanism in the middle class makeup. Many people pretend not to know about the phantasmagoric world he brings to life and rationalise the appetite for fetishistic death and sex as monstrous aberrations, thinking they only exist in the underground world of a few sin-ridden cities. Witkin's achievement in this respect is his ability to encapsulate in quite plausible terms the pungent, titillating, and sometimes eerie practices of masochism, mock mayhem, transvestism, and homosexual behaviour carried out with gothic appurtenances. We must remember that what he has recorded are in part figments of the photographer's imagination - as well as the fire and ice of real people. He demystifies taboos, scatology and apocalyptic imagery. There are cases when his concoctions are undecipherable when first encountered, but, when we rub our eyes, the ominous implications of the underground world he pictures become more religious than threatening, more surreal than abnormal.

While his pictures often have atmosphere of demonic fiction, this in part is due to the command he has over his imagination and in part they are quite rational pokes at, the philistines of the

smug middle classes. However seemingly absurd his images are, we sense that they must be taken seriously for they derive from the realm we now associate with the Freudian subconscious where there is a constant hunger for sexual gratification, often coupled with rawness and even brutality. We are at the mercy of our fears which trigger the feeling of being powerless; an effect that in the cold light of day, is out of proportion to the reality of the situations found in his pictures, but gives us clues to the sources of our deep-seated emotions.

Intellectual pleasure can be discerned in Witkin's formal manoeuvrings and references to art history. Such games serve the function not only of artistic self-indulgence, but importantly broaden the social discourse of the work. Like Francis Bacon, who he greatly admires, Witkin deals with his personal nightmare by fusing a raw, emotive fervour with detached, formal, intellectualism. Like Bacon, gambling with spontaneous marks and random drips of paint, Witkin flaunts the vagaries of sprayed wet tissue veils, and chemical staining. Like Bacon's Witkin's oeuvre is ambitious and difficult. It is direct, yet steeped in allusion to painting, to media mythology, literature and cultural symbolism.

Witkin's imagery is infused with an accumulation of meanings that mask, but hardly obscure it's starker implications. Over his pictures he literally throws a veil (of tissue), without which some of them would indeed be harder to take. As in Bacon,

formal, even semi-abstract elements are played in conjunction with the intellectual distancing against the rawness. This sets up a frisson that tends to heighten rather than negate the despair or outrage we feel at the horror of it all. Savagery seems even more savage, obscenity more obscene if unleashed from beneath our veneer of civilisation.

TECHNIQUE AND PHYSICAL QUALITY

Witkin's prints are amongst the most visually seductive of a decade that has seen a renewed focus upon the photograph as art object. He has maintained simple technical procedures. The lighting in his studio is north light, which he prefers. A single strobe light may also be used. The placement of highlights and the general distribution of tones are modified a great deal in printing, so lighting is not a major issue with Witkin. After a negative is exposed and developed, he makes a contact print and studies it to determine where markings will appear, where to mute a passage, or where he wants to clarify. to make an exhibition print, he places a very thin tissue on his photo-paper in increase light retraction and soften an image or he punches holes in the tissue to create selective areas of sharpness. After the tissue is laid on the photo-paper, it is sprayed lightly with water to cause it to adhere to the photo-paper and to make it more translucent. Recently he usually uses the tissue in its normal flat state, crinkling the edges only.

Before a print is made, he makes scratch marks on the emulsion side and even at times on the opposite side of the negative. He prints on warm-toned paper that reflects well the marking and muting he feels are appropriate for a specific picture. When processed and dried, his prints are toned, often with two toners. the brown/yellow glow in his prints, created by toning, conveys the feeling of a partina brought on by age or recalls the look of

parchment or fine old rag paper from past centuries. This old-masterish look gives even the most outrageous image a sense of history. It is as if his photographs had been put away in a musty cabinet for years and only recently rediscovered. This makes possible a more oblique approach to his bizarre subjects than would be the case if he used a straightforward printing technique. 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.

However, many of those who make 'marks' upon photographs follow far in the wake of their painting confreres, often producing more than artistic juvenilia. This has been one of the most embarrassing areas of recent photographic endeavour, so it is good to see such a successful integration of formal manipulation with genuine content. Witkin's grafting on of a manually applied matrix to the photographic process is persuasively seamless, contrary to much contemporary practice, where the joins, both physical and intellectual are apt to show.

This rich patina of stains, scratches, and other marks, has a dual function. It defines the space of the image, confining the subject tightly within its bounds. And it refers to a primary source of Witkin's iconography - other photographs - all the images he has viewed at the University of New Mexico Art Museum and elsewhere. This inspiration ranges from the scuffed,

scratched, burnished surface of the daguerreotype to the fuzzy grainy new picture of death and disaster; from the peeling emulsion and excised features of a Bettocq prostitute to the favourite snapshot or pornographic memento moti, creased and torn from neglect in a forgotten back pocket or old drawer. From this it is clear that the physical qualities of photographs are vital to Witkin, for through them imagistic values would seem to be enhanced. For example, a battered Weegee press print has an aura beyond its image. It becomes as evocative as a Mandeleine, its conjuring power increased tenfold.

So Witkin is drawn particularly to the iconic quality that resides in nineteenth century photography, its surface richness and temporal distances.

CHAPTER 3

ARTIST OR PORNOGRAPHER?

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

I am drawn to Witkin's work because of its complexity and sheer physical lustre. The primary issue however, must of course be one of morality. I believe that ultimately, Witkin's art is a moral art, as I believe Arbus' art is a moral art, or Francis Bacon's is a moral art. However, many undoubtedly will disagree, and I also have my own nagging doubts.

Does Witkin's beguiling print quality serve simply to mask a self-indulgent brutality? Are the art historical quotations the sign merely of an sharp operator, clever window-dressing to soft-sell a vicious pornographic? This question must be raised, but examination of his photographs leads to the answer that there is a mystical and even darkly spiritual quality to his pictures that is quite at odds with pornography. Pornography is intended to arouse lust immediately, not after contemplating a picture and thinking about its many implications. Pornography is a substitute for actual experience and tends to trivialise and focus narrowly the sexual urge. Witkin recognises this strong universal urge and defines its manifestations in broad uninhibited ways, but the results have esthetic as well as emotional power. Pornography lacks the first and deals with the

second in a superficial fashion. By the allusions to art history and his reinterpretations of classical symbols, he signals the seriousness of his intent.⁶ But there are questions too, to be asked of Witkin's models.

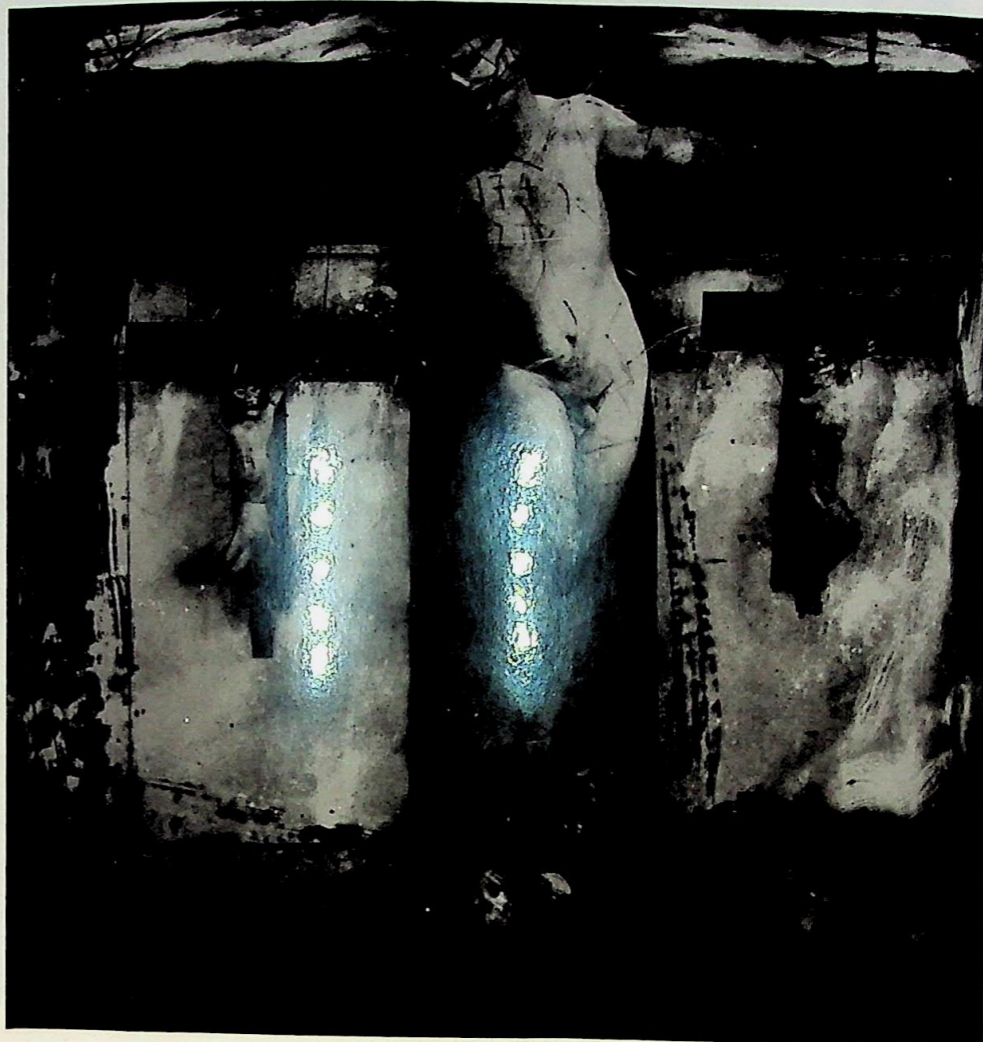
The Ethics of photographing corpses dressed black brassieres are dubious, to say the least. The level of Witkin's work also varies. Inevitably, there are times when the photographer parodies himself with images that venture little beyond the unmediated pornographic. "Journeys of the Mask: Phrenologist" (1983), and "Australian Drag Queen" (1982), for example, would be placed in this lesser category. It may be that Witkin's political message, also, is too vague or ambitious. He makes few claims for it, after all - therefore I may readily be accused of wishful thinking to discern it all.

Yet, if one crucial question is posed - that is, whether Witkin opts for the wet dream, or the world - the answer has to be the world. His works seriousness, its evident chill, passion, its relative lack of salaciousness - its abundantly real obscenity, if you like - compels us to deal with the issues raised by his uninhibited confessional. One cannot be neutral about Joel-Peter Witkin. He forces us to ask us too many uncomfortable questions of ourselves.

He has declared that he views his images as 'icons' as 'sacred' image - objects put to the service of faith. Such a view might

be taken of much photography, particularly portraits, snapshots, and other momenti mori, articles of faith that desperately attempt to cheat time - and death. But Witkin's icons are not so much icons of hope, as of despair. And yet in their relentless honesty and self critique, they offer the potential of hope. As one colleague wrote of his work after Witkin's first semester at the University of New Mexico: "They are not about horror and suffering, but are the profound emotion which arises when a man is conscious of the potential of horror and suffering that is always present in the reality of the human condition. Here we are confronted with the depths that a conscious man can probe in his search to find himself and what makes us human beings".

It can be said that in his remarkable, provocative art, Joel-Peter Witkin achieves, the rarefied feat of putting pornography in the service of society, or at least, as Angela Carter states it, "allows the possibility for it to be invaded by an ideology not inimical to women".

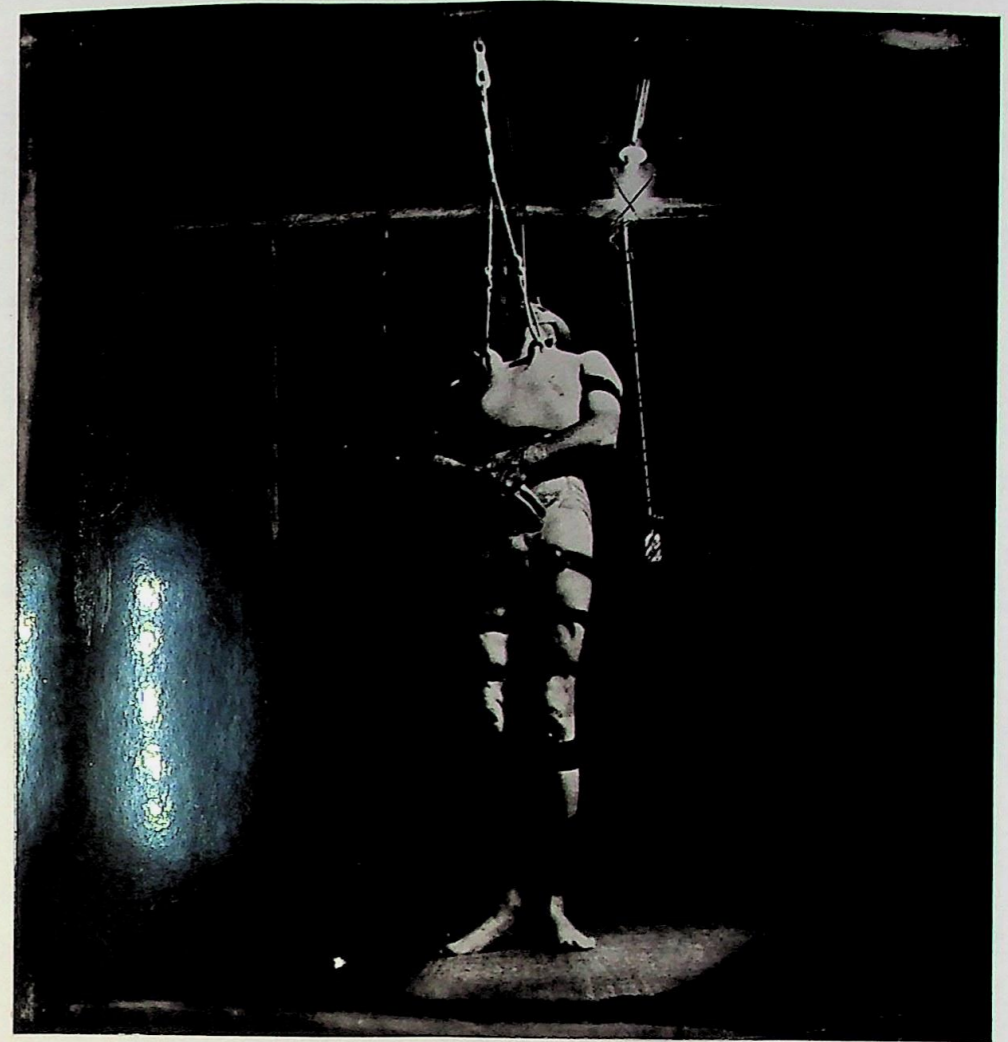


'Penitente'

(figure 1)

PELITENTE

'Tentative'
(figure 1)

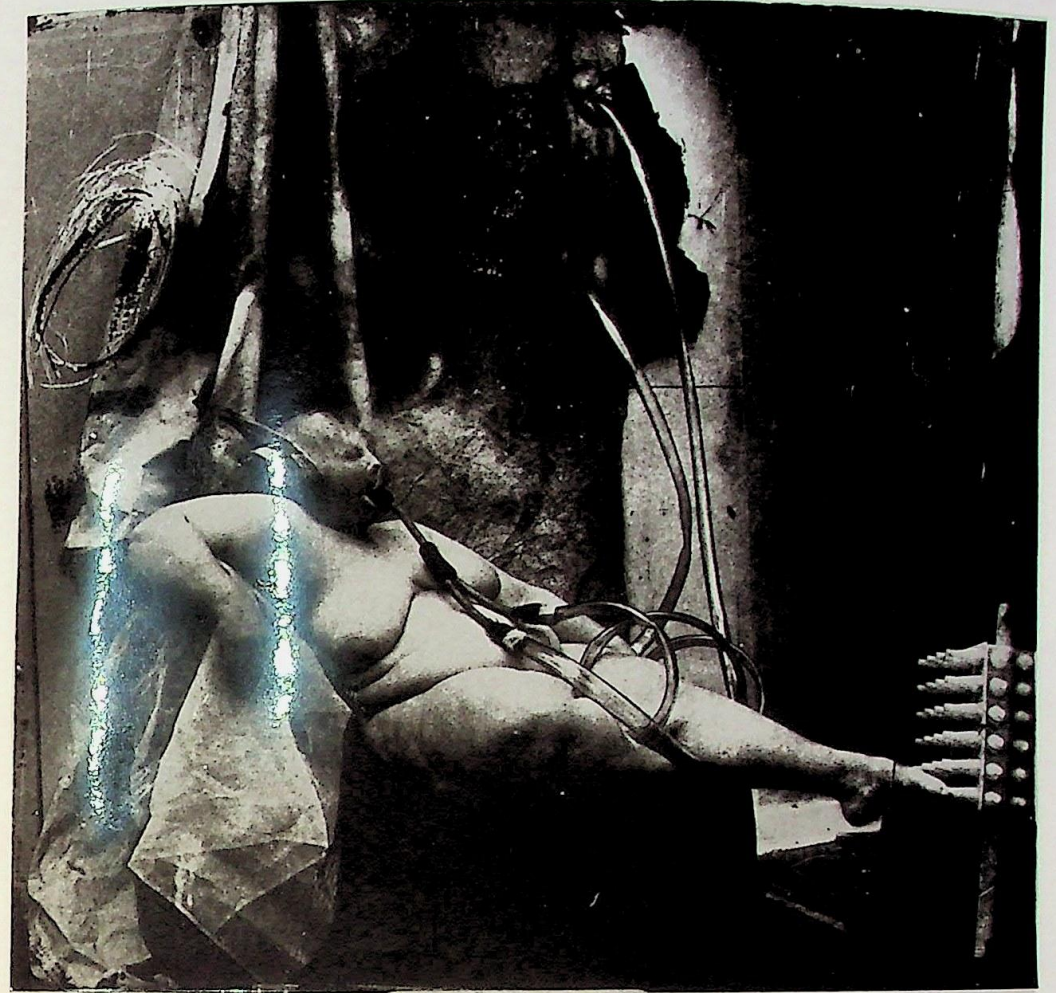


'Mandan'
(figure 2)



'Woman Breastfeeding an Eel'

(figure 3)



'Sanitarium'

(figure 4)



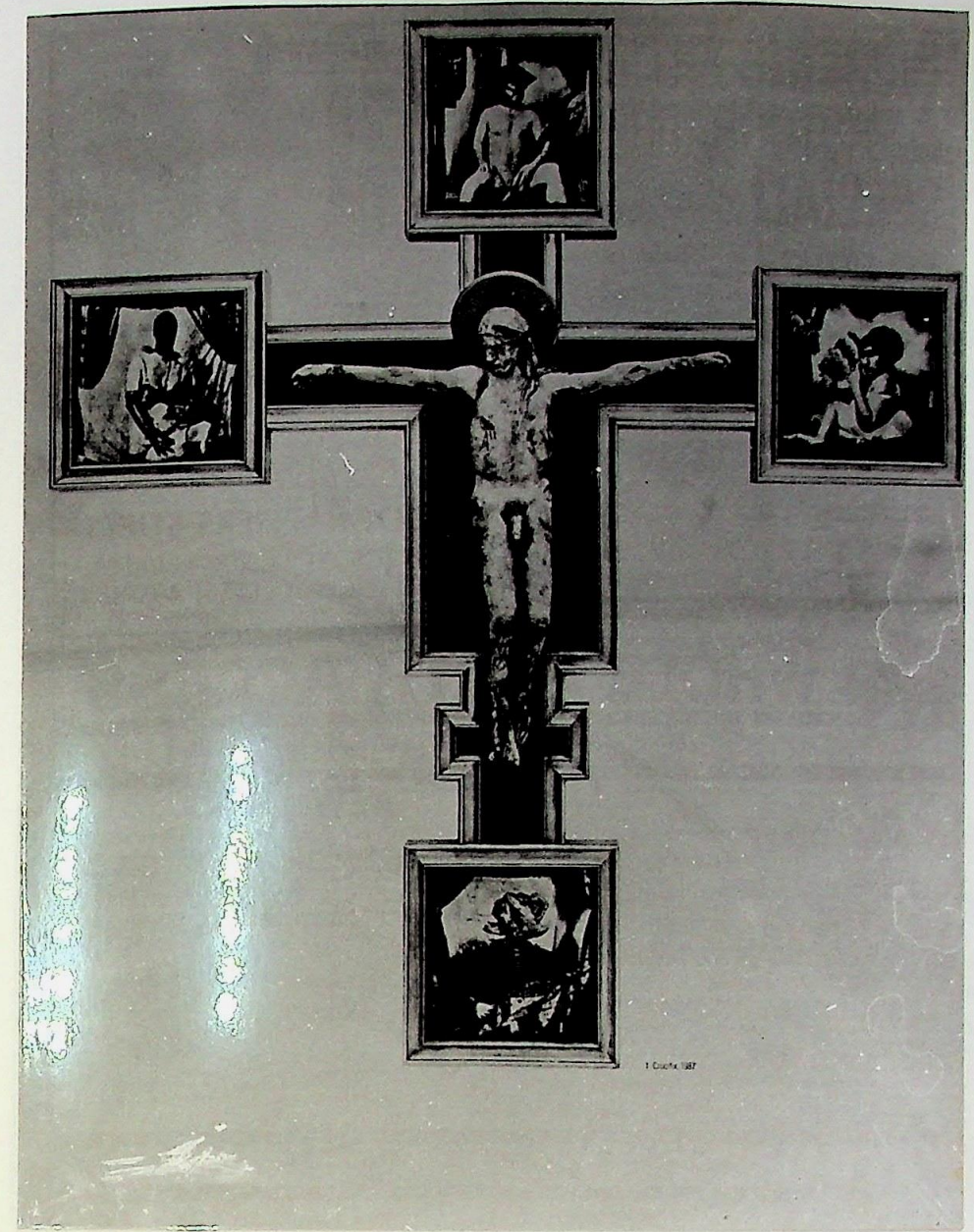
'Von Gloeden in Asien'

(figure 5)



'I.D. Photograph from Puratory: Two Women with Stomach Irrations'

(figure 6)



'Crucifix'

(figure 7)



'Choice of Outfits for the Agonies of Mary'

(figure 8)

FOOT NOTES

1. Patricia Bosworth, Dione Arbus, a Biography
page 67-77
2. Angela Carter, The Sadeian Woman (Virago Press, 1979)
page 19-20
3. " " " " "
4. Biographical information and quotations are derived from
'Revolt Against the Mystical', Witkin's M.A. Thesis,
University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 1976.
5. Further quotations are from an interview conducted by
Van Deren Coke with Joel-Peter Witkin in Albuquerque,
New Mexico, July 1985.
6. 'Mandan' is based on George Catlin's painting of the 1830s
young Indian men being tested for bravery by being
suspended in the air by cords hooked into their pectoral
muscles.

Other examples include Witkin's use of the painting
'Dan Manuel Osorio de Zuniga' by Goya and Grant Wood's 1930s
portrait of his sister Nan. His parody of Ruben's 1630s
painting of his beautiful wife, Helena Fourment, and
Canova's nineteenth century marble of Venus indicate that
there is a whimsical side to Witkin. We look at these
photographs derived from major works in art history and
then look again to discover a penis peeking out from under
the Covers in Canova's 'Parolina Borghese as Venus
Victorious' and the same appurtenance appears attached to
the coy Helena Fourment in Witkin's version. Much more
serious in intent is his 'Pygmalion' in which he
incorporated imagery of a dead human foetus with portions
of Picasso's great 1930s protest painting against war,
'Guernica'.

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1. Patricia Bosworth, Diane Arbus, a Biography page 84-85

2. Angela Carter, The Sadeian Woman (Virago Press, 1979) page 19-20

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4. Further quotations are from an interview conducted by Van Deren Coke with Joel-Peter Witkin in Albuquerque, New Mexico, July 1982.

5. 'Witkin' is based on George Catlin's painting of the 1830s young Indian man being tested for bravery by being suspended in the air by cords hooked into their pectoral muscles.

Other examples include Witkin's use of the painting 'Dan Mennet Courto de Anida', by Goya and Grant Wood's 1930s portrait of his sister Nan. His parody of Bruegel's 1630s painting of his beautiful wife, Kater's portrait, and Canova's nineteenth century statue of Venus Callisto that there is a historical side to Witkin. We look at these photographs derived from paper works in art history and then look again to discover a point peering out from under the covers in Canova's 'Fetters' sculpture as Venus Victorious', and the same appearance against attached to the very Helen Kowand in Witkin's version. Such more serious in intent is his 'Tyrannical' in which he incorporated layers of a dead woman's face with portions of Picasso's great 1930s protest painting against war, 'Guernica'.