THE SPIRITUAL BODY:

Regression and Redemption in the Work of Joel-Peter Witkin

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ABSTRACT

The photography of Joel-Peter Witkin inspires psychoanalytic readings, yet surprisingly little has been written in this area despite the critical attention that Witkin has received, which has tended to concentrate either on art historical allusion or the shock factor in his work. At least one critic has observed the ‘obsessive’ presence of the twin themes of sexual difference (defining the female, and specifically, the maternal body), and Christian iconography (focusing on crucifixion).

Employing Sigmund Freud’s contention that religion is formed in the image of the father, and, to a lesser extent, Julia Kristeva’s definition of a maternal body which the child must abject, I have been tempted to trace the influence of parental authority in Witkin’s imagery. Through his interpretations of the maternal, Eucharist and crucifixion as it encompasses the marginalized, martyred and bestialized body, I examine this presence in absence. Freud observed that liberation from parental authority is a difficult and painful task; Kristeva contends that the child never fully separates from the maternal body.

Kristeva’s ‘return of the repressed’ is an apt description of the impact Joel-Peter Witkin had on this viewer. Witkin’s imagery distinguishes itself from traditional Christian iconography by its regressive rather than redemptive nature, a return rather to Cain of the Old Testament than to Christ of the New. Although bodily martyrdom and suffering are exhibited as a means of achieving revelation, this revelation is not of Christ’s redemptive victory over death, an ascendancy, but rather of man’s inhumanity—a descent to an earlier, cruel and incapacitated state. In Witkin’s crucifixions, the closure of redemption is associated with regression, whether experienced through a body that presents either a primitive, less differentiated, or arrested state of development or some deformity or ‘deviation.’
If the resurrected body is signified anywhere in Witkin’s imagery, it is in the transcendence of certain of his vanitas. Where the realism of the Medieval Compassion Cross was meant to evoke emotion and empathy with Christ’s humanity, Witkin’s demonic Christs convey humanity’s regression, blurring and transgressing the boundary delineating human from animal, man from beast. Whether this creature is even deserving of redemption is at issue here; Witkin’s Penitente may not engage our empathy—but we may recognize and fear aspects of its bestiality in ourselves.
PREFACE

Joel-Peter Witkin has said of his photographic practice, “I can’t define what I’m doing; I don’t know what I’m doing.” Researching Witkin’s work has led me to explore the unknown, in areas ranging from the antique tradition of the vanitas to Julia Kristeva’s abjected maternal body, from historical depictions of Christ on the cross to a Freudian analysis of sadomasochism. Neither Catholic nor Jew, I realized how little I knew about Catholicism and Judaism from allusions in Witkin’s work. I joke that my priorities have become discombobulated: while I was investigating the meaning of Purgatory, my little brother purchased his first home in far-off Boston, Massachusetts.

25,000 seemed like a lot of words to me until I began writing up my findings. That was the word limit imposed on me for the thesis half of a Master of Fine Arts, in which the other fifty percent represented my studio practice. I must emphasize here that my focus on Witkin’s Spiritual Body represents only a portion of his work, and of my investigations. To do justice to it all would have meant including another chapter on Witkin’s treatment of the Maternal Body, although I do discuss the Maternal Body briefly in Chapter 1.

It is in fact difficult to fully appreciate or understand Witkin’s treatment of the spiritual outside the context of the maternal. If the mother’s breast is the object of the first fetish, Christ’s body constitutes another, both being defined by the abjected trauma of their loss, and often futile search for a substitute, in the twin poles of love and faith. As Freud observes, the fetish object commemorates this loss as sign and mourning. “The fetish acknowledges its own traumatic history like a red flag, symptomatically signaling a site of psychic pain.”

Witkin’s emphasis on the Virgin Mary and her son Jesus Christ marks this connection between the maternal and spiritual realms in bodily form. There is unfortunately no room in the present written project to go into that important area in the depth it deserves. While this is only half the
thesis I envisaged, it seemed more important to do one half of it properly. A fuller treatment of the Maternal Body awaits further study.

In the limited space allotted, I have accordingly narrowed the focus of my investigations to Witkin’s treatment of the Spiritual Body, primarily in the areas of crucifixion and the Eucharist. I have endeavored to present psychoanalytic and art historical interpretations of Witkin’s imagery as he engages with Christian iconography, rendering it contemporary and relevant to our times. My hope is that this thesis will prove interesting, illuminating and provocative reading.

I would like to acknowledge the love and support of the Metaxatos Family in helping me to achieve this goal. Thanks go also to Dr. Ian McLean, and to Dr. Clarissa Ball.


2. See Antonio Saura’s perceptive commentary in his essay “Une Horrible et Sublime Beauté,” in the exhibition catalogue Joel-Peter Witkin: Centre National de la Photographie, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, Septembre—Novembre 1989, Ministerio de Cultura, Direction generale de Beaux-Arts, Madrid, 1989, pp. 83—94. In particular, Saura points to two themes in Witkin’s work “present in an obsessive fashion:” (translation from the French by the author) One is sexual difference, primarily as designated in the female body, and the other is the reference to Christian iconography, most specifically Crucifixion imagery. Saura, p. 90. These themes have represented the subjects of my own inquiry into Witkin’s work.


CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION: THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE

We are, Freud said, the ‘precipitates’ of our love relations. ¹

The finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it. ²

Joel-Peter Witkin has gained notoriety for his images of the marginalized body, depicting abjected, deformed, maimed, dead and dismembered subjects, often in art historical tableaux. Although he has worked as a professional photographer and printer since the 1960s, it was in the early 1980s that Witkin began attracting media attention for images whose content was decidedly abject, but whose art historical quotation and masterful printing also made them difficult to dismiss. People tend to remember the circumstances in which they saw their first Witkin, which the photographer considers an honor.³ I first saw the image Sanitarium in a book our instructor passed around in an introductory photography course in 1992. (figure 1) The impression was of an initiation into a strange subterranean world, of an artist working at cross currents to contemporary media representations of beauty.

Yet Sanitarium (1987), a lushly toned black and white gelatin silver print featuring a reclining, obese woman nude, was undeniably seductive. Her face concealed by a winged mask, the woman was sucking on a bizarre piping arrangement that looked like a cross between a hookah and medical tubing. This piping was connected to the mouth and genitalia of a monkey corpse suspended on the wall behind her, in an apparent exchange of bodily fluids, a highly charged subject since the beginning of the AIDS crisis a decade earlier. Offsetting the disturbing content, Sanitarium was masterfully printed, the textures of skin, transparent folded cloth, the shadowed enclosure in which the woman lay, and maniacal circular scratches to the negative all rendered in a subtle chiaroscuro of tonal greys. The overall impression was that sculptors
Gaston Lachaise or Andre Maillol had taken up photography after suffering major psychological trauma, transporting their famously comfortable women to the asylum.

From obese women suckling eels, masturbating with carrots, or cradling dead fetuses, to women with male sexual organs and men without them, from the elevation of individuals born limbless to the status of ‘obscure saints,’ to disembodied human limbs forming part of a contemplative *vanitas* meditating on the Eucharist, from acts of apparent sadomasochism, bestiality and necrophilia to human and animal crucifixion, Witkin melds entities which would not ordinarily engage and delves into activities which are not part of the veneer of ordinary social engagement. They are rather, so to speak, under the skin, and yet strangely familiar, which explains their ambivalent critical reception. Witkin depicts transgressive bodies engaged in transgressive acts, safely enclosed and embalmed within the ritual frame of the art photograph—although one may argue, like Barthes, that ritual comprises the making of any photograph.⁴

Abundant flesh—and/or its startling absence—is very much in evidence in Witkin’s photographs. Like Georges Bataille and Charles Baudelaire,⁵ Witkin finds beauty in the disagreeable, the repugnant, engaging a similar pessimistic view of man’s inhumanity—as did Freud. The definition of ‘normal’ and of ‘transgressive’ begins to founder amongst all the very large women, dwarves, pre-op transsexuals, deformed persons, human and animal corpses that people Witkin’s photographs, whose otherness he accentuates rather than mitigates. One gains the impression that Witkin has embarked on a quest for these unusual subjects, and indeed he has. In the Afterword to several of his books, Witkin solicits models to include the following list of “physical prodigies”:

…pinheads, dwarfs, giants, hunchbacks, pre-op transsexuals, bearded women…. Satyrs, twins joined at the forehead, anyone with a parasitic twin, twins sharing the same arm or leg, living Cyclopes, people with tails, horns, wings, fins, claws, reversed feet or hands, elephantine limbs…. Anyone born without arms, legs, eyes, breasts, genitals, ears, nose, lips. All people with unusually large genitals. Sex masters and slaves….hairless anorexics. Human skeletons and human pincushions….Private collections of instruments of torture, romance; of human, animal and alien parts. All manner of extreme visual perversions. Hermaphrodites and teratoids (alive and dead)…. Anyone bearing the wounds of Christ.⁶
Well into the twentieth century, visitors paid to see many of the above freaks at the circus, where they formed a community unto themselves. The circus has its roots in the medieval Carnival, where “physical prodigies” such as the above were viewed as prophetic embodiments of divine inspiration, their ambivalence and otherness the physical evidence of God’s work. The inversion of norms and exuberant excess of the grotesque featured as an integral part of European folk-culture at Carnival, famously depicted in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel.

As references to Bosch, Brueghel and Carnival indicate, certain themes that reappear in Witkin’s work are not particular to the twentieth century, although they are certainly germane. Indeed, they have the character of regression in a chronological and a personal sense. The maternal body and the spiritual body, as represented by constructions of the monstrous mother, the Eucharist and Crucifixion, are themes to which the artist has returned since the 1970s. These may be viewed as components of a singular narrative of traumatic loss and redemption derived from Witkin’s Catholic heritage—that of the Virgin Mary, the birth of her son Jesus Christ, and his grotesque crucifixion.

The most troubling aspect of Witkin’s reinterpretation of this religious narrative is its apparent futility—birth from his maternal body ends in death, while crucified beasts personify man’s inhumanity. The sole redemption appears to be the therapeutic qualities of Witkin’s art making, while what is resurrected is his past. Effectively, Witkin appears to ground this religious narrative in his own psychic experiences, as if in quest of a past, or perhaps more correctly, of some psychological interior and anterior. His references to the Virgin Mary and to Jesus Christ address a collective maternity and paternity, a lost parental authority. Witkin looks also to that 1950s landmark of mythology studies, The Masks of God, taking seriously Joseph Campbell’s exhortation to artists to “revitalize the perennial mythology in terms of our local personal human experience.” The fact of Witkin’s commercial success as an artist indicates that he has struck a chord—whether of synchrony or dissonance—signaling this common shared past in the population at large.

Given his choice of models, and his construction of maternity and spirituality, a presence in absence, or conversely, in repetition, in overabundance, features strongly in Witkin’s pantheon.
The viewer may experience the sensual assault of a Witkin image — *Sanitarium* is relatively sedate—as a delayed reaction, the fist in the velvet glove. Viewer response to the unusual beings of Witkin’s images, frequently 16 x 20 inch (40.6 x 50.8 cm) toned gelatin silver prints, is mediated by this artist’s particular antiquing manipulation of the photographic medium, creating a safe voyeuristic distance akin to that of the action or horror film. These may be photographs of real bodies, but “the spectator cannot participate physically in Witkin’s carnival, one is only allowed to look on as a voyeur or inquisitor,”¹¹ observes Anne Marsh in *The Darkroom*. Like other forms of bodily contact in the Western world, a once intimate association with death and decay is available at second hand, if not simulated.

While the viewer may freely access these photographs, the sense of being a voyeur, of penetrating into some hidden realm of the mind, plays a significant role—one might say, the major role—in achieving their fetishistic aura. Despite its popular reputation as a machine for documenting the visible world, the origins of the camera are in more mystical and mysterious realms that make its photographic processes ideally suited to Witkin’s psychoanalytical subject.

**THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE**

“Day by day,” observed Walter Benjamin, “the need becomes greater to take possession of the object—from the closest proximity—in an image and the reproduction of an image.”¹² The Benjaminian ‘aura’ of ‘cult value’ and authenticity clings to nineteenth century copper daguerreotypes, whose blurred long exposures, patina of chemical aureoles and camera-induced chiaroscuro mimic painterly techniques. Daguerreotypes remain magical originals since, like paintings, they could not be duplicated.¹³

Even earlier, the *camera obscura* situated viewers inside a small dark enclosure into which the outside world penetrated through a tiny hole. The modern camera places the photographer outside that small dark room, capturing the image rather than being passively enclosed by it.¹⁴ Peter Schwenger traces a link between Witkin’s enclosed, constructed theatricality and the antique device of the *camera obscura*, whose pinhole ‘eye’ permitted a limited inversion of the outside world. Besides the eye’s interior space, the closet-like constructions also echo
“claustrophobic studio photographs of the nineteenth century,” for Schwenger, a resemblance Witkin enhances through deliberate scratches, folds and decayed emulsion, which mimic the patina of age on old photographs.

This mysticism of the photograph as fetish object inspires Witkin, whose phantasmagorical imagery also opens up associations with visualizing the mind’s eye in the enclosed camera obscura. In addition to his own formidable body of work, Witkin has collaborated in the editing of two collections of early sociological/medical photographs: Harm’s Way, a collection of atmospheric murder scenes from turn-of-the-century New York police files, and Masterpieces of Medical Photography, which includes American Civil War wounded. Witkin’s Disciple & Master, published in 2000, pairs his own photographs with their inspiration in the plates of 19th century photographers Roger Fenton, Charles Winter, Charles Nègre, and Frederick Holland Day, among others, as well as twentieth century greats such as Walker Evans, Diane Arbus and Weegee.

Fenton’s photograph Skeletons of a Man and a Male Gorilla, taken in 1861, (figure 2) for example, reveals Witkin’s interest in the human/primate connection, which he develops further in his use of rhesus monkeys as models in place of humans. Winter’s Nature morte, circa 1850, (figure 3) directly inspired Witkin’s Studio de Winter, Paris, 1996, (figure 4) in which he pays homage to Winter’s still-life assemblage of classical sculpture by posing a nude scoliotic female model among reproductions of classical statuary, replacing Winter’s classical ideal with his own standard of perfection. From Charles Nègre’s Nu allongé sur un lit dans l’atelier de l’artiste (négatif papier ciré/negative on waxed paper) circa 1850, (figure 5) Witkin borrows the arrangement of the nude female model in order to literally express its inherent fetishism through his own Nègre’s Fetishist, Paris, 1990, (figure 6) in which the model wears heel extensions Witkin had made for her. Frederick Holland Day’s series of self-portraits as Christ crucified, taken in 1898, (figure 7) provide Witkin with material to work against in his own crucifixion iconography.

In its witnessing of the freakish marginalized body and highly charged states of being, Witkin’s work has frequently been cited in connection with twentieth century New York photographers Diane Arbus and Weegee, both of whom Witkin encountered. Although all three rely on
abjection and otherness for impact, Arbus and Weegee were more interested in documenting the \textit{éclat} of the real than in enhancing and allegorizing it with props in enclosed studio settings, which is Witkin’s \textit{modus operandi}.

Finally, Witkin compares his elaborate \textit{vanitas} of decomposing body parts, \textit{Feast of Fools}, Mexico, 1990, (figure 8) with Walker Evans’ apparently straightforward \textit{Bethlehem}, Pennsylvania, 1936, (figure 9) which at first glance appears unrelated. Yet their juxtaposition and mingling of death with life, morality with mortality through the use of historical allusion (the crucifixion, the \textit{vanitas}, the medieval Feast of Fools) enables a \textit{rapprochement} between these two images, and is indicative of the tenor of Witkin’s work.\textsuperscript{21}

Witkin’s references to earlier photographers have perhaps been overshadowed by his more readily recognizable quotations of the history of painting and sculpture, richly documented in side-by-side comparisons by critic Germano Celant in his catalogue to Witkin’s 1995 retrospective at New York’s Guggenheim Museum. Even (perhaps \textit{especially}) if abjected, the quotation of paintings and sculpture by canonic painters such as Arcimboldo, Rubens, Botticelli, de Heem, Velasquez, Canova, Courbet, Miro and Picasso\textsuperscript{22} reveal a respect and appreciation for tradition, even a traditional mindset—the artist’s version of Harold Bloom’s \textit{The Anxiety of Influence}. Despite his living in the semi-rural American Southwest since 1976, when he began graduate work in photography at the University of New Mexico in an attempt to make a life change away from New York City, Witkin’s is ultimately an urban, Old-World sensibility subject to an ‘anxiety of influence’ driving him to confront and abject traditional symbols of authority and spiritual guidance. Because his art historical quotations range beyond the scope of this thesis, I treat Witkin’s allusions to the art historical canon within the context of specific works referencing the theme of the spiritual body as denoted by the Eucharist or Crucifixion.

\textbf{METHOD IN MADNESS}

Revelation in Witkin’s images is often of lack even in the presence of symbols—the mother and child, the crucifix, the body—reading as an absence of intimacy, of divinity, and of the soul. The more hysterically piled and mannered the symbols, the greater the lack. A spiritual presence is
ironically most often read in absence—Witkin’s desire to “make the invisible visible,” is best communicated through the reductive simplicity of the body to mere fragments in his *vanitas*.

“My life wish,” Witkin states, “is to be connected with a place we can’t know, hope to go, or hope to be.” He reports experiencing the feeling that his photographs are more intelligent than he is. Of his working methods, Witkin says: “I can’t define what I’m doing; I don’t know what I’m doing.” Witkin’s working methodology has attracted almost as much curiosity as his abjected subjects, with which it is inextricably bound in the sense of ritual.

There is a method to this madness. The artist often begins with rough pencil sketches and blurbs detailing the proposed photograph, sketches which are included in several of his monographs side-by-side with the final image. Occasionally, this penciled text is incorporated into the final image, as in *Maquette for the Crucifix*, New Mexico, 1986. (figure 10) Assembling the elements for his images often entails getting official permission to photograph items in museum collections, hospitals—and in morgues.

There may be a protracted negotiation with prospective models (Jackie Tellalian), or Witkin may travel to solicit a model ‘scouted’ for him by a friend (*Santo Oscuro*). He has traveled to Mexico to work with corpses, and to asylums in Eastern Europe to photograph inmates.

Although models are frequently photographed nude, Witkin finding the nude body “timeless,” facial masks often conceal their identities. This is of course a reversal of daily life, in which we see peoples’ faces rather than their bodies, their subjectivity as individuals rather than their physical presence as male or female, or perhaps even male and female bodies. That knowledge usually entails a higher level of intimacy—or violation of boundaries. Since in Witkin’s case we are often dealing with deformed or otherwise different bodies, the subjects assume their bodies. In essence, Witkin is imposing a symbolic language on his subjects:

> To me people were only masks. My interests would not be to reveal what the individual chose to hide, but instead to make the qualities of the hidden more meaningful…. I could deal only with people by superimposing my own mask on theirs.

Although Germano Celant defends Witkin’s masking of his subjects as a way of respecting their identities while liberating their duality, this further reduction of the already marginal subject to
symbol in a Witkin performance highlights the dynamic of power that underlies any discussion of mask and artifice. As Anne Marsh observes, “the performative subject is turned into the perverse object for the seeing spectator and in this relationship power struggles pervade the action of the look.”

Witkin's more ambitious art historical revisions require the construction of elaborate painted backdrops and the participation of numerous models, as in Las Meniñas, (figure 11) or Studio of the Painter (Courbet) Paris, (1990), (figure 12). In many of the works I examine in this thesis, the background is deliberately a dark enclosure for a solitary figure. In all cases, the setting in Witkin’s tableaux is controlled and theatrically artificial—a curtain drawn to expose a dark alcove, a scenic backdrop that doesn’t quite cover the room behind. He works indoors under artificial light, whose effects may later be distorted through the addition of chemical aureoles in the darkroom. Just as he enhances his models’ unusual physical characteristics with masks and props, Witkin draws attention to, rather than concealing, the theatricality of his décor.

Witkin works with a Rolleiflex 6 x 6 camera, and finds that in a shoot he rarely uses more than one or two rolls of film, “which is largely sufficient to know if my spirit is equal to understanding the ambient visual and psychic forces.” The “decisive moment” is just the beginning. On the contact sheet developed from the film, Witkin “modifies aspects of reality I don’t wish to appear on the negative.” He then makes a drawing of how he envisages the final print. From all the above, it is clear that the real represents a point of departure for a type of wish fulfillment that may be achieved through the photographic process. The critic Germano Celant speaks of an ‘oneiric’ quality to the work, which Witkin puts poetically: “What I make are my prayers.” The modification of reality takes places at multiple levels—in the deliberate selection and masking of models, in the construction of sets, and finally, in the darkroom.

Transforming the chosen negative and developing the print, Witkin can spend days in the darkroom, which he refers to as a “sacred site.” He speaks of becoming a “priest” engaged in the “holiest” activity of his vocation, a form of “transubstantiation,” a term usually reserved for the Eucharistic transformation of the flesh into the Holy Spirit. It is easy to forget in all this hyperbole Witkin is a highly trained technician who spent his formative years in photography as a color printer of other peoples’ work and as an army photographer trained in documentation,
for example of manoeuvre accidents, arenas which leave little scope for a technician’s personal expression.  

From his preparatory sketches onwards, Witkin’s working methods are about deliberately controlling outcomes. In his photographs objects matter because he put them there. Compositional elements of the tableaux from models to props to lighting are carefully selected. The word ‘tableau’ itself denotes a structuring of the composition, a mimicking in photography of earlier painted convention, as in the trompe l’oeil 3-dimensional scenography of his Teatro di Morte (1989) (figure 13) in which the curtain is drawn to expose a dark alcove harboring a skull, a corpse’s head, and a tiny fetus arranged in a meditative pose not unlike Rodin’s Le Penseur.

Working within earlier photographic conventions, responding sculpturally to specific works of art means submitting ‘unruly’ flesh—the decomposing body part, for instance—to a preconceived vision, an embalming. Reading the Freudian superego, credited with parental prohibitions and knowledge of our actions, impulses, and wishes into Witkin’s photographic method is tempting when that which was so carefully controlled in the studio is desecrated in the darkroom, his ‘holy house.’ The French term revelateur for developer contains this sense of awakening consciousness. When Witkin discovers that an anonymous woman has walked into a frame in which he photographs himself strangling a small homemade toy, he feels compelled to scratch her eyes out on the negative, because she had observed him inflicting pain on the toy:

This object then became a symbol not only of the image, but of my sadism. I had been caught in the process of inflicting pain. In all my previous work, the viewer could never know that I had either caused or renewed the pain and suffering which I presented as photographic prints. This image proved it!

To ‘blind’ this witness “for her not to have seen what I had done”, Witkin reports, meant literally obliterating her face by scratching it out with a needle on the emulsion side of the negative:

The scratches….represented my continuing participation with the image—after the event itself had ceased to exist allowing me to change the image for my own emotional and aesthetic purposes.

Witkin has continued scratching, marking and chemically staining his negatives in the darkroom, occasionally getting so carried away in a destructive fury that he is forced to rebuild the image,
as was the case with the model’s mouth in *The Wife of Cain* (1982).<sup>43</sup> (figure 14) He has completely ruined negatives because he favors this intense “painter’s action,” rather than a careful sequence of marks. Witkin’s scratches and staining appear as obvious, dramatic physical interactions—he has a box of ‘tools’—nails, files, glass shards and other street finds, just for this purpose.<sup>44</sup> At times he applies bleach directly onto negatives,<sup>45</sup> effectively erasing and expunging traces. Witkin may enrobe his subjects, as in *Choice of Outfits for the Agonies of Mary* (1984) (figure 15) with theatrical chemical and bleach-induced halos, making Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel’s reflections on the pervert’s need for enhancement and artifice enlightening in this context.<sup>46</sup> The force of this engagement with an image, this desecration, and Witkin’s subsequent public presentation of the altered state, compels readings regarding parental and ecclesiastical authority, insistently so because Witkin abjectly reworks masterpieces from the art historical canon.<sup>47</sup> Just as Witkin closes his image like the mind’s eye of the *camera obscura*, the darkroom’s confines release a confessional engagement with the image:

> I work alone during printing and begin by communicating with my equipment and chemistry, thanking them all in advance. I place a negative in the enlarger and the darkroom becomes a kind of holy house, a refuge for phenomena.”<sup>48</sup>

Reworking negatives has occupied Witkin for hours in the darkroom, a good print even a week. The time-consuming marking of negatives with razor or needle scratches and stains, his use of potassium ferricyanide and selenium toning baths to impart warm yellows and browns, softened printing through glass stained with coffee, tea, egg, soy—whatever works, as well as printing through water-misted torn, crumpled tissue paper onto warm-toned Portiga paper—<sup>49</sup> are all ways of physically embedding, contextualizing and evoking the symbolic object in all its associations. We may venture to say that just as Freud’s idea presented to the patient out of context is not that memory which was repressed, so too Witkin’s print, presented without this accretion of the added and the obliterated, is not his completed image.
CONTENT VS. CONTEXT: POLARIZING THE VIEWER

Critical controversy over Witkin’s darkroom techniques focuses on intent. Connie Samaras, who finds his refuge in “religiosity” part of a formalist excuse, views Witkin’s “monastic communion with chemicals, darkness, and wounds” skeptically. Does he, as Melody Davis implies, “manipulate” the negative and print surface purely for “art certification,” to impart “historicism”? Or is she closer to the mark in suggesting that Witkin elevates and “preserves the perverse” as a form of control, his manipulations of patina a cover and deflection of sadistic intent? “Even when the photograph is not an obvious quotation of a master narrative, the artist manipulates the surface of the print for authorial insurance,” observes Anne Marsh, for whom Witkin ritually mutilates and disfigures his already deformed subjects in a love-hate relationship, simultaneously enshrining them in the artistic canon, and accentuating their abjection through mutilation:

[Witkin’s] theatre of photography, like the body artist’s enactments of the primal scene, seems to be incarcerated within the Oedipal triangle….Perversion and punishment becomes a spectacle: a theatrical display, which enters the symbolic and ironically enforces the law of the father.

Given Witkin’s undergraduate sculptural training and his manipulation of bodies in tableaux, physical process assumes a significant role in his darkroom ritual of abjection and redemption. The physical qualities of photographs are vital to Witkin, according to Gerry Badger, for their imagistic aura, in much the same way that a battered Weegee print has aura “as evocative as a Madeleine, its conjuring power increased tenfold.” For Peter Schwenger, degrading the surface of the photograph doubles the effect of these degraded bodies:

To scar and mutilate the film’s pellicle is etymologically to inflict a kind of violence on its skin, a violence that is parallel to the bodily mutilation often depicted in these photographs. Within these closed chambers the integrity of the body and the integrity of the image are simultaneously dismantled.

It is interesting to reflect that in the context of sexuality involving cruelty, the skin assumed the role of “erotogenic zone par excellence” for Freud. The type of emotional engagement that Witkin solicits from the viewer guarantees a heated critical reception, as is already evident. Witkin’s active solicitation—provocation is not too strong a word—projects a need to control, even psychically scar, yet the range of reactions to his work guarantees no one outcome—which may be the ambivalence he seeks. “Artists must learn that, be they ever so perverse,
they cannot outflank the perversity of viewers” comments an irate Peter Schjeldahl in his review of Witkin in New York’s *Village Voice*.  

Selections from newspaper and journal articles and scholarly monotypes, from American and European sources, reveal two critical approaches to Joel-Peter Witkin’s work, which I would characterize as content vs. context: the first, in the popular press, tends towards sensationalizing and trivializing the actual content of Witkin’s work as a smorgasbord of body parts. This is an effective litmus test, as the artist himself notes: “When people see my work, there is no ‘gray area’ of response….What they experience is either love or hate. People who hate what I do hate me, too.” The opposing art-historian approach grounds the artist’s work in a dense and reverential historical/psychological context. Germano Celant’s *Witkin*, the definitive critical text on the artist to date, is referred to memorably in one instance as ‘deepest artspeak,’ illustrating the deep divide even between segments of the gallery going public. Witkin himself appears to occupy a middle ground—his own published reflections revealing more of an intuitive than an intellectual approach:

I think most of the constructed world is actually very, very ugly. In place of that I wanted to create an enclosure, take the best elements of what I perceived and put them in that enclosure. That way I could direct things that were already, that I could design and establish and reconstruct. This was a very natural approach to me because it was like I was in a birth, my own birth experience.

Part of my initial attraction to Witkin is this ability to polarize viewers—neutrality is simply not an option. However veiled and mediated by photography, art-historical references and beautifully buffed surfaces (or because of this mediation), Witkin’s subject matter challenges viewers, polarizing them into opposing camps. The following is a selection of excerpts from several of these critics, which illustrates how Witkin’s interaction with his viewer is at least as interesting as the conflict inherent to the photographs themselves:

Maureen Mullarkey, writing in *The Hudson Review*, likens Witkin’s motif-driven preparatory sketches, studio sets and model selection, his inspired mark making on the negative and exhibition print, to the techniques of “a visionary painter”:

The result is a disquieting phantasmagorical world that recalls the marginalia of late Gothic manuscripts….His grotesques are chimeras of an uneasy
conscience alive with irreconcilable pain. They are sexual and psychological dream symbols, insidious with opportunities for deviance and hints of death, stated with hallucinatory clarity and surprising beauty. It is the perverse loveliness of the photographs, softened by printing and toning techniques into an illusion of age, that makes the images bearable. It is as if we had unearthed an antique, encoded record of the caverns of the mind.\textsuperscript{60}

Mullarkey’s metaphor of antiquity in the “caverns of the mind” echoes Freud’s own metaphor of the archaeological unconscious, to which I shall return. At the other end of the spectrum are critics such as the aforementioned Schjeldahl of New York’s \textit{Village Voice}, who observes in his review of Witkin’s 1995 retrospective at New York’s Guggenheim Museum, that “Witkin has made pretty much the same picture repeatedly for the 19 years covered by this show.”\textsuperscript{61}—a significant comment in itself for psychoanalysts. “The picture displays one or more physically unusual and/or fetishistically costumed human creatures—never even remotely persons—in hieratic attitudes, weird action, or apparent agony.”\textsuperscript{62}

For Schjeldahl, Witkin’s “coy pastiche” of art historical allusion is inferior to the ways in which artists such as Diane Arbus or Cindy Sherman have explored the human grotesque:

The devastating humanity of Arbus’s “freaks,” in pictures that turn that world’s cruelty against the observer, points up Witkin’s callous exploitation of his models. The candid artifice of Sherman’s monstrous while also truly beautiful fantasy tableaux—adding up to a lexicon of perverse imagination for which she assumes full authorial responsibility—knocks holes in Witkin’s presentation of his kinky stuff as somehow authentic, universal myth.\textsuperscript{63}

Whether Witkin’s narcissism in directing abjected models to expose a personal degradation reflects the results of emotional repression as a child, and subsequent emotional impairment as an adult, is interesting but speculative. He has admitted to choosing models who seemed ‘damaged and malleable’ in the hopes that they would reveal their pain for him. “Visceral, real feeling in real time” is the type of intense anxiety he sought to provoke in belting, hooding, and nailing a claustrophobic man to a wall, although Witkin came to realize the potential psychic damage to himself and others.\textsuperscript{64}

The question of whether Witkin’s work is pornographic is tackled in an article on sexually transgressive imagery in the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and Sally Mann, among others, in \textit{The New York Law School Law Review}. For author Connie Samaras, a lesbian artist and activist, Witkin’s formalist approach betrays an equally conservative stance, his theatrical
staging of pre-op transsexuals as hermaphrodites more “moralistic testimonies to an essentialist notion of sexuality than…chronicles of the variable nature of sexual identity.” Samaras’ impression is that Witkin is more “comfortable” presenting sexuality as a “timeless fixed opposition between light and dark,” an illuminating observation in light of his chiaroscuro depictions of the Virgin as whore. “The message thus becomes that kink, sexual exploration, and gender destabilization are the dark pole of an intractable sexual nature”—feeding the viewers’ voyeuristic instincts with sexually transgressive imagery for which the patina of formalism is a time-honored “legitimating construct.”

Rather than focusing on the relative political correctness of Witkin’s production, other critics highlight the overwhelming seductiveness of allowing oneself to say ‘yes’ to that which is taboo. Citing the *vanitas* Still Life, Mexico (1992) (figure 16) Keith Seward asks whether we can reconcile the sophistication and beauty of the presentation with its repulsive content:

...a crisp, white tablecloth emerges from a black background to proffer fruit, a fish, a roll, and a human leg (severed just below the knee). Though horrible, stringy, meaty stuff gushes out the top of the leg, and a cut on its side reveals globules of what looks like caviar, it’s a perfectly elegant still life—very deliberate, technically perfect, and utterly unsensational. Even if you want to say No to the subject matter, its rendering is so beautiful you just might say Yes.

Saying Yes to death, dismemberment, or any of the other staples in Witkin’s banquet of the bizarre is sort of like an extreme form of multiculturalism, a respect for what is drastically foreign to you, even terrifying.

For Max Kozloff, this seductive formalist patina of art-historical references, manipulated negatives, and Baroque theatricality remains just that, for “if photographs could smell, Witkin’s would stink of semen and formaldehyde.” The photographic inversion of what constitutes ‘other’ exposes a viewer’s personal margins:

At the precise instant that I realize my strong alienation from his subjects (that is, right away), he blithely, though with considerable art, works to dissolve it by his invitational stance. As soon as I know that I will not empathize, the photographs declare that I can and even that I should. He anticipates or outflanks my desire to disconnect from subject matter with which it’s impossible for me to be engaged. That is the limbo....

To Kozloff, Witkin’s images appear to be more about viewer engagement and manipulation than the result of a personal artistic quest: He contends that the “ideal shock” of Witkin’s work
derives more from a “psychosocial” viewer response than the artist’s interpretation of religious revelation:

You discover that you cannot accommodate this work because it postpones and twists the notion you have that Witkin’s subjects should be outsiders to your experience, and therefore in a more or less pitiable state. Suddenly, the artist makes you think that you may be in the pitiable, powerless state.  

Witkin found an early and enthusiastic reception in France; critics such as Pierre Borhan and Eugenia Parry have embraced him as a “blood brother” in the abject literary tradition of Baudelaire, Céline, Bataille and surrealist filmmakers such as Cocteau, Dali and Buñuel. He is represented by the Baudoin-Lebon Gallery in Paris, and has returned often to France, and further afield to Eastern Europe to create work, perhaps finding the European moral climate more conducive to his second-generation American filtering of an Old World vision.

A major French publication, Paris Match, inaugurated its Master Photographer Series with a Witkin interview, in which the artist seconds André Kertész’s opinion that the camera is rather a way of prolonging and documenting an emotional bond than a tool. It is tempting to consider that Witkin’s work may be appreciated for different reasons in historically Catholic France than in the United States. “The reason I work in Europe and other countries,” notes Witkin, “is that visual associations are embodied within their history.” Witkin’s implication and identification with his models’ physical and emotional states as parts of himself, his self-confessed tendency to “think historically” have earned him the respect of critics for whom immersion in the abject has serious religious, art historical and literary precedent. Beyond European art and photographic quotations with which the French public would be familiar, it is tempting to go further back, to the Middle Ages, still a formidable presence in 21st century France—and a relative absence in the United States. Links between Witkin’s images and Medieval conceptions of the integrity of body and soul, which I will discuss in greater depth, make this reading rewarding.
**LOVE IS HATE: AMBIVALENCE AND THE ABJECT**

For theoretician Julia Kristeva, ambivalence is a central project of abjection, and ambivalence is, as evident in the contrasting reactions cited, a central characteristic of Witkin’s critical reception, often felt by individual critics: “…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 with me, and I do admit to having my own nagging doubts.”

Badger refers to Witkin as a ‘moral pornographer,’ whose appropriation and subversion of the techniques of ‘real art’ with abject sexual content effectively manipulates viewers.

The lurking suspicion that Witkin is, after all, “an authentically Sadean artist of high ambition,” as Kozloff puts it, frightens “because of his revelation of the desire for cruelty.” Yet this very desire, this ‘passion in perversity,’ also authenticates Witkin’s project—such that a Sadean ‘perversion without passion’ would be true obscenity. Sublimating aggression into Christ’s Passion is effectively a version of Kristeva’s edging of the abject with the sublime.

Part of Witkin’s ambivalence is that someone who appears to thrive on the public exhibition of his dark side should position his work as an exploration of “my personal revolt against the mystical….concerned with the fear of my being, the unknown of myself,” as the artist does in his Master’s thesis in photography at The University of New Mexico in 1976. Judging from the press clips, Witkin’s dark side strikes a chord of recognition—even if nightmarish—in a sizeable sector of the population.

Witkin’s photographs “pose a special problem for the viewer,” observed a critic at a Witkin opening at the Kansas City Art Institute. “Anything less than a wholehearted endorsement of his work invites the suspicion that one is too squeamish or too removed from artistic trends to appreciate his grotesque images.”

“Witkin Le Provocateur” writes another. The provocation of sublimating abject content and bodies has conventionally been adopted by the artistic community to expose a range of social ills. Witkin’s work should be situated among representatives of a raft of contemporary American photographers/artists, including Cindy Sherman’s grotesques, Andres Serrano’s hauntingly spiritual morgue series, or the lush boxes of ‘chocolates’ cast from surgical sutures of Stephen Shanabrook, all of whom
exploit the power of seductive surfaces in contemplating transgressive and abject subject matter.

Witkin's abject project may represent part of a greater artistic trend, in which the danger of provocation is eventual numbness to what was photographed and how. Numbness implies that shock is the primary value in these images, after which they cease to challenge. Shock implies a need on Witkin's part to put the images out there, an 'art therapy' for himself if traumatic for viewers. The artist denies a cathartic element, but there are tenable links between his work, Freud's active unconscious, and Kristeva's discussion of the abject. The sheer volume and repetition of abjected maternity and martyred Christ figures in Witkin's work suggests this grappling with the maternal semiotic and the paternal symbolic.

In his continued emphasis on the fragmented and masked body, Witkin repeats an experience of dislocation, torment and lack. This potential insecurity created by fear of the loss of love in his childhood emerges as a need to control and dominate. The closeness of his masked bodies engenders fear and deprivation rather than intimacy. Speaking of the corpses he works with, Witkin emphatically asserts: “For sure, I will not photograph a person I love.” On one occasion when he employed his former wife Cynthia as a model for Courbet in Rejlander's Pool (1985) (figure 18) her elegantly tattooed back faces the viewer in an image that is for Witkin more a photographic homage to these artists than an intimate portrait of a loved one.

Effectively, Witkin's work compels psychoanalytic readings. In his MA thesis, he states that “the people in all these images were myself....I carefully screened the potential models, making them understand that what I was going to do was a visual examination of my own mind....of my deepest fears. Fears of loneliness, castration, and love.”

The mystical, fear and the unknown have respectable pedigrees in both psychoanalysis and in art, probably stretching back as far as the cave painters of Lascaux, though Arnold Bocklin and Odilon Redon come more readily to mind. For Freud, certainly, the unconscious teems with the residues of impulses, desires and beliefs, which could acquire an active, pathogenic force from having been repressed as unacceptable early in an individual's life. Certain characteristics of his unconscious mind, such as “exemption from mutual contradiction, primary process (mobility of
cathexes), timelessness, and replacement of external by psychical reality” appear readily applicable to Witkin’s working methods and tableaux.

For Freud, ambivalence is a feature of all loved and feared introjected objects, such as parental figures with which the child identifies. The facility with which love gives way to hate marks the latter part of Freud’s oral and anal-sadistic phase, and is projected as rage onto the parents. Witkin’s repeated abjection of the maternal figure, his identification with and need to replicate Christ’s suffering, and the androgyny of his figures suggests readings of Freud’s complete Oedipus Complex:

…which is twofold, positive and negative, and is due to the bisexuality originally present in children…a boy has not merely an ambivalent attitude towards his father and an affectionate object-choice towards his mother, but at the same time he behaves like a girl and displays an affectionate feminine attitude to his father and a corresponding jealousy and hostility towards his mother.

Freud’s ‘simple positive’ Oedipus Complex, comprised of “an ambivalent attitude to his father and an object-relation of a solely affectionate kind to his mother,” does not provide adequate latitude for the complexity of Witkin’s imagery. In any case, Freud observes that “…it is advisable in general, and quite especially where neurotics are concerned, to assume the existence of the complete Oedipus Complex.

Woman as the site of trauma, of conflicting desires of love and hate may have its roots in Witkin’s fear of the loss of love as a child, competing with his twin brother for his mother’s love, when he had already ‘lost’ his father to divorce. Identifying the mother with anxiety gives coherence to Witkin’s early “Images of Woman” series, in which he tied, bound and masked willing female models for the camera. Freud’s defense mechanism of sublimation may be read into the repeated resurrection (from the past) and abjection of this mother figure.

In Creativity and Perversion, Janine-Chasseguet-Smirgel also points to the absent father in the development of a castration complex, giving as example the following individuals:

…who subsequently have gaps in their identifications, will feel the necessity, for obvious narcissistic motives, to grant to themselves their missing identity by different means, creation being one among others. The work thus created will symbolize the phallus, the gap in the identity being likened to castration.
Despite being unable to identify with his father, the subject will be led to create; yet, instead of begetting his work, he will fabricate it.98

The threat of castration is physically re-enacted in images such as *Apollonia and Dominatrix Creating Pain in the Art of the West, New York City*, (1988) (*figure 19*) in which a female version of St. George ‘slays the dragon’ by impaling the penis of a willing masochist on her spear, or Hermaphrodite *With Christ* (1985) (*figure 20*), the portrait of a man born without a penis, an image which also figures prominently in Witkin’s Crucifixion series. Repeatedly re-enacting the Crucifixion as Witkin does may be seen as ritually slaying the father. Witkin does not play the martyr but actively crucifies Christ, driving the nails, at one point comparing himself to Longinus, plunging the spear into Christ’s side.99

**RETURN OF THE REPRESSED: THE MATERNAL BODY**

Critics have commented on Witkin’s obsession with sexuality, but in view of Freud’s emphasis on the dominance of the sexual urge—its antiquity, imperiousness, plasticity, and proneness to maldevelopment—foot fetish images such as *Shoe-Fucker, Paris*, (1998) (*figure 21*) or the previously mentioned *Nègre’s Fetishist, Paris* (1990) (*figure 6*), featuring a reclining nude wearing flesh-colored heel extensions, rather shed light on the past.100 During the making of *Nègre’s Fetishist* in Paris, Witkin discovered reading that the infant’s first sexual playthings were his feet and toes,101 explaining the French expression “prendre son pied” with a refreshing Gallic succinctness. Freud’s contention that human nature is inherently bisexual finds visual correlation in the pre-operative transsexuals posed as hermaphrodites in Witkin’s work, and in the ambivalent sexuality of the models he seeks. It is, in fact, their status as ambivalence and duality embodied to which Witkin responds.

Examined through the prism of Freudian psychology, Julia Kristeva’s vision of the abject and Melanie Klein’s good and bad mother,102 Witkin’s images take on a startling clarity. Freud’s assertion that the ego is “first and foremost a bodily Ego,”103 stresses the role the body plays in the development of self-awareness. If the mother’s breast is the start of the infant’s sexual life, the mother the first ‘love-object,’ perversions arrested stages in the individual’s development, and inflicting and enduring pain components of childhood sexuality, then Witkin’s oneiric
persona and scenarios assume a regressive character—the return of the repressed finding creative outlet.

Where Freud privileges a paternal role that eventually eclipses the maternal function, Kristeva’s expansion of this maternal role appears germane to Witkin’s project, in particular the infant’s struggle to separate from a maternal body which it must abject in the process. Kristeva has spoken generally of the artist’s tapping into the unconscious through a return to the pre-semiotic *chora*, a pre-verbal space associated with the maternal body. The continual return of the repressed due to the incompleteness of infantile separation appears in Witkin’s work as a phallic or monstrous mother, as in *The Wife of Cain* (figure 14). Kristeva’s discussion of the child’s development (“The Abjection of Self”) resonates in Witkin’s abjection of the maternal and his refuge in a spiritual paternity:

I imagine a child who has swallowed up his parents too soon, who frightens himself on that account….Even before things for him are—hence before they are signifiable—he drives them out, dominated by drive as he is, and constitutes his own territory, edged by the abject. A sacred configuration….What he has swallowed up instead of maternal love is an emptiness, or rather a maternal hatred without a word for the words of the father; that is what he tries to cleanse himself of, tirelessly. What solace does he come upon within such loathing? Perhaps a father, existing but unsettled, loving but unsteady, merely an apparition but an apparition that remains. Without him the holy brat would probably have no sense of the sacred…. 

The sadistic impulse driving Witkin to desecrate the maternal body may be viewed as a reversal of an aggressive impulse directed upon or towards himself. By masking the face of the nude model in *The Wife of Cain* (figure 14) with a portrait of the Virgin, Witkin shuttles between Eve and Mary, attempting to ‘expose’ danger behind the façade of purity while making of the woman’s body a site of confusion and ambivalence, an abyss implicated with fratricide. Who Cain’s wife could even have been remains a source of speculation today on the internet, freeing Witkin to bestow on her the persona of monstrous mother, post-Garden of Eden.

Witkin perverts and abjects the potential of maternity in *The Wife of Cain* by associating—indeed entwining and burdening—the body of the anonymous pregnant female model with snakes and skeletons, traditional symbols of the Devil, Death and Hell. A dead, dissected fetus in the image’s top left corner appears to presage a doomed birth, further indicated by the burden of biblical original sin and murder implicit in the title. *The Wife of Cain* links impending
birth with death in a vicious cycle, unifying Eros and Thanatos, Freud's life and death drives. Time and reality having also been suspended, the image exists in a Freudian 'exemption from mutual contradiction.' Given Freud's definition of a neurotic danger as one which threatens a person from an instinctual demand rather than from an external object, Witkin's abjection of the pregnant woman threatens both as woman and as mother; the instinctual need for her proportional to the fear of the loss of her love, as adult, as child, but most particularly in the physically vulnerable status of fetus or infant.

The fetus in Witkin's project in part evokes the trauma of transit from the mother's body in birth, a process only the fortunate survive, the rest languishing in purgatory. Linking pre-life with the emotional trauma of separation from and subjugation to this maternal body, Witkin appears to imply that no escape is possible. In Freud's definition of neurotic anxiety as discussed by Wollheim, "we are invariably implicated with the danger, since we and the impulse, unlike the man and the wolf, are both parts of the same organization."

We may liberally read Freud's phases of individual anxiety into The Wife of Cain —from the fear of birth, fear of physical separation from the mother (the dead fetus), fear of castration (the model's mouth as vagina dentata), fear of the mother's anger and subsequent loss of her love (the internalized superego rendered visible), and ultimately, the fear of death which veils all. Abjecting this potentially hostile body twice—via the exposure and by mutilating the negative in the darkroom—frees the subject of anxiety, deflects the perceived danger. Printing the image encapsulates and delimits the threat within the picture frame. In a perverse ex voto, The Wife of Cain assumes the status of prophylactic in its desire to name and control.

“The history of this ill-fated passion,” observes Freud biographer Richard Wollheim specifically of the male infant's relationship to his mother, “runs across the last two stages in the development of the libido.” This body the infant has been forced to abject returns in Witkin's womblike enclosures, his massive and monstrous maternal figures, the emphasis on and degradation of bodily orifices and fluids, and in a haunting and pervasive melancholy of lack upon which Kristeva elaborates.
The individual human past begins to assume the depth of an archeological site, a simile favored by Freud, rich with accretions of ‘mnemic objects’ and memory traces. As we observe in this excerpt from John Cheever’s short story, “The Wrysons,” parental influence, in this case a mother’s, may be felt in the most subtle ways:

Searching desperately for some way to take himself out of this misery, [Donald] hit on the idea of baking a Lady Baltimore cake. He went out and bought the ingredients—deeply ashamed of himself—and sifted the flour and chopped the nuts and citron in the kitchen of the little walk-up apartment where he lived. As he stirred the cake batter, he felt his depression vanish. It was not until he had put the cake in the oven and sat down to wipe his hands on his apron that he realized how successful he had been in summoning the ghost of his mother and the sense of security he had experienced as a child in her kitchen on stormy nights. When the cake was done he iced it, ate a slice, and dumped the rest in the garbage.

Despite allegorical references to mythology and nineteenth century photography, sources of Witkin’s inspiration in deformity and decomposing body parts may be traced much closer to home:

My grandmother had only one leg, and in the morning I would wake up and smell her gangrenous leg. Where most kids would wake up and smell coffee, I would wake up and smell my grandmother’s rotting leg. The experience of having in the family a person who was physically challenged made the connection between the outside world, and the world of the “freak-show” more direct, and more sublime for me.

The fragrant smell of cakes baking in the Wrysons’ cozy kitchen, and Maria Antonia Pellegrino’s rotting leg may occupy opposite ends of the odor spectrum, but like Proust’s Madeleine, it is the effect on the psyche that resonates. Witkin dedicates his Master’s thesis in photography to his grandmother, lauding her as “immigrant, holy woman, invalid.”

Thematic repetition—of the monstrous mother, of physical deformity and torment, of death and the body in parts—may be traced over at least a twenty-year period in Witkin’s body of work, from the 1970s through the 1990s. Did Witkin feel compelled to recreate situations that approximated an original anxiety (fear of the loss of love), in order to justify a habitual reaction, a need to control outcomes? “The neurotic repeats instead of remembering,” states Freud. If neurotic, Witkin’s production and exhibition of a body of work manifests a control at plumbing these depths. In Freud’s Rat Man, conflicting desires of love and hate oriented to the repressed
memory of a real or imagined event manifest as neurotic compromise formation. The severing of idea and affect could potentially engage the transference of unacceptable feelings towards Witkin’s own parents onto distorted maternal and paternal authority figures.

**PRESENCE IN ABSENCE**

The artist’s emphasis on the Mary/Eve dichotomy, and the general prevalence of religious symbolism in his work, may be traced to his Brooklyn childhood, in which religion played a prominent, if divisive role. Witkin’s mother, a Catholic of Neapolitan origin, divorced his Orthodox Jewish father over religious differences when the artist was six, an event that would have impressed the child earlier than most with the potential weight of religious ideology. To a small child, the thing dividing his parents could perhaps take form only in objects and ritual. Raised a Catholic by his mother, and attending Catholic schools, Witkin nonetheless acknowledges a debt to the Jewish as well as the Christian tradition.

His very first portrait, *The Rabbi Who Saw God*, was an attempt at proving God’s existence. Other very early images, such as *Star of David Dancer* (1956) (figure 22) or *Puerto Rican Boy* (1956) (figure 23) reveal a similar fascination with the intangible, as achieved through the play of light and shadow, or the blur of motion upon faces and figures—in the case of *Star of David Dancer*, a woman with a bone deformity, “an object of both terror and love.” 119 Born of two religions, Witkin also has a fraternal twin brother, the painter Jerome Witkin, dualities that early on may have inspired him to view and represent the world as a competition of opposing forces.

Almost every Witkin interview mentions the artist’s alleged traumatic encounter, aged six, with the severed head of a little girl in the aftermath of a car accident, an event which clearly had an impact on the artist: As Rachelle A. Dermer observes in an article entitled “A Language of Body Parts”, “The visual morpheme of the severed head makes numerous appearances in the work of Joel-Peter Witkin.” 120 I will discuss this episode in greater depth, but in light of Freud’s psycho-mythology of dream symbolism, it is illuminating to consider Owen Edwards’ perspective following his own interview with Witkin:
The point, of course, is not whether this event really took place as Witkin so clearly recalls, but that he believes it happened, has placed it so firmly at the metaphoric heart of his life, and thinks of it as his ‘first conscious visual experience,’ one that made him obsessed with seeing.\textsuperscript{121}

Of his first camera, Witkin recalls, “I wasn't holding a machine…I was holding HER FACE.”\textsuperscript{122} Henceforth, “…photography would be the means to see and relive my fantasies.”\textsuperscript{123} He would transform the real; begin to build the stuff of his fantasies into tableaux, recruiting people who in their bodily difference could embody elusive states of being.

Although Witkin states that his work bears the impact of his own “irreality…doubts….rage of confusion and need to find the self,”\textsuperscript{124} the boundaries of his tableaux clearly demarcate a space in which he plays the Deity as maker of a “new sacred art form, photographic icons….I wanted to dominate, as I felt God dominates.”\textsuperscript{125} The creation of a private realm in which Witkin exercises complete control manipulates Marsh’s “seeing spectator” into viewing his “performative subject”\textsuperscript{126} as he does. Physically marking the subject through the revelation of their ‘stigma’ also psychically marks the viewer.

Witkin's grandiose ambitions go some way in explaining why direct large-scale quotations of well-known works, such as \textit{Three Kinds of Woman} (1992) after Seurat, (figure 24) or \textit{Studio of the Painter (Courbet), Paris}, (1990) (figure 12), do not achieve the impact of Witkin’s meditation on mortality as disciplined by the antique convention of the \textit{vanitas}. Maria Christina Villaseñor blames Witkin’s “shamanistic notion of himself as an artist,” in his attempts to transform models into “living myths.”\textsuperscript{127} Of a tableau entitled \textit{John Herring, Person with AIDS, Posed as Flora with Lover and Mother} (1992) (figure 25) she comments, “The specificity of the models and their conditions cannot be overridden by Witkin’s dramaturgy.”\textsuperscript{128} Masked and costumed, these often pathetic presences presented as “living myths” still have the capacity to engage our empathy—or humor, or ridicule.

Witkin’s allegory is tellingly most successful in the one condition in which he exercises complete control of his models—when his models are corpses, \textit{nature morte}. We cannot empathize or engage with the presence of death, because it marks an absence, an unknown. Witkin’s ambition to reveal the hidden would lead to some of his most lyrical compositions—his still lifes
based on the *vanitas*, in which human bodily fragments—a head, an arm, a leg—prove a greater mystery than any “living myth.”

The drama of these bodies has been played out elsewhere, and what we are left with—for example, a severed arm, leg and skull composition—quietly presents the need to invest the flesh with divine import while simultaneously offering it up [as] a piece of meat, what’s left of a carcass.  

I will return to Witkin’s *vanitas* in connection with Medieval constructions of the fragmented body and its departed soul, as illuminated by Caroline Walker Bynum, in my discussion of The Spiritual Body. One may rightly say that these *vanitas* images, more so than Witkin’s Crucifixion series, evoke a spiritual contemplation. They transcend death by embalming it, preserving a rotting limb by replacing flesh with an “illusory chemical substance,” appearing to halt time’s corruption. An actual embalming process is repeated over several months for special exhibition prints, which are “burned” onto aluminum, pigment-toned by hand, layered in encaustic molten beeswax and hand-buffed.

**EXHIBITING THE BODY: TRAUMA AND JOUISSANCE**

Given that Witkin’s work represents “a visual examination of his own mind,” in which the models symbolize facets of himself, Badger’s observation that the artist “…inflicts a sense of suffering and degradation to suggest his own suffering and degradation” reveals an immersion in the abject, in trauma. Although artists tap into the unconscious for creative inspiration, Witkin’s confessed completion of his desires speaks more to the Freudian fulfillment of perversion through the medium of photography.

In particular, Freud’s discussion of traumatic transference and neurotic repetition, the maternal (with Kristeva’s additions), and the death drive are applicable to Witkin’s project and to his process. Hal Foster speaks of contemporary art’s fascination with trauma, an “envy of abjection,” because trauma discourse simultaneously “evacuates and elevates” its subject. The disturbed subject testifies in absolute authority, forging an identity erased by trauma—in Witkin’s case potentially his perceived childhood trauma. A presence in absence—or conversely—in repetition features strongly in Witkin’s repertoire. Foster’s paradoxical sense of
“absentee authority” is buttressed in Witkin’s case by his particularly controlled photographic practice situated as it is in an abjected appropriation of historical conventions of representation of the maternal and the spiritual body.

Freud’s contention that we possess a strict moral ideal in the proportion to which we have renounced aggression is illuminating in the context of Witkin’s channeling of his self-professed spiritual quest. The extent to which Witkin morally transgresses appears directly linked to his jouissance. Sadistic and masochistic behaviors are well represented in Witkin’s work—from the artist himself crucifying monkey and horse corpses, driving nails into severed human feet, to participating in the masochism of models who experience pain as pleasure, such as a Testicle Stretch With Possibility of a Crushed Face (1982) (figure 26) or Mandan (1981) (figure 27), the model for which suspends himself with hooks through the chest. Witkin undeniably plays the sadist rather than the masochist in his tableaux, whatever his published statements. Melody Davis argues that Witkin’s body of work exhibits a sadistic dominance, cast in the roles of “confessor, torturer, ‘master’ of proceedings, and the rationale of healing.” This desire for mastery and subjugation, Freud argues, compulsively repeated, discharges the subject of tension, reduces it to extinction, to death.

A priori, the sight of abjected bodies is traumatic for many people. If the displacement of a patient’s hostility onto the analyst is transference in Freudian terms, we may speak of Witkin’s display of dead bodies and parts of bodies, including fetuses, and bodily violation, as a transference of his sadistic impulse to viewers, becoming for Davis a form of exhibitionism.

Witkin explains why he creates the “unsettling” image:

The detail might elicit that fear and connection with the photograph. I’m not solely interested in making a great looking image….I really want to create a link between the person posing in the picture and the mind of the viewer that always associates with danger, and the condition of danger, of being afraid.

Indeed, this unsettling appears to be Witkin’s mode d’emploi, as photographer Duane Michals observes: “Joel-Peter Witkin’s work gets to you. ‘If it doesn’t then there is no way for you to get to it.’”
Freud’s phenomenon of transference—“the construction of a miniature or ‘artificial’ neurosis, inside which the patient reactivates and re-enacts his most fundamental conflicts, but this time around the person of the analyst”—conjures up images of Witkin’s little “theatres of abjection.” Although Witkin may certainly ‘work through’ rather than ‘act out’ impulses in this way, viewers bring their own remembrances to the work. The projection of parental authority figures onto the viewing audience, onto the Old Masters whose work Witkin appropriates, or onto the Catholic Church, may be viewed as the corporeal ego raging at an institutionalized superego.

“The melancholic, in railing against himself, rails against the loved one he has lost.” The pervasive deprivation and melancholy of Witkin’s discourse in subject and presentation, the repetitive abjection of maternal and Christ-figures begin to resemble in visual form Freud’s “pure culture of the death instinct” which characterizes the superego in melancholia. Following on Freud’s link between repetition and the death drive, the compulsion to repeatedly abject, to extinguish, which characterizes Witkin’s production and his darkroom processes finds its logical conclusion in death and its physical manifestation, the corpse.

**THE CORPSE AS OTHER: ‘THIS POWER OF REALITY’**

The integrity of the corpse to Witkin’s project, its status as “the living image of a dead thing,” in Barthean terms, magnifies the inherent ambivalence of his work. Peter Schwenger argues that in the corpse, “we see a subjectivity at the same time that we see an object; we see the degree to which subjectivity is the seeing of an object.” This paradoxical, shifting image of otherness and self in the dead body constitutes the uncanny. We are both there and not there—this is the slippage into Bataille’s *informe*, which negates meaning while also questioning the nature of image:

Witkin’s work, then, whatever else it appears to be about, is always about the ambiguous status of the image….we see an unusually powerful conjunction of images that strain towards an impossible representation of image itself. In particular, corporeality and the corpse, seen as pure image, are fused with the canonical images of art.
This incompatibility of subject and object lead to a breakdown in meaning. Kristeva’s “place of the severance of representation,” the black hole, the greater mystery, is what the corpse ultimately signifies here. Appropriating, physically manipulating, and photographing bodily remains constitutes Witkin’s engagement with this unknown, even as it also leaves him open to branding as a “visual serial-killer.”

Witkin himself acknowledges this use of the corpse’s symbolic power, stating that he is a photographer because photography allows him to work with “that power of reality”:

…if I show death, that is because even in that condition I recognize this power of reality that no imagined work can reproduce….The *Pieta* or *The Virgin of the Rocks*, no matter how wonderful they are, are only reproductions of the human mind, while the reality of flesh, living or dead, is a creation of God.

Hal Foster has defined the real as trauma rather than representation as a hallmark of contemporary art. Appropriating institutions of church and the art-historical canon as image screen, Witkin subverts these into the object-gaze, getting as close as legally possible to Foster’s “obscene vitality of the wound” and “radical nihility of the corpse.” Witkin masks his own reductive gaze and lack in abjecting the marginalized other, often borrowing 19th century conventions of photographic depiction.

For example, the ‘unseeing passivity’ of models in Witkin’s tableaux, “seemingly pinned to the page as though they were specimens,” recalls 19th century studies in physiognomy for critic Connie Samaras; In *Masterpieces of Medical Photography* and in *Harm’s Way*, Witkin includes 19th century photographic studies of psychiatric cases, including one probably made by Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière in Paris, with whom Freud did his formative work in the 1880s. Unlike his mentor Charcot, Freud rejected photography as a means of portraying mental states, opting for a “mental vision” which would lead to his “exclusively discursive practice (all caption and no picture).” Just as photographing these models meant embodying disorders, not individuals, so too Witkin’s scarred, encaustic-rubbed images become embalmed fetish objects, *memento mori* to lack in which bodies and activities function as coded symbols.

Barthes’ discussion of the rhetorical function of text (or caption) to image is enlightening here, as Witkin images such as *Ecce Homo* (1975) (figure 28), *Mother and Child* (1979) (figure 29),
Amour (1987) (figure 30), and Abundance (1997) (figure 31) deliberately subvert labels for themes borrowed from classical and Renaissance art, while others in referring to specific works—Journeys of the Mask: Helena Fourment, San Francisco (1984) (figure 32) to Peter Paul Rubens’ painting Helena Fourment in a Fur Coat, and The Graces (1988) (figure 33), to Canova’s sculpture Le Grazie—double the inverted irony of the pre-op transsexuals pictured. Returning to 19th century systems of classification, Cynthia Chris makes the observation that Witkin’s labels also correlate to “the labeling of otherness by the psychiatric and medical community.”

This is borne out in numerous titles that order one reading even as other readings proliferate: for the masochist, we have Testicle Stretch with Possibility of a Crushed Face (1982) (figure 26); for the homosexual, there is Australian Drag Queen (1982) (figure 34); In The Collector of Fluids (1982) (figure 35), woman is effectively reduced to a series of leaking orifices. Man Without Legs (1984) (figure 36) defines its subject just as the labeling of symptoms of tertiary syphilis reduced the subject to the disease, although Witkin often blurs the medical with symbolic references to the subject’s condition elevating him or her on a spiritual plane.

Witkin exhibits the horrific, but there is no breakdown in the screen, no obscene. Through allusion to Greek mythology as in Hermes or Pan, art historical quotation and revision (replacing the dwarf servant in Velasquez’s Las Meniñas with an equally entrapped legless Infanta) (figure 11); conventions such as the painted vanitas still life, featuring a severed human leg rather than the classic skull; and masking of the subject (thus deflecting the model’s returning gaze and subjectivity), Witkin embeds the real in historical symbolism, down to the titles. This historical implication may explain why Witkin has not been subject to the level of controversy of Serrano or Mapplethorpe. Several recent images apparently devoid of allegory and allusion are literally disembodied stick figures. Without an institution to abject from within, Witkin’s project for mastering a personal through a collective past risks becoming transparent. If there is an obscene, it would be exposure only to Witkin’s abjected versions of masterpieces without access to the originals.

The revelation viewers experience in seeing man’s traces in the bodily remains or marginality Witkin orchestrates and sublimes make us wonder at the profound depths of the human psyche. A single mark, stain or scratch may appear futile, but cumulatively, in repetition,
accretions of marks, stains and scratches, embedded in layers, reveal a history akin to the archaeological investigation that Freud was fond of relating to psychoanalysis, in which he saw a connection between the early life of the species, and that of the individual. Just as the cake which Donald Wryson bakes is his way of returning to the security of his mother’s kitchen, what Joel-Peter Witkin most concretely shows us is our compulsion to repeat and resolve that with which we have been imprinted, for better or worse.


4 One might also argue that Witkin dramatizes as ritual that which is implicit in Barthes’ discussion of the symbolic, private qualities of image making in *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes, (La Chambre Claire, Note sur la photographie, Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, Editions de l’Etoile, Cahiers du Cinema, 1980).

5 Eugenia Parry discusses these ties of abjection in “Convalescent…Incorruptible,” her essay in Joel-Peter Witkin, *The Bone House*, Twin Palms Publishers, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2000, p. 182.


8 The grotesque as discussed by Bakhtin contains an element of exuberant humor and subversion, which occasionally surfaces in Witkin’s images such as *Anna Akhmatova* (1998) in which a woman’s severed arm forms part of a composition including Salvador Dali’s ‘readymade’ of the armless Venus de Milo. See Eugenia Parry, *Joel-Peter Witkin*, 55 Series, Phaidon Press Ltd., London, 2001, pp. 106—7 for discussion and reproduction of this image.

9 I am thinking in particular of Barbara Creed’s construction of the monstrous mother and womb in the horror genre: “What is most interesting about the mythological figure of woman as the source of all life is that, within patriarchal signifying practices, particularly the horror film, she is reconstructed and represented as a *negative* figure, one associated with the dread of the generative mother seen only as the abyss, the all-incorporating black hole which threatens to reabsorb what it once birthed.” Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 27.


14 Crary, p. 34.


16 Witkin’s influences also stem from the history of photography as clinical and social ‘evidence’ as shown in his collaboration with ophthalmologist Dr. Stanley Burns on Masterpieces of Medical Photography: *Selections from the Burns Archives*, Twelvetrees Press, Pasadena, CA, 1987, and also with

17 Witkin juxtaposes his own *Who Naked Is?* (1996), a human skeleton weighing a preserved penis, with Fenton’s *Skeletons of a Man and a Male Guerilla* (1861), as a way of examining his own genetic history in Joel-Peter Witkin, *Disciple & Master*, English edition, Fotofolio, New York, 2000, p. 76. I delve deeper into the human/primate connection in Witkin’s work in the following chapter.


21 Ibid., p. 55.

22 Germano Celant traces Witkin’s influences and quotation in the art historical canon, from Greek mythology and Renaissance art and sculpture through to the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries with Picasso and Brancusi. The monograph also includes Witkin’s MA thesis at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, in 1976, entitled “Revolt Against the Mystical.” Germano Celant, *Witkin*, First Scalo Edition, Scalo, Zurich, 1995.

23 Witkin, “Revolt Against the Mystical,” Celant, p. 52.


27 See for example, the catalogs from the Witkin exhibition that was held at Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Seville, Spain, in January 1989, and at the Centre National de la Photographie, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France, from September to November 1989. Joel-Peter Witkin: Catalog of Exhibit at Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Seville, Junta de Andalucia, Consejeria de Cultura, Seville, January 1989. Joel-Peter Witkin: Catalog of Exhibition, Centre National de la Photographie Palais de Tokyo, Paris, Ministère de Culture, Direction Générale des Beaux-Arts, Madrid, septembre—novembre 1989.


30 A friend working as a location finder in the film industry saw the model for *Un Santo Oscura* (1987), a thalidomide victim, begging in a wheelchair at roadside in Los Angeles. Townsend, p. 48.


33 Witkin, “Revolt Against the Mystical,” Celant, p. 51.

34 Marsh, p. 217.

35 This deliberate theatricality is the case also in *The Fool*, 1993, another version of *Raping Europa* mentioned above, in which the fifteen foot high painted scenic backdrop reveals baroque interior molding.
in the palatially proportioned room of the Budapest location of the shoot, a copy of a palace at Versailles. Image available in Eugenia Parry, Joel-Peter Witkin, 55 Series, Phaidon Press Limited, 2001, p. 77.

36 Witkin, Centre National de la Photographie exhibition catalog, p. 19, (translation from the French by the author).
37 Ibid. p. 19, (translation from the French by the author).
38 Witkin, “Revolt Against the Mystical,” Celant, p. 10.
39 Witkin, Centre National de la Photographie, p. 19.
40 The artist describes his early photographic training in “Revolt Against the Mystical,” Celant, p. 51. Witkin’s strong grounding in technique serves him well in formalist debates, since the seductive surfaces and technical mastery evidenced in his images acts as a counterpoint to their abjected content.
41 Witkin, “Revolt Against the Mystical,” Celant, p. 61.
42 Ibid.
43 Witkin observes that The Wife of Cain “echoes my own need to visualize what I’m told about, whether I accept it or not as a belief system.” Coke, p. 15.
45 Joel-Peter Witkin email correspondence to the author regarding darkroom techniques, April 23, 2004.
47 As mentioned earlier, Germano Celant has documented art historical quotation extensively in his monograph, Witkin.
48 Witkin, Joel-Peter Witkin, Photographs, Twelvetrees Press, p. 4.
49 Celant discusses Witkin’s techniques in Witkin, pp. 12 and 20, as does Parry in her Bone House text, “Convalescent…Incorruptible” pp. 184—85 which are supplemented with the author’s email correspondence with Witkin.
52 Marsh, p. 215.
53 Ibid.
54 Gerry Badger, “Towards a Moral Pornography,” Creative Camera, no. 6, June 1986, p. 35.
55 Schwenger, p. 407.
59 Schjeldahl, p. 85.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Coke, V.D., Forty Photographs, p. 11.
63 Samaras, p. 84.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., p. 86.
66 Ibid., p. 85.
68 Max Kozloff, "Contention Between Two Critics About a Disagreeable Beauty," Artforum, Vol. XXII, no. 6, February 1984, p. 45.
69 Ibid., p. 49.
70 Ibid.
71 In “Convalescent…Incorruptible,” The Bone House, p. 182, Eugenia Parry finds that abjection marks Witkin as a “blood brother” to Céline, Baudelaire and the Surrealists. In his Introduction to Disciple & Master, French critic Pierre Borhan considers Witkin as ‘disciple’ or apprentice to the
‘masters’ of photography whose images inspired him. Critics such as Parry, Borhan, and Celant contextualize Witkin’s work within a historical, primarily European, framework of influences, rather than positioning the historical as a formalist cover, and confronting Witkin’s transgressive imagery from a more or less feminist stance, as do Melody Davis, Anne Marsh, and Connie Samaras, for example.


Witkin, R.H. Cravens, “Joel-Peter Witkin,” Aperture, no. 133, Fall 1993, p. 54.

Badger, p. 36.

Ibid., p. 34.

Kozloff, p. 45.

Ibid., p. 47.

Mark Durden, “The Word: Three Views of Photography” Creative Camera, no. 321, April/May 1993, p 41. Durden questions Gerry Badger’s position in “Towards a Moral Pornography,” (Creative Camera, June 1986, see above) that Witkin is “all right” because of his ‘authenticity.’ Included in this article is “The Scandal of Horror Photography,” by Roland Barthes, first published in Creative Camera in July 1969, (translated from the French by Graham Leman). Durden highlights “a certain evasiveness concerning photographic images,” which manifests in Badger as an unwillingness to call a spade a spade in Witkin’s work.

Witkin “Revolt Against the Mystical,” Celant p. 49.

Patrick E. White, “Joel-Peter Witkin at Kansas City Art Institute,” New Art Examiner, vol. 10, no. 6, 1983, Section “Midwest.”

Alain Dister, “Witkin Le Provocateur,” L’Oeil, no. 490 (November) 1997, p. 33. This is the title of a French review of Witkin’s exhibition at Galerie Baudoin Lebon, Paris, in November 1997 by Dister. Dister, like the French critic Pierre Borhan, grounds Witkin’s provocation in history both public and private: his Catholic/Jewish background, and influences such as Géricault, Goya, Otto Dix, Bois-le-Duc, and Hieronymus Bosch. Patrick White of the New Art Examiner (see above), also ends his review by calling Witkin a provocateur, but his complaint is that Witkin’s knowledge of artistic and photographic conventions and considerable technical mastery could be put to better use than a one-dimensional horrorfest. “Witkin disappoints so greatly because his gifts are as apparent as his current limitations.” (White, “Joel-Peter Witkin at Kansas City Art Institute”).

Stephen Shanabrook, “Morgue Chocolate Series.” Shanabrook states, “The chocolate molds were made from impressions collected at morgues in both Russia and America. Through the hint of digestion or thought, these wounds structured superfluous in chocolate are temporarily removed for the living to process again, not to acquaint us with death per say, but to nourish life in the sense of connection to.” Shanabrook, (accessed September 3, 2003).

Witkin also exhibits this connection between food and death in his image of a death mask with vegetables referencing Arcimboldo in Harvest (1984) See image in Celant, Witkin, and p. 35.


Celant, p. 34. for the information about Witkin’s former wife as model, and p. 37 for a side-by-side comparison between this image and Courbet’s La Source (1868). The addition of the Victorian photographer Oscar Gustave Rejlander, known for his allegories on vice and virtue, unites Witkin’s twin influences of painting and early photography in one image.

Witkin, “Revolt Against the Mystical,” Celant, p. 62.

Georges Bataille’s division of prohibitions into the realms of sex, (birth) and death in connection with the cave art of Lascaux, and his discussion of ensuing ecstatic transgression is illuminating with regard to Witkin’s constructions of the maternal, crucifixion, and his use of fetal corpses. Georges Bataille, Lascaux or, The Birth of Art, Prehistoric Painting, translated by Austryn Wainhouse. Skira, Lausanne, 1955, p 29—39.

For example, Freud discusses the mechanism of repression in “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices,” Gay, p. 434.
Freud, “The Unconscious,” Gay, p. 582. Also, in “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” Gay, pp. 442—443, Freud stresses the role of fantasy, childhood memories and public disclosure in the creative process.

In his essay “Une Horrible et Sublime Beauté,” Antonio Saura professes amazement at “the satisfaction that [Witkin] appears to derive from his work, of the sublimation of his personal issues, of his pathetic and wrenching exposure.” (translation from the French by the author). He cautions, however, that Witkin’s tendency to “brouiller les pistes,” —to confound, cover or erase his tracks—requires that any psychoanalytical commentary be closely linked to an awareness of the mechanisms of artistic creation—including simulacra, chance, provocation, the aesthetic confronting the intellect—and, we might add to Saura’s list, art therapy. Nonetheless, the author believes that Freud, Kristeva and Klein offer insight into Witkin’s process. Antonio Saura, “Une Horrible et Sublime Beauté,” Joel-Peter Witkin: Centre National de la Photographie, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, septembre—novembre 1989, Ministerio de Cultura, Madrid, pp. 91—92.

I reproduce here in English translation Antonio Saura’s passage in “Une Horrible et Sublime Beauté” on Witkin’s repeated association of the feminine with degradation: “The female body almost always appears in a degraded form, never idealized, always sullied, immersed in an atmosphere invariably altered by the presence of sadomasochistic objects and artifice, while men are habitually treated as beautiful women. The woman will frequently be pregnant or deformed by obesity, like certain prehistoric Venuses or the sculptures of Gaston Lachaise. She is shown masked, in an attitude of hieratic abandon, as though she were a sexual monster, an Amazon, a succubus or an evil Gorgon. On occasion, she will appear, contradicting the mythical signified of her exaggerated attributes, as a castrating horror, as a being which invariably generates monsters. In a morbid aftertaste, the image of birth is inevitably cut short by the fate of an abnormal or unfinished fruition.” Joel-Peter Witkin: Centre National de la Photographie, p. 90, (translation from the French by the author).


Ibid., p. 640. This is particularly the case with Witkin’s abjection of the maternal body, for which Kristeva’s construction of the abject and Melanie Klein’s ‘bad breast’ fill in Freud’s gaps, as it were. However, since the maternal body is not the subject of my thesis, I will not be exploring these areas in depth.

Ibid., p. 641.

See Witkin’s discussion of his “Images of Woman” series in Witkin, “Revolt Against the Mystical, Celant, pp. 55—56.

Chasséguet-Smirgel, p. 70.

Witkin discusses his karmic readings in an interview with Mireille Thijsen, stating that he has twice been told that in a past life he was Longinus, the Roman Centurion who pierced Christ’s side in an act of mercy. Thijsen, p. 14.


Witkin discusses ‘fusing’ concepts of pedic sex he had read about in The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe with elements of French photographer Charles Nègre’s concept of love as expressed in Nu allongé sur un lit, c. 1848. Witkin, Disciple & Master, p. 47.


Ibid., p. 233. Kristeva’s discussion of maternal abjection also returns us to Barbara Creed’s construction of the monstrous mother as primordial abyss: “...Mother as an omnipresent archaic force linked to death and Mother as the cannibalistic creature represented through the alien as fetish-object.” Creed, p. 23. See also Creed, pp. 24—30, “The Archaic Mother.”

Witkin has confirmed that the portrait masking the model’s face in The Wife of Cain is that of the Virgin, and that “this photograph is a ‘Vanitas’ in that it shows the consciousness between the ‘finite’, ‘Wife of Cain’ and the infinite, the Divine. The Difference between the history of man and the divine.” Witkin, email correspondence with the author regarding The Wife of Cain, April 9, 2004.


having attempted to separate from the monstrous maternal figures pictured, and that they are symbolically suspended in Purgatory to atone for the Original Sin, which can only refer back to the maternal body. The paradox is that the fetus, intimately a part of the maternal body, may not be construed as innocent. If all Witkin’s characters are aspects of himself, then identifying with the fetus here casts the mother as monstrous in a perpetual revision of Christian Original Sin. Witkin’s fetus, like Kristeva’s infant struggling to attain subjecthood, never escapes the oppressive maternal body.

Kristeva discusses the vagina dentata in the context of Freudian psychoanalysis: “The threat of incorporation issuing from the maternal body is most likely to be concentrated on the two areas associated with incorporation: the mother’s facial mouth and her genital mouth... The child’s early experiences of the world are all marked by oral influences. If the child in any way sees the mother as castrating figure, her presence will always invoke a degree of anxiety.” Creed, p. 113. Creed’s difference with Freud is that her monstrous mother terrifies not because she is castrated, but because she threatens to castrate with her vagina dentata. Creed, p. 22.

Wollheim, p. 117.

Kristeva discusses this “lack of being,” of presence defined by absence, which she associates with Bellini’s treatment of the Madonna as archetypal maternal body in “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini,” Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, translated by Leon Roudiez, Basil Blackwell, Publisher, Limited, Oxford, 1980. “The maternal body is the place of a splitting.... the module of a biosocial program,” to which the woman as subject is mere witness. (pp. 238—241) Kristeva puns on the French use of enceinte (a fortification wall and a pregnant woman) to this effect. (p. 240) Kristeva also documents the ‘phallic’ (p. 244—Leonard Da Vinci’s mother), the ‘possessive’ (p. 254) and the ’hostile’ mother (pp. 259—260) among Bellini’s Madonnas. Kristeva asks whether “the myth of the maternal figure is nothing but a screen, a foreground, or an obstruction to be broken through.” (p. 260). She argues that Bellini’s personal experience of marriage and paternity may have ‘disappointed’ him into revisiting “the archaic impact of the maternal body on man; in order to complete the investigation of a ravishing maternal jouissance on man but also of its terrorizing aggressivity; in order somehow to admit the threat that the male feels as much from the possessive maternal body as from his separation from it—a threat that he immediately returns to that body....capturing her specific imaginary jouissance, the jouissance on the border of primal repression.” (p. 263) Thus we move easily from Bellini’s removed and melancholic Madonnas to Witkin’s monstrous mother, as in The Wife of Cain, whose overwhelming and threatening presence signals Bellini’s ‘archaic impact,’ ‘terrorizing aggressivity’ and a ‘jouissance on the border of primal repression,’ which attempts to embody the lack and abyss of the abject.


Witkin, “Revolt Against the Mystical,” Celant, p. 45.


Celant, p.15.


Edwards, p 49.

Witkin, “Revolt Against the Mystical,” Celant, p. 50.

Ibid., p. 51.

Ibid., p. 53.

See Marsh’s discussion of the relationship between photographer, spectator and ‘performative subject’ in The Darkroom, p. 217. Though Witkin may manipulate, Marsh implies that he as photographer is equally enmeshed in the “complex power structure” that underlies the gaze.


Ibid., p. 82.

Erin O’Connor, “Camera Medica: Towards a Morbid History of Photography,” History of Photography, Vol. 23, no. 3, Autumn, 1999, p. 239. O’Connor refers to this process picturesquely as a “visual undeath,” quoting André Bazin on the need to “fend off death through representation.” Referencing once again to Barthes in Camera Lucida, O’Connor asks whether “what stares out of the antiquated image is the present moment—or perhaps, a moment of presence at once so distant and so pure that the viewer’s own precarious sense of being-in-time is utterly destabilized.” O’Connor, p. 239. As Peter Schwenger has similarly observed in “Corpsing the Image,” Critical Inquiry no. 26, Spring 2000, pp. 395—413, this destabilization—which also involves the use of corpse models—is a significant mechanism in Witkin’s imagery.

Cravens, p. 57.

Badger, p. 35.


Ibid., p. 168.

Ibid. The fact of Witkin’s notoriety and popularity appears to correlate with Foster’s logic of trauma discourse. Witkin has found an audience that responds to the depiction of the traumatized body as the ultimate frontier—or the ultimate pornography. “If there is a subject of history for the cult of abjection at all, it is not the Worker, the Woman, or the Person of Color, but the Corpse. This is not only a politics of difference pushed to indifference; it is a politics of alterity pushed to nihility.” Foster, p. 166.


Davis, p. 124.

Davis suggests that Witkin’s “real intent” is in fact “perverse enjoyment and deliberate, Sadean control” in his role as “visual priest.” Davis, pp. 124—126.


Wollheim, p. 153.

Parry, “Convalescent…Incorruptible,” The Bone House, p. 179.

Wollheim, p. 193, see also another translation of this expression in Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” Gay, p. 586.


Schwenger, p. 400.

Ibid., p. 405.


Witkin was thus branded by one Parisian critic “disgusted by his pictures’ truncated limbs and chopped-off heads.” Margaret Regan, “Turning a Prophet: Joel-Peter Witkin takes an unusual look at Catholic images of the sacred and profane.” Margaret Regan, Tucson Weekly, February 1—7, 2001, accessed on October 13, 2003 at <http://www.tucsonweekly.com/tw/2001-02-01/review2.html>.


Foster, 146.

Ibid., p. 166.

Samaras, p. 86.

For example, in Masterpieces of Medical Photography, Witkin selected from among Dr. Stanley Burns’ collection Psychiatric Patient in Rag Clothing, anonymous but “most likely the work of Jean M. Charcot.” Stanley Burns, Masterpieces of Medical Photography: Selections From the Burns Archive, ed. Joel-Peter Witkin, caption to image no. 9, unpaginated. In Harm’s Way: Lust & Madness, Murder & Mayhem, ed. Joel-Peter Witkin, Witkin devotes the last quarter of the book, entitled “Psychiatric Photography in Victorian England,” (essay by Aaron H. Esman, M.D.), to portraits of patients at an
unnamed mental hospital, complete with notes of the admitting record. The notes indicate typology for clinical records, an attempt at a sort of physiognomy of mental illness.

155 O’Connor, “Camera Medica,” p. 242. According to O’Connor, “it was Freud who repressed the psychiatric photograph,” preferring a “language-based concept of mind and of therapy that dominates our thinking about mentalities to this day.” p. 241.


157 Celant, Witkin, p. 27 for Canova’s Le Grazie and p. 35 for Rubens’ Helena Fourment in a Fur Coat.


159 Rachelle Dermer makes this observation in regards to Witkin’s Siamese Twins (1988) by comparing it with an nineteenth century photograph of the conjoined Carolina Twins from Stanley Burns’ archives. She finds that Witkin “puts the marks of high art onto the already medicalized body,” merely adding “‘arty’ and sexualized accoutrements: the bird, the flowers, the masks and the slips. A basic assumption underlies both images: these bodies, as medicalized visual morphemes, have an inherent meaning.” Dermer, “Joel-Peter Witkin and Stanley B. Burns: A Language of Body Parts,” p. 251, on which both images are reproduced.

160 Maria Christina Villaseñor analyzes Witkin’s “tweaking the iconography” in Las Meninas, in which he dispenses with the dwarf and the now legless Infanta must rely on a dog for transport. “Thus the Infanta becomes the plaything at the mercy of a lazy dog’s whims, trapped in her beauty, elevated social position, and deformity as much as Velasquez’s dwarf maid is trapped in her ugliness, servitude, and deformity.” Villaseñor, p. 79.


162 See for example The Arrival of Eve (1996) or Shoe, Hat and Eggs, New Mexico, 1999, reproduced in Joel-Peter Witkin: Oeuvres Récentes 1998—1999, exposition du 19 janvier au 19 février 2000, Galerie Baudoin-Lebon, Paris, 2000. Who Naked Is (1996), which appears on the page prior to The Arrival of Eve, p. 91), also appears to precede it creatively, in a process of reducing the human skeleton of Who Naked Is even further, to the basic stick figures shown in The Arrival of Eve. Shoe, Hat and Eggs of 1999 takes the process further still, to stark black cut-out paper shapes. According to Eugenia Parry, Witkin alludes to the ‘Art Brut’ of black American Bill Traylor (1854—1947) in this latter work. Parry, Joel-Peter Witkin, 55 Series, Phaidon Press Limited, London, 2001, p. 112. French critic Alain d’Hooghe finds the inspiration in Traylor consistent with Witkin’s interest in the marginal, given Traylor’s background as a former slave who began painting at age eighty-five. Alain d’Hooghe, “Grâce et Compassion,” Joel-Peter Witkin, Oeuvres Récentes, unpaginated. Nonetheless, there is an apparent change in direction here, with Witkin appearing to abandon the exuberant flesh of his earlier images for the skeletal, the stick figure, and the silhouette. What comes next?

CHAPTER TWO
THE SPIRITUAL BODY

Architecturally and spatially, the spiritual has always represented a challenge for artistic representation. How can the presence of the numinous be experienced? Inspired medieval architects tried to bridge that distance to heaven, as Notre Dame, Chartres, and other soaring gothic cathedral spires across Europe testify. Verticality resonates in historical paintings of the crucifixion and resurrection, the transcendence symbolized by the cross. If the architecture of the maternal body has been compared with the abysmal abjection of the grotto, a netherworld, then that symbolized by religious patriarchal authority is the rigid structure of the cross, traditionally planted in dirt at the site of Adam’s burial, but soaring heavenward.

Witkin’s early admiration of the paintings of Redon, Rops, Klimt and Kubin, whose work “dealing with dreams, perversity and Satanism, somehow challenged the sacred, yet seemed an unavoidable part of the sacred,”¹ demonstrates an interest in the sacred as prohibition, a mingling of the sacred and profane similar to that explored by Mary Douglas, Joseph Campbell and Freud in analyzing religious rites. Indeed, Witkin’s articulation of the sacred appears to have much in common with the interstitial societal space Mary Douglas defines as inhabited by witches, burned at the stake for centuries.²

Where the iconic Virgin Mary embodies an ergasterion, a privileged space associated with physical and spiritual nurturing of new life,³ the crucifix as symbol in religious ritual references Christ’s physical martyrdom and bodily sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Crucifixion was a shameful and agonizing form of execution for murderers, thieves, traitors and rabble-rousers.⁴ In a conjunction of the profane with the sacred, this Roman instrument of torture and death has been sanctified and transformed by Christians into a symbol of faith and redemption. Like the
paradox of virginity co-existing with pregnancy in the Virgin Mary’s Immaculate Conception, this symbolic duality embedded in a simple cross has made the crucifix as object attractive to Witkin and to a number of other contemporary American artists of Catholic origin, such as Andres Serrano and Kiki Smith.

In *Creativity and Perversion*, Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel speaks of indicators in the creative arts to the decadent dawn preceding the collapse of the Roman Empire, the French Revolution, and the birth of Nazism. These include “dissolute sexual behavior” and a “confusion between the sexes and generations,” including androgyny and parental incest, specifically with the mother.5 Her description of the pervert’s creation of a hybrid “anal-sadistic universe” based on biblical sacrilege and the abolition of differences constitutes a “parody of the genital universe of the father.”6 Witkin’s imagery, as Melody Davis shows, touches on all of these points.7 In his contemporary desecration and reconstruction of religious symbolism at the Millennium, it is tempting to see evidence of spiritual despair at the knowledge that we have been feverishly augmenting our destructive capacity for the next, potentially apocalyptic World War.

In looking at Witkin’s body of work referencing religious imagery, it is obviously the body—though not always the human body—which is the touchstone. Here again, Witkin is in the company of photographers such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman. But where Mapplethorpe erects a temple to the sexualized male body and Sherman exposes the accretions with which calcified social codes weigh the female body, Witkin examines the integrity of the body in a different way, both less subversive and more literal.

If maternity embodies an enclosure from which Joel-Peter Witkin incessantly reenacts a doomed birth in his photographed tableaux, the architecture of Christ’s Passion also provides him with a structure against which to enact his struggle with parental authority. The crucifix in particular assumes the status of fetish in Witkin’s oeuvre, appearing as early as 1974 in his sculpture *Corpus* (figure 37) most recently in 1999 with the photograph *Crucified Horse* (figure 38),8 and occasionally incorporated into the black carnival mask worn by him and his models in conjunctions of the sacred and profane prefixed ‘Journeys of the Mask,’ as in *Journeys of the Mask: Helena Fourment, San Francisco* (1984) (figure 32). The emphasis here is on the

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presence of Christ’s Passion in the interstitial spaces of gender transformation and what Witkin refers to elsewhere as “all the aberrations of love.”

The relationship of Witkin’s fleshly body to soul, to essence and presence, has been examined by Germano Celant in *Witkin*, his 1995 catalogue of the Guggenheim Museum’s retrospective. This relationship is also the subject of the bulk of articles written about the artist, whose interviewers are usually most intrigued by his boundary crossing, whether it be in the depiction of fetuses or crucified monkeys. Examining a cluster of Witkin’s images dealing with crucifixion is an informative approach to this area, as depicting Christ is one of the artist’s earliest and abiding concerns.

The Afterword soliciting exceptional models that appears in most collections of his photographs includes a request for “Anyone bearing the wounds of Christ.” Even where crucifixion is not the obvious subject of a Witkin image, it is often alluded to: The abovementioned mask that reappears in ‘Journeys of the Mask’ and elsewhere is a simple black decorated with a white Christ of the type depicted in ivory carved crucifixes, whose hanging body forms an elegant cross. Witkin himself wears one in a photograph taken by his former wife Cynthia, entitled *Portrait of Joel* (1984) (figure 39).

What specifically is it about the wounds of Christ and the crucifixion scene itself that attracts contemporary artists, not to single Witkin out? The oxymoronic title of this chapter, *The Spiritual Body*, provides guidance—spiritual is numinous, flesh is palpable and weighty; is there a spiritual body accessing both realms? Crucifixion, once deemed too cruel and degrading a capital punishment for Roman citizens, has come to symbolize its opposite force—God’s love for man as demonstrated in the sacrifice of his son for our common redemption. The base and earthly has been miraculously transformed into its vertical opposite, ascension, and a transfiguration. The traditional term “Passion” for Christ’s torment achieves the necessary emotional density for this event.

Having posited that the psychic life of individuals consists of a series of ‘splittings’—“birth, weaning, separation, frustration, castration,” Kristeva finds that the dramatization of these ‘ruptures’ is “a source of exorbitant and destructive anguish:”
Because Christianity set that rupture at the very heart of the absolute subject—Christ; because it represented it as a Passion that was the solidary lining of his Resurrection, his glory, and his eternity, it brought to consciousness the essential dramas that are internal to the becoming of each and every subject. It thus endows itself with a tremendous cathartic power.\(^{14}\)

The stigmata, the crown of thorns, the agony on the cross, all emphasize the humanity, the fleshliness of Christ’s body; as Kristeva has observed, pain exposes our fleshly boundaries as effectively as pleasure.\(^{15}\) The coupling of physical suffering with salvation, the achievement of spiritual redemption and enlightenment effected through bodily degradation and torment are dualities embedded in the crucifixion, which Witkin literally deconstructs and updates to alleviate his own psychic pain through religious symbolism that is relevant to him personally. The emphasis on Christ’s bodily suffering as a locus for and an assumption of Mankind’s generalized social suffering assumes a contemporary relevance with the emergence of body-based art for a generation of contemporary Western artists, Witkin among them:

\[\text{I chose to represent Christ as God because I believe he is God and because he still represents the living belief of this culture. He is the symbol, regardless of historical existence, representing REDEMPTION, and the end of suffering and confusion.}^{16}\]

Yet Witkin’s statement of God as the symbol of redemption, and Christ as Kristeva’s passionate and triumphant resurrection do not correlate with his actual images, which rather generate confusion and transmit suffering. If there is suffering, where is the salvation? If there is rupture, it does not communicate the glory and eternity of resurrection, but rather an anguish of blockage in that becoming which Kristeva attributes to each and every subject, an inhibition by parental authority (the threatening maternal body) and a significant lack, a literal castration, in regard to the father. Witkin’s purpose distinguishes itself from that of traditional Christian iconography by its regressive rather than redemptive nature, a return more to Cain of the Old Testament than to Christ of the New.

I will address several themes related to religious convention that are apparent in Witkin’s photographs. These find their expression through the medium of the body, as photographed in atmospheric alcove settings from which Witkin expunges concepts of time. One is that of the body in parts, which the artist depicts through the artistic convention of the \textit{vanitas}, a reminder
that death is a constant presence within life, and that life springs from death, through metamorphosis and sacrifice. The play of the present ‘soul’ inhabiting the absent body is particularly rich in these images, and engages a dialogue with the ex voto and with saintly relics. We may go so far as to say that if the resurrected body is signified anywhere in Witkin’s work, it is in the transcendence of certain of his vanitas rather than in his crucifixion images.

The second theme is that of bodily martyrdom and suffering as a means of achieving revelation; the most obvious expression being the crucifixion scene itself. This revelation, however, is not of Christ’s redemptive victory over death, ascendency, but rather of man’s inhumanity—a descent, even regression to a primitive, cruel and incapacitated state. Although Witkin speaks of Christ’s crucifixion as the “ultimate violent act,” and torture as “the negation of love,” his images and writings reveal his re-enactment of crucifixion from a sadistic stance, not a masochistic one, as mentioned earlier. The Passion of Christ becomes for Witkin an exercise in moral and physical transgression. The sadomasochistic theme unfolds into a discussion of perversion, aggression and the death drive as discussed by Freud and Kristeva. Related to this theme of martyrdom and redemption is the import of the androgyny and monstrosity of Witkin’s models.

Freud’s conception of obsessional neurosis as “a distorted private religion” and religion as “a kind of universal obsessional neurosis” is revealing in this context. In his analysis of the artist Leonardo Da Vinci, Freud discusses the “intimate connection between the father-complex and belief in God”:

> Psychoanalysis....has shown us that a personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father, and it brings us evidence every day of how young people lose their religious beliefs as soon as their father’s authority breaks down. Thus we recognize that the roots of the need for religion are in the parental complex.

Complicating this reading in Witkin’s case is Freud’s statement that for the helpless, dependent young child, “almighty and just God and kindly Nature appear to us as grand sublimations of father and mother.” Freud briefly touches on the oriental Mother Goddesses of antiquity as “both creators and destroyers—both goddesses of life and fertility and goddesses of death,” but leaves the contemporary female psyche one-dimensional. We have seen that Witkin’s vision
of maternity is rather the antithesis of kindly Nature as Nurture. And yet the prohibitions of the Oedipus Complex—patricide and an abjected maternal body, if not incest proper—resonate in Witkin’s desecrating conflations of Eros with Thanatos. Following Freud’s line of thinking on patriarchal authority and the primal father yields some rewarding and unexpected consequences in regard to Witkin’s crucifixion images.

**BORDERLINE: THE BODY AS ITS LIMITS**

The body at its physical and psychic limits, tortured and redeemed, is at the heart of the most powerful historical Crucifixion imagery. For Kristeva, the writhing hands and visible web of scourging on Christ’s agonized, even putrefying body in Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece, c. 1515 (*figure 40*), gives expression to “the Gothic eroticism of paroxysmal pain.” Witness also the paschal lamb, symbol of Christ’s sacrifice, at the base of this cross. More realistic still are the life-sized, sculpted Gothic Christs, wooden eyes rolling, mouth agape, painted blood pouring from their stigmata.

Since the late fourteenth century, the identification and veneration of the fourteen Stations of the Cross by the Franciscans has allowed the faithful to participate in the stages of Christ’s Passion, bearing each their own cross metaphorically. In the sixth Station of the Cross, Veronica is unafraid to approach and wipe the face of Christ, disfigured and transformed by pain into The Man of Sorrows. The emphasis for the Catholic faithful here is on recognizing Christ in the face of often repulsive and frightening bodily difference: the body of the leper, the eyes of the madman. Whenever and whomsoever we love poorly, we ‘recrucify’ Christ, emphasizes a French version of the Stations of the Cross, entitled *L’Amour Crucifié* (Love Crucified):

I seek your face, My Lord! /Je cherche ton visage, Seigneur!
Do not hide your face from me!/Ne me cache pas ton visage! (Psalm/Psaume 26)

She suffers on a hospital bed: this is Christ./Elle agonise sur un lit d’hôpital: c’est le Christ.
He’s filthy, he smells bad, he begs: this is Christ./Il est sale, il sent mauvais, il mendie: c’est le Christ.
He was tortured to death: this is Christ./Il a été torturé à mort: c’est le Christ.
She takes drugs: this is Christ./Elle se drogue: c’est le Christ.
The above association of the abject with the sublime, the attainment of the sublime through immersion in the abject, reaches its defining moment in the Crucifixion. As Chris Townsend observes in his text *Vile Bodies*, “The mutilated, dead or dying body is made spectacle as punishment, but that is then made by the church into proof of Christ’s very materiality, his earthly existence, as a basis for faith.”

To Freud, for whom Christianity represented the most recent version of atonement for a heinous patricide, the sons’ murder of a remote primal father, “this redemption is achieved—by the sacrificial death of a single person, who in this manner takes upon himself a guilt that is common to everyone.”

As often as not, Witkin represents this repository of common guilt in animal form, already sacrificed for humanity’s varied purposes—as laboratory controls, as potential pet food.

Beyond the confines of church and gallery, Jesus has made a spectacular return to the big screen. Released in 2004, Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (figure 41) has earned the label “crimson carnage” for its emphasis on Christ’s brutal and bloody scourging, the Stations of the Cross, and the Crucifixion. This “direct descendent of medieval passion plays” has been labeled “theologically in tune with the times—the 1300s.”

Encouraging contemporary viewers to physically identify with Christ’s Passion echoes this earlier theatrical form of assuaging suffering due to plague, torture, and daily misery, “lending sanctity to the senseless” through the dedication of personal torments to Christ.

A devout Catholic, Gibson claims that his film reflects a near-suicidal period he survived by meditating on Christ’s suffering: “I had to use the Passion of Christ to heal my wounds.”

The film opens with a scriptural quotation from Isaiah 53: But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. Gibson takes these wounds, bruises and stripes literally, graphically inscribing them on Christ’s body. The extreme violence of *The Passion of the Christ* is rendered more palatable to movie-going audiences because Christ’s suffering in the context of sacrifice for mankind is cathartic; sharing his pain a form of redemption, just as the disciples are encouraged to eat of his body and drink of his blood in film flashbacks to the Last Supper. Although it constitutes just a few moments at the film’s close, the Resurrection in which Christ awakens to a peaceful and glorious new dawn gives coherence—and closure—to his graphic earlier torment, of which the stigmata remain the sole evidence. In Witkin’s crucifixions, by
comparison, the closure of redemption is associated with regression to an earlier and less differentiated state, whether experienced through a body that presents either a primitive or arrested state of development or some deformity or ‘deviation.’

Gibson has been hailed as the inventor of a new genre, “the religious splatter art film,” but this emphasis on martyrdom at the Millennium has the flavor of revival. One of Witkin’s favorite books, *The Incorruptibles, A Study of the Incorruption of the Bodies of Various Catholic Saints and Beati*, details the bodily mutilations endured by various future saints, from Cecilia (d. 177 AD) onwards. Of particular interest are the stigmata endured by saints such as Catherine of Siena, which became more pronounced after her death on the otherwise incorrupt body. Witkin depicts St. Francis of Assisi receiving the stigmata in rays from Christ, portrayed as a phocomelic fetus on the cross in *The History of the White World: Venus Preferred to Christ*, (1997) (figure 42).

Christ’s stigmata marked him as risen to his disciples, but in the original Greek and in English, the word *stigma* has a darker cast. To be stigmatized is to be branded in disgrace or infamy (*OED definition*), perhaps even ostracized—once banishment from one’s community, as to a leper colony. Physical wound transforms to metaphorical stain. Effectively, the stigmatized transgress a borderline—originally the pierced skin of the physical body, eventually the ‘skin’ of the social body. The sight of these Others—a severely deformed person, or that “utmost in abjection,”—the corpse—triggers feelings of intense psychic discomfort in the viewer.

*The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1522) (figure 43), by Hans Holbein the Younger, is one such uncomfortable painting, although there existed precedents for displaying sculptures of Christ in horizontal funerary recesses in churches. The feeling of “permanent death” is intensified by the weight of the tombstone in this twelve-inch high, life-sized horizontal painting of Christ stretched out on a slab. Kristeva analyzes the phenomenon of the profoundly abjected Christ, post-crucifixion and pre Reformation. The image conveys a “hopeless grief…without the promise of Resurrection….unbearable anguish before the death of God, here blended with our own, since there is not the slightest suggestion of transcendency.” The enclosed, isolated and realistically painted corpse, sans mourners, conveys intense feelings both of claustrophobia and a minimalist melancholia—there is no future, no sky,—no exit.
We are accustomed to equate crucifixion with Resurrection and Ascension to heaven. Without the promise of heaven, “Christ’s dereliction is here at its worst: forsaken by the Father, he is apart from all of us.” Because the Passion appears to have ended in futility, this painting tests faith:

Holbein…proposes another vision—that of man subject to death, man embracing Death, absorbing it into his very being, integrating it not as a condition for glory or a consequence of a sinful nature but as the ultimate essence of his desacralized reality, which is the foundation of a new dignity.

That Holbein’s Dead Christ does not indicate either transcendence or redemption makes it a precursor of sorts to Witkin’s despairing use of crucifixion imagery. While Holbein’s Christ is recognizable as such, it is only our knowledge of imminent resurrection that redeems this image, whose horizontality and realism opposes rather than suggests the Resurrection (which is also, of course, its source of dignity and power). Witkin’s exhibition of the crucified body at its physical and psychic limits is in spirit a return to the ‘Compassion Cross’ of High Gothic art:

At the end of the 13th century, all restraint is abandoned. Christ’s sufferings are now portrayed mercilessly, demanding compassion; for this reason, this type of crucifix is also known as ‘Erbärmdekreuz’, or ‘Compassion Cross’. The body is distorted by pain to the point of hideousness.

But where the realism of the Compassion Cross is meant to evoke emotion and empathy with Christ’s humanity, Witkin’s demonic Christs convey humanity’s regression, blurring and transgressing the boundary delineating human from animal, man from beast.

The body at and as its limits becomes a test and verification of physical presence, one extreme being the conflation of pain and ecstasy experienced by early Christian martyrs “scaling pinnacles of pain.” Witkin has stated that he wants his images “to be the most powerful thing a person sees before death,” creating the imperative for visuals which almost palpably trigger physical sensation. Its impact on successive viewers may be psychological, but trauma in Witkin’s body is enacted spatially: a case of turning the inside out, of probing cavities if not wounds.
Witkin treats the maternal body as an enclosure from which the child can never truly separate or escape. By depicting pain and bodily fragmentation—nails penetrating a head in the crucified Corpus, a severed human limb as part of the Eucharist in Still Life, Mexico, (figure 16) he questions what constitutes the spiritual body by transgressing its borders and probing its limits. The body as vessel for the soul is here taken to its extreme. If the corpse implies a present body and an absent soul, Witkin often strives towards the presence of the soul in the absence of most of the body. It is as though this bodily and moral transgression—a reductive process that involves working with smaller and smaller fragments of bodies—will somehow reveal and affirm the true significance of spiritual symbols whose meaning has become banal, a sensation Witkin has articulated: “My work represents this search.”

The meditation on presence and absence, presence in absence, is particularly rich in Witkin’s still life work; the French nature morte is perhaps more fitting a term. Certainly, Witkin’s Eucharist compositions borrow from the seventeenth century Dutch still life, as Germano Celant has demonstrated. Traditional still life has long influenced photography as well; on Niépce’s Le Table Servis of c. 1825—9 (figure 44) are laid the dish and cutlery, the bottle of wine, the loaf of bread. For Witkin, the power of photography lies in its ability to compress everything “into one particular stillness. When you really want to say something to someone, you grab them, you hold them, you embrace them. That’s what happens in this still form.” Its meditation on morality, mortality and immortality thus makes the antique tradition of the painted vanitas a logical choice for Witkin to update in photographic form.

While Witkin clearly draws inspiration from nineteenth century photographic sources, examining his particular reprise of the vanitas tradition in light of much earlier, indeed, medieval concerns with the spiritual integrity of body and soul is particularly edifying. Why Witkin, among others, has re-ignited debates of the first millennium A.D. at the close of the second, perhaps represents an attempt to negotiate overwhelming current events and trends in interpersonal distance noted by Virilio, by applying the framework of a period in time in which all human interactions were necessarily focused on the veritas of the body itself. For example, in 1999 Witkin contributed a grim illustration entitled “The Plague Years: Decimation via the Black Death and AIDS” to a special issue of The New York Times Magazine devoted to the AIDS crisis, drawing parallels with the Black Death which decimated Europe in the fourteenth century.
CATHOLIC AND JEW

We live in a “dark and prophetic time,” says Witkin, articulating his need to orchestrate the appearance of martyrdom and sacrifice, whose iconic reference is most obviously the crucifixion. The duality of presence in absence is the domain of religion in the broadest sense, which Witkin often represents through the Catholic iconography he was raised with. The artist attended St. Cecilia’s grammar school in Brooklyn, where he received the foundations of a Catholic education. Yet in interviews Witkin expresses distrust even of the word “religious” as “an admission of institutionalization,” preferring the term “spiritual.” This from a product of Catholic schooling, who admits to an earlier ambition to enter the priesthood.

Catholicism’s canonic emphasis on the physical body provided a reference to work from and against, complete with reenactments of martyrdom, crucifixion, the lives of saints and biblical parables. The emphasis on tangible presence inherent in icons and relic worship becomes an important feature of Witkin’s quest for the absent soul. Witkin abjects, negates and perverts icons of Christianity, even as he professes to be on a quest for spiritual identity and enlightenment. His words provide a clue: “Spiritual,” as in “something to do with the opening up of a truth that’s found by a person by way of their own discovery, the fact that they have basically burned themselves to some charring point….” One critic has in fact identified Witkin as suffering from what she coins ‘Catholic burn.’

Witkin’s artistic recycling of elements of his Catholic upbringing is not unique for the period from roughly 1975 to 1995, the year of his retrospective at New York’s Guggenheim Museum. In an article entitled “Postmodern Heretics” published in Art in America in 1997, Eleanor Heartney discusses the “residue of a Catholic upbringing” as artistic influence for a whole generation of contemporary artists.

Heartney contends that Catholicism’s particular stress on the physical body “pushes certain artists toward the corporeal and the transgressive.” She observes that in all its major mysteries, Catholicism “emphasize[s] the role of the human body as vessel of divine spirit,”—
as opposed to Protestantism's separation of the human and divine—and that it is this physicality and an emphasis on ritual, relic and religious ecstasy which has influenced Joel-Peter Witkin, Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, Kiki Smith, Mike Kelley, Janine Antoni, Karen Finlay and David Wojnarowicz, all raised Catholic, whose work “emerges in a mixture of the sacred and profane which may appear as blasphemy or sacrilege to fundamentalist viewers.” Heartney suggests that the sacred and profane are an “inevitable corollary” of Catholicism’s stress on the continuity of human and divine.

She views Witkin’s oeuvre as evidence of a “spiritual despair,” observing that “the key to Witkin’s despairing, pessimistic Catholicism seems to lie in the ambiguous course of his search for the sacred.” Rather than catharsis or redemption through art, Heartney sees rage at an unjust God, “who not only refuses to show himself but dispenses death and deformity among mankind….By reveling in the monstrous and repulsive, Witkin mocks God’s supposed mercy and challenges the promise of universal redemption.”

Heartney pinpoints an “ecstatic essence” in Mapplethorpe’s work that she identifies as “a radical collapse of the spiritual and corporeal realms.” ‘Radical’ in a millennial secular American context because it is anti-Puritan, with its emphasis on restraint and denial, and because it returns notions of good and evil to a medieval, fleshly incarnation. By comparison, Witkin’s Orthodox Jewish father makes him doubly the outsider in Heartney’s Protestant vision of America. Although Witkin was not raised a Jew, image titles such as Lesson in the Kabala (1981) (figure 45) reveal an interest in Judaism’s traditional mystical interpretation of the Old Testament, exposing an affinity for even more archaic religious traditions than the “fleshly incarnation” of the Medieval that Heartney pinpoints.

If, as Freud contends, religion is formed in the image of the father, a situation of ambivalence emerges in the case of Witkin’s divorced parent. The artist’s paternal Jewish heritage works a subtle influence, yet the contentious flavor of his Christianity, references to animal sacrifice, mythological figures such as Laökoon incurring the wrath of the Gods, Old Testament strife and Holocaust gives Judaism a presence in his work as archaic opposition. In an interesting counterpoint, Witkin’s references to archaic Mother Goddesses has a strong sculptural
counterpoint in the substantial antiquities collection of perhaps the most famous non-practicing
Jew of the 20th century, Sigmund Freud.  

Witkin’s revision of Christ’s persecution at the hands of Jews, his references to Salome and
John the Baptist, imbue Christian sacrifice with a particularly combative, futile and perverse
color. His appropriation and re-interpretation of symbols—the crucifix, the Eucharist—like
the inverted cross of Black Mass, forces a reexamination of the original function in calcified form
now taken for granted. By inverting values of good and evil, light and dark, attraction and
repulsion, presence and absence, Witkin first applies form, then peels it back to test and master
faith, in Freud’s sadistic understanding of the term.

In his Master’s thesis, entitled “Revolt Against the Mystical,” Witkin recalls enthusing that “My
first photograph, the very first piece of film I would expose, would be of the Rabbi Who Saw
God.”  

As mentioned in Chapter One, as a teenager in the 1950s, Witkin attempted to capture
God on film through a visit to a Bronx rabbi who claimed to have seen God:

Instead, I found a tired, sleepy little old man sitting in a corner of a large, dusty
study. I did not see G-d within the rabbi or the presence of G-d within the room.
I decided to photograph the rabbi anyway, hoping that perhaps, if I couldn’t see
what I had imagined to be there, the film would reveal it. Perhaps G-d would
appear on the film when it was processed. Somehow, I knew it wouldn’t turn out
that way. I closed the great doors still believing that the sight of God would give
life reality and purpose.

This frustration at not grasping God’s presence is poignant in light of Witkin’s documentation
and subsequent transformation of the traces of God’s ‘work,’ as it were, in the form of Siamese
twins, dwarves, hermaphrodites, individuals who are missing limbs, and others who are
anomalous in the sense of Levitican abominations and the ‘clean and proper body’ Kristeva
derives from Douglas. “Photography would be the means to see and relive my fantasies,”
Witkin observes of his practice. “These fantasies had no place in the ordinary, but only in the
most secret and hidden things—in the strange, the bizarre, the invisible.”

Before he ever focused attention on the unusual body that attracts attention through the
attributes of overwhelming presence or profound absence of bodily parts, Witkin was already
exhibiting a preoccupation with notions of presence and absence. His earliest photos document
the play of abstracted sunlight on a young boy’s face, *Puerto Rican Boy, New York*, (1956) (figure 23), or the blurring of a face or body in motion, as in *Star of David Dancer, Coney Island*, (1956) (figure 22), followed by *Face at the Window, New York City*, (1967) (figure 46). From this capturing of literal movement, Witkin would proceed to a more intellectual, allegorical meditation on the *anima* uniting body and soul.

**THE LAST SUPPER: REPRISE**

Witkin has been preoccupied since the early 1970s with a personal reinterpretation of Christian iconography. In 1974, the year he earned his BFA degree in sculpture at Manhattan’s Cooper Union School of Art, Witkin created *Corpus* (figure 37), a six and a half-foot high Christ, its arms severed at mid-bicep, its bowed head studded all around with long, handmade Spanish nails. The truncated arms lie against the body; there is no cross support, although the hanging feet show that the body is clearly suspended. Intended as a tabernacle, the hollow chest cavity encloses a small child holding an orb. In Christian religious services, the priest is meant to first lower the Christ from above to eye level, open Christ’s chest in the manner of a *Vierge Ouvrante*, consecrate the host inside the orb in holy communion, return the utensils and close the cavity, raising Christ back up above the assembly in a symbolic resurrection.69

Witkin’s *Corpus* is at once Christ’s martyrdom on the cross, the tabernacle and the resurrection. Reflecting on the absence of the cross in this crucifixion, it is noteworthy that the religious iconography of early Christianity avoided depicting crucifixion scenes; still too near, too graphic as the most lowly of punishments for common thieves, unbefitting the Son of God.70 For the first 500 years of Christian art, the depiction of Christ’s death was considered taboo. When scenes of Christ’s death did begin to appear in the early fifth century, they depicted a living, triumphant Christ as opposed to a dead or agonizing Christ.71

Witkin’s *Corpus* raises, literally, a host of issues. In portraying Christ as a tabernacle—at once enclosing, embodying and incarnating the Host, so to speak—Witkin takes the much-debated ‘Real Presence’ of Christ in the Host itself to the extreme—replacing the Host not with the earlier bread and wine as in Byzantine rite, but supplementing it with contemplation of a life-
sized crucified body. The external symbol (figura) of Sacrament in the Eucharist is here realistically embodied as veritas externally and internally, rendering the container as important as the Host.72 Whereas the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation of the body and blood into the host requires a faithful believer to participate in Christ’s sacrifice through sacrament, Corpus renders explicit that which is symbolic.

The embodiment of Christ in communion is here taken literally to a visceral level; the cavity in Corpus is located in the torso, the seat of major organs. The priest opens the sculpted body to remove and distribute the body and blood of Christ, the Eucharist, for consumption and assimilation into worshippers’ bodies in a re-enactment of Christ giving himself as sacrificial food for our salvation.

Medieval controversies over whether the Eucharist involved the reception of “little pieces of Christ’s flesh,” 73 as well as the potential resurrection of cannibalized bodies and digested foodstuffs74 begin to assume a peculiar relevance with Witkin’s Corpus as the bodily presence returns the Eucharist to its status as a literal Last Supper. Even in this early sculptural work Witkin’s willingness to palpate and render concrete his personal interpretations of the boundaries of Catholic exegesis is rendered visible. “The ordinary pious individual,” Freud observed, “performs a ceremonial without concerning himself with its significance….” This ceremonial, whether performed by priest or neurotic, has for Freud its origins in “an action for defense or insurance, a protective measure.”75

Freud’s discussion of the archaic totem animal sacrifice in Totem and Taboo assumes relevance here. “The rule that every participant at the sacrificial meal must eat a share of the flesh of the victim has the same meaning as the provision that the execution of a guilty tribesman must be carried out by the tribe as a whole.”76 In opening Corpus to retrieve the Host, the priest does appear to be engaging in a re-enactment of biblical sacrifice that required the ritual killing and consumption of an animal offering in order to seal a covenant with God(s). St. Augustine’s definition of the “external rite” of sacrifice as “a visible sacrament or sacred sign of an invisible sacrifice”77 is particularly relevant with regard to Corpus. Opening the body cavity in the context of worship, removing and raising the Host for viewing by the assembled worshippers is the external sign of sacrifice, literally embodying Christ’s position as the Paschal
lamb sacrificing its body and blood. The consecrating mass and transubstantiation of the Host into the Body and Blood comprises the internal sign.

In the case of *Corpus*, Freud’s discussion of totemic sacrifice is revealing on other levels. “Psychoanalysis,” states Freud, “has revealed that the totem animal is in reality a substitute for the father.” Killing and yet mourning the slaughter reveals that an “ambivalent emotional attitude, which to this day characterizes the father-complex in our children and which often persists into adult life, seems to extend to the totem animal in its capacity as substitute for the father.”

The child, and the neurotic patient, hate the father as an obstacle to their quest for power and their sexual desire for the mother, but they also love and admire him. At the root of this, for Freud, lay ‘Darwin’s primal horde’ deep in prehistoric times, whose sons killed their violent, jealous father to gain power and access to women who are none other than their mothers and sisters. This collective patricide by the sons drains their hatred, and fulfills their wish to identify with the father, so that they are left with the love and admiration, which has turned to remorse. “The dead father became stronger than the living one had been,” inspiring his sons to forbid killing the totem and renouncing claims to their sisters and mothers. “They thus created out of their filial sense of guilt the two fundamental taboos of totemism, which for that very reason inevitably corresponded to the two repressed wishes of the Oedipus Complex.” We shall return to Freud’s primal horde in our discussion of Witkin’s depiction of animal sacrifice.

At the very least, the re-opening of the body/tabernacle with each mass in *Corpus* is a symbolic re-opening of the wounds in Christ’s body, forcing priest and worshippers into a continual re-engagement with the torture and suffering that crucifixion implies, and with the enormity of the sacrifice Christ made. With each mass and in this context, the host is transformed into a bodily organ, say a bleeding heart. That *Corpus* is a hollow sculpture privileging a dynamic between interior and exterior is particularly resonant in view of Witkin’s later photographic work on bodily boundaries, entrails and orifices. The physical activity involved in lowering and opening *Corpus* for Communion and closing and raising it in a symbolic ascension only after worshippers have eaten the Host invokes their direct, active participation in Christ’s Passion as a sort of perpetual performance art.
Both the priest’s and the worshipper’s participation in communion using this particular tabernacle engages a re-enactment of Christ’s torment in a manner reminiscent of the type of Catholicism practiced by the flagellant Penitente Brotherhood in New Mexico, whose members carry and have themselves nailed/tied to the cross in a ritual crucifixion. Although Witkin has lived in New Mexico since commencing graduate study at the University of New Mexico in 1975, and one of his later Crucifixion images is entitled Penitente (1982) (figure 47), Corpus itself was completed before his move to the Southwest, indicating a more profound engagement with the forms of Catholic worship than that inspired by location. Witkin claims never to have seen the Penitentes “in action,” and that what interests him is their “‘historic’ piety and faith, not what they do now!”

Witkin’s distinguishes all his work from mere “pictures,” calling them “devotion at first visualized in the mind…incarnations, representing the form and substance of what my mind sees and attempts to understand.” The symbolism of crucifixion is particularly attractive to the melancholic, posits Kristeva, as a representation of the loss he or she first experienced as a child in the depressive stage:

“...Such a depression—parting sadness as the necessary condition for the representation of any absent thing—reverts to and accompanies our symbolic activities unless exaltation, its opposite, reappropriates them. A suspension of meaning, a darkness without hope, a recession of perspective including that of life, then reawaken within the memory the recollection of traumatic partings and thrust us into a state of withdrawal: ‘Father, why have you deserted me?’ .....The Christly dereliction presents that hell with an imaginary elaboration; it provides the subject with an echo of its unbearable moments when meaning was lost, when the meaning of life was lost.”

The nail-studded head of Corpus graphically communicates the sensation of agony that was the premise of crucifixion as torture. Christ has no hands here, and his feet are unblemished; the nails have migrated to the head. The head recurs often in Witkin’s lexicon, invoking associations between the mortality of man and the immortality of art, as with the skull in the antique tradition of vanitas appropriated by the artist. In Corpus, the sensation of pain and suffering is concentrated in the head, rather than in the missing hands or the feet, rendering this sculpture particularly poignant as a modern crucifixion; in our culture of automated and computerized miniaturization and psychoanalysis, the head has been privileged—overloaded
even—at the expense of the therapeutic manual labor involved in hands and feet. This deconstruction of the mind/body connection, the cerebral vs. the visceral, signifies in Witkin’s lexicon a state of regression, loss and symbolic castration.

As previously mentioned, Witkin often relates a traumatic childhood encounter with the severed head of a little girl which rolled towards him in the street in the aftermath of a horrific car crash. As he bent to touch this head, an adult carried him away from the scene. As Witkin’s fascination with the head, not to mention the fragmented body and stigma as wound, may well have had its origin in this traumatic incident:

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

The artist claims that during his initiation to photography with his first purchase of a camera as a teenager, “I spent several days looking through the camera...then secretly came to know I wasn't holding a machine...I was holding HER FACE.”

Although the accident itself is apocryphal, Witkin’s recounting of it as a memory anchors a personal iconography that includes references to the severed head of John the Baptist and Salome in Head of A Dead Man (1990) (figure 48) and Woman With Severed Head (1982) (figure 49). In view of Witkin’s apparent ‘Delilah Complex,” we must also consider Freud’s contention that castration may be symbolized by decapitation, in which case the nails driven into the head of Corpus assume a further violation of the power inherent in this ‘substitute father figure.’ A significant portion of Witkin’s work depicts the fragmented body, centered either on body parts in isolation such as the head, the skull, the hands, the legs and feet—or the absence thereof. Just as Catholic Holy Communion involves the worshipper in an acknowledgement of the Real Presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Host, Witkin’s referent of a body part, even if two-dimensionally photographic, has the power to evoke the whole person—and their symbolic loss.
VANITAS: THE BODY AS RELIC

It takes a few moments for the elements of Still Life, Mexico (1992) (figure 16) to register as a Last Supper. The presence of the fish, the small bread roll and the grapes are references to Christ and to the bread and the wine of the Last Supper, just as the table is denoted by the substantial square linen napkin on which they rest, which Witkin hunted down as a necessary prop.93

The element distracting the viewer from this reading appears at first to be entirely out of place—just as dirt is matter out of place94—: a human foot imposing itself in the center of the pristine napkin, attached to a leg ending at mid-calf in a gory stump, whose extruding flesh exhibits a glimmer against the dark ground. While carved meat may appear in the traditional still life as the remains of a banquet, the raw human remainder in Still Life, Mexico serves as a meditation on what constitutes the essence of the departed. Whether a severed foot, a hand or a head, this photograph demonstrates that the bodily part clearly retains its power to evoke a person’s psychic presence, the ‘separated soul,’ just as for the believer, the Sacrament transsubstantiates the body and blood of Christ into the Host. The historian Caroline Walker Bynum articulates the early medieval connection between Eucharist and Resurrection:

Eucharist, like resurrection, was a victory over the grave. Tertullian and Irenaeus expressed in paradox what Athenagoras expressed in (questionable) science: even if executioners feed our bodies to the beasts and then serve those beasts up on banquet tables, we are not truly eaten. To rise with all our organs and pieces intact is a victory over digestion—not only the digestion threatened by torturers and cannibals but most of all that proffered by natural process itself. Small wonder then that the funerary Eucharist, at first condemned as a continuation of pagan piety, came to be seen as a palpable assurance that our flesh unites with the indigested and indigestible flesh of Christ in heaven. The Eucharist is a guarantee that the risen body we shall all become cannot be consumed.95

In deconstructing the body into its fragments, Witkin liberates the parts while demonstrating the mystic presence of the whole. Like the wafer and the wine, these fragments incarnate the spirit which inhabited them and which continues to inhabit them even after decay, as the skulls gracing the traditional vanitas attest. There is fetishism at work here, akin to that of ex votos of body parts festooning shrines. Until returned to the undifferentiation of dirt, the corpse derives power from its location in dual realms, and so these body parts, which reference the whole, inspire fear, awe and horror.96
While manipulating the woman’s severed leg in the arrangement of *Still Life, Mexico*, Witkin experienced near-religious revelation: “When I first held the leg, I realized I was holding what is now for her the space between her body and the earth.” Although some critics have accused Witkin of a horror-film fetishism for body parts, Bynum’s discussion of early medieval debates over the separated soul, saintly relics, and whether bodily fragments would be resurrected as a whole person, are strangely enlightening in this context.

The issues of spiritual presence and absence that Witkin grapples with here profoundly engaged Christian exegesis as early as 1800 years ago. Would the body of an early Christian martyr torn apart by wild beasts be resurrected? Would the body eaten by cannibals be resurrected, and how? Would unborn embryos and fetuses be resurrected? Though these issues may appear wildly irrelevant in our society at large, they assume a fresh significance in the context of Witkin’s work—specifically with what constitutes borderline, as represented through the tortured limits of actual decaying body fragments and fetuses he shows us. In a panel discussion entitled *The Body in Question*, on ABC Radio National, Bynum addresses the importance of embodiment to any identity position of gender, race and experience; the specificity of the person being tied to the particularities only that body can express. “If we believe in the resurrection we must believe in the body, we’re not resurrected as a generalized spirit.”

For Elizabeth Grosz, it was the 1980s focus on keeping the body under control, going to the gym for the perfect external body while denying the ‘everyday’ body, which spawned hostility towards the ‘multiplicity’ of actual bodies. At the same time, Richard Kearney observes, medical (re)construction of the body through organ implants and new technologies has invaded the sanctity of the interior body. One thinks here of Witkin’s attraction to the obese and radically deformed body which has somehow evaded these social controls, drawing attention to itself in an almost obscene way.

Indeed, with the proliferation of cyberspace, “pure simulated body contact of every form” has led to a virtual disappearance of the corporeal body, and a corresponding desire to “resituate the self via the body.” In this context, Kearney observes, Christ’s scourging emerges as a
particular orientation of the suffering body. By graphically re-enacting Christ’s physical torment in *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), Mel Gibson appears to be launching a cathartic counterattack to reach audiences who have become disconnected from all but their own bodies.

The body’s lacerated boundary of skin, as Douglas observed, may represent our threatened, frayed social and psychic boundaries. Holbein painted his abjected *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* in 1522, at the very dawn of an iconoclastic Reformation that would force him to flee to England, though he was later to return and convert to Protestantism. Among other works, *The Ambassadors* (1533) (*figure 50*), underlined by a gigantic anamorphic skull, demonstrates that Holbein was at least as obsessed with the imminence of death as Witkin. Kristeva makes much of his apparently cold “amorality” calling him “an iconoclast of ideals” and a “disenchanted verist.”

The terms Kristeva applies to Holbein’s character resonate in some sense for Witkin. By graphically focusing down on the marginalized body, and the body as its margins (a severed leg, an arm) Witkin forces a spiritual meditation on those viewers willing to look, the object ritually demarcated (and distanced) by the picture frame. Is this an America, a Western World in spiritual and moral decline? The tonic shock may appear as the remedy, the ‘reparation’ for having marginalized and abandoned the deformed or contagious ‘hyperreal’ body, here returning with a vengeance. Is Witkin dealing in some form of virtual ritual sacrifice, or demonstrating that death is merely the final mystic frontier over which we have no control?

In *Still Life, Mexico*, the gory stump of a leg is actually being venerated as a potent relic object in much the same way that, for centuries, the incorrupt bodies of saints were divided up and distributed among churches for veneration by the faithful, a head here, an arm or a finger there. However little remains of this woman’s body, the manner in which Witkin contemplates it, and the way in which it is offered up for contemplation, signifies that it remains the vessel for her soul. Freud contends that the “holy mystery of sacrificial death…keeps alive a living bond of union between the worshippers and their god,” a bond which is “nothing else than the life of the sacrificial animal, which resides in its flesh and in its blood and is distributed among all the participants in the sacred meal.” In association with other symbols of the Eucharist, it is the specter of this life, this soul, which haunts the viewer. The identification
previously required with the sacrificial animal to give it symbolic entry to the clan is here already achieved with a human leg, reflected back to the viewer as an abjected self.

The foot as bodily fragment reappears in Still Life with Mirror (1998) (figure 51), a photograph made twenty-four years after Corpus, featuring similar references to the crucifixion: in this case, the body and the cross are absent. Although two-dimensional, it is important to reflect that for Witkin, assembling the elements of this tableau was essentially a sculptural act in which he manipulated a three-dimensional, real body part. Witkin works directly with bodies and bodily fragments because they spatially represent, in unmistakably concrete form, the mysterious divide separating death from life, the ultimate abjection we must reject in order to live. In the sense that he recognizes and commemorates the power inherent in these bodily traces, Witkin is supremely a fetishist—but the same may be said of Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva.

Partially because he works with corpses, photography became for Witkin more than documentation, a means of fetishizing in icon form the encounters in which he transformed these bodies, of rendering real the oneiric associations made in his preliminary drawings, realized in his studio setups, and refined in the darkroom. Jay Ruby’s observation that nineteenth century mortuary photography represented a way of immortalizing mortal remains, of “securing the shadow ‘ere the substance fade,” provides an interesting counterpoint.

Anne Marsh documents the nineteenth century practice of embedding crematorial ashes into mortuary photographs, rendering them actual relics in “a double-reading of photography as both essential evidence and simulacrum.” Where bereaved relatives sought to document the departed as they knew them in life, Witkin transforms bodies he knows only in death, which frees him to bestow upon them new identities as actors in allegorical scenarios. Like ‘evidence’ embedded in early mortuary photography, Eugenia Parry finds traces of relic cult in Witkin’s approach:

Fashioner of relics from miracles of the physical, he distributes them in the most repeatable of graphic media. The photographs are reliquaries preserving severed heads, arms, legs, and wonderful bodies. Like the dispersed fragments of incorruptible saints, they are a fellow-sufferer’s divine talismans against ‘the confusion of the Now.’
The corpse picked up off a Mexico City street that Witkin photographs in Glassman (1994) (figure 52), for example, undergoes a transformation on the autopsy table:

Suddenly he’s not a punk any more. He’s gone through this kind of transfiguration on the [autopsy] table....However he was judged, he is now a different presence!....he looked like a Saint Sebastian. He looked like a person who had grace.\(^{114}\)

The individual having departed the body, the corpse becomes a generalized waste or remains (or as the French put it, \textit{restes}), a symbolic indication of the boundary between life and death. Literature provides similar examples: stumbling upon the funeral of someone he didn’t know allows Saul Bellow’s protagonist in the short novel \textit{Seize the Day} license to release his private sorrows in a generalized lament on all humanity. Witkin sees the possibilities in the disengagement of body from soul, a liberation that permits his own oneiric associations.

In \textit{Still Life With Mirror}, a human foot severed just above the ankle sits on a white cloth covering a tabletop. Beside it lies a tied bunch of asparagus, while the right background behind the mirror is covered with an antique-looking floral tapestry. The neutral title makes no reference to the image’s most gripping aspect: the five hand-forged nails driven into the top of the foot, between ankle and toes. These five wounds invoke the stigmata in Christ’s hands, feet and side. The mirror that is tilted vertically behind the composition doubles the effect of the gory stump. Completing the \textit{vanitas} is a dead butterfly, which Witkin says he used, “remembering Queen Victoria’s strange presumption that photography capturing life, netted it, like a butterfly.”\(^{115}\)

As with the crucifixion of \textit{Corpus}, Witkin has here reinterpreted the \textit{vanitas} tradition: instead of a skull grinning at the vanity of man’s ephemeral existence, it is a foot which here symbolizes man’s mortality, Christ’s crucifixion and martyrdom, through to the Ascension. As Leo Steinberg observes, in the ancient concept of the human body as a hierarchical system, “head and feet respectively polarized the divine and the human.” Indeed, “‘feet’ is a standard biblical euphemism for genitalia,” both belonging to the lower, generative stratum of the body, navel to feet.\(^{116}\) The Ascension is invoked by the five nails in conjunction with the foot, in a twist on traditional iconography of the ‘Disappearing Christ’:
...Feet on earth, head in heaven. [Kantorowicz] adduces the familiar image of the Ascension, wherein Western artists, from Ottonian times to the Cinquecento, depicted a “disappearing Christ,” whose “feet alone—the symbol of the Incarnation—remain as a visible token of the historical fact that the Incarnate has migrated on earth.”

Witkin’s choice of a foot, which moves and supports the weight of the body, whose sole is in constant contact with the soil, serves as counterpoint and punctuation to ascension. The end and unclean part of the body has pride of place on this table. *Still Life With Mirror* is very much a *fait accompli*, the foot no longer serving its functions of support or locomotion, the passion with which the nails were driven having passed into contemplation.

By lengthening the exposure and printing the negative through glass, the artist “dimmed and distanced the arrangement into the altarpiece he wished to create.” This patina lends the scene a peculiar replete tranquility akin to that of *Still Life, Mexico*, (figure 16) belied only by the *punctum* of the nails. The foot remains as evidence that Christ was once flesh, bore our sins, and walked the earth.

**SADIST AND MASOCHIST: PUNISHING THE BODY**

The viewer of *Still Life With Mirror* does not witness Witkin driving the nails into the defenseless foot in the direct voyeurism of the horror genre. Rather, s/he experiences the aftermath of the act, mediated by a two-dimensional photograph: the act is twice removed. Witkin locates his *punctum* in a contemplative still life that meditates upon the integrity of this *fait accompli* with ephemeral acts in the natural world—a dead butterfly, asparagus readied for consumption.

Above all, however, *Still Life With Mirror* is Witkin re-enacting the Crucifixion:

The week before I had purchased old nails to hammer into the foot, fantasizing that the first nail to penetrate would magically touch its crucified center. Holding the foot and first nail with my left hand, with my right hand I pounded the hammer. I was somewhere between Europe and Golgotha. The nail held tightly to the flesh, I was at the Crucifixion. At any moment, darkness and lightning would swirl, turning the room into chaos. Several weeks before in New Mexico, I had crucified a horse. But the foot was more real, more about human suffering. I drove in the other nails. As a boy in Brooklyn...my grandmother allowed me to carry her rosary. I was so proud. Pointing to Christ’s hands and feet on the
cross of the rosary, I told her that when I grew up I would work in a rosary factory and nail the body of Christ to each cross.\textsuperscript{119}

Witkin expressed surprise at “how easy it was to drive the old, hand-forged nails into the foot,” giving another perspective on the role he assumes in this Passion Play. Speaking of an earlier image, Penitente (1982) (figure 47), in which he crucified dead rhesus monkeys onto crosses, Witkin observes:

\begin{quote}
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-realization out of 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. \textsuperscript{121}
\end{quote}

Witkin’s statements and decisive action make it clear that his engagement with the crucifixion is not about playing Christ, as was the case with the nineteenth century photographer F. Holland Day. In his MA thesis, Witkin claims that when he first began working on his Christ series in the 1970s, he was unaware of Day, who fasted to attain the ascetic aspect and had himself bound to a cross as Christ, pressing a cable release strapped to his arm to photograph himself over two hundred times in one summer. (figure 7)\textsuperscript{122}

It is significant that on at least two occasions—once in a monograph, once in an interview—Witkin has chosen Holland’s Day’s depictions of himself as Christ when called upon to discuss photographs he can’t forget. Yet he derides Holland Day as a ‘poseur,’ whose work exhibits “twisted delusions of Victorian pseudo-decadence.”\textsuperscript{123} Although Witkin claims not to understand “that kind of thinking,” there is a sense that he somehow measures himself against Holland Day’s physical intensity, that it is the same passion he strives for. Where Holland Day invested that intensity internally, in his own masochistic bodily suffering, Witkin invests it externally, inflicting tortures in which others, if living, willingly participate. Achieving revelation for Witkin is not about his own personal physical martyrdom and suffering, but about directing and participating in that of the willing other, recalling Freud’s conception of sadism and masochism as internal and external manifestations of the death drive’s aggressive impulse.\textsuperscript{124}

As Anne Marsh has observed in her book, The Darkroom, Witkin’s live models bring their own
desires to his tableaux, even as he masks them. The dead, on the other hand, mount no resistance or subterfuge.

Perhaps it is Holland Day's direct manner of "transforming himself into his spiritual belief," which piques Witkin; he himself admits to being more comfortable with symbolism. Although occasionally present in his tableaux (in *Las Meniñas* (1987) he substitutes himself for Velasquez, as symbolic creator of this revision), Witkin prefers to direct off-camera, playing The Father rather than The Son.

Holland Day's passion lay in faithfully reproducing the Crucifixion to the best of his ability, while Witkin has gained notoriety for his appropriation and reinterpretation of icons (*Maquette for the Crucifix for a Master of St. Francis*, for example). Perversion is a necessary part of this ritual, *is* the ritual in fact. It is through the perversion of actual and imagined Originals that Witkin gains his *jouissance*, experiencing both in the design and execution, and later in the presentation, a sense of having palpated and redrawn the boundaries of the spiritual body for himself.

At its best, the re-enactment of trauma to attain catharsis and spiritual enlightenment engages a dialogue—of presence with absence, of corrupted, fleshly body with numinous spirit, and of what Julia Kristeva has identified as the bordering of the abject with the sublime. At its worst, it descends to sheer sensationalism and a spiritual numbness. Given the sadomasochistic trappings of certain Witkin images such as *Penitente, Saviour of the Primates* (1982) (figure 53), *Mandan* (figure 27), *Un Santo Oscuro* (1987) (figure 54), and in relation to women —*Sander's Wife* (1981) (figure 55), *Mother & Child* (figure 29), *Choice of Outfits for the Agonies of Mary* (figure 15), and *Infantilism* (1985) (figure 56), coupled with Witkin's fascination with the ecstatic martyrdom of early Christian saints, a pattern begins to emerge.

The change and loss of bodily boundaries experienced in pain and that of religious ecstasy begins to blur and meld. Indeed, a subtle linking of the ecstasies of sexual sadomasochism and the masochism of Christian martyrdom appears to be a time-honored tradition. One recalls Saint Teresa's expression as she is about to be pierced by the angel's spear in Bernini's sculpted *Ecstasy of St Teresa* (1646) (figure 57), which is widely considered a realistic depiction.
of orgasmic bliss.\textsuperscript{129} The symbolic castration that is the masochistic body reminds us also that there is a long tradition of depicting Jesus as Mother.\textsuperscript{130}

Gerry Badger has described Witkin as “both sadist and masochist,” in the sense that “he inflicts a sense of suffering and degradation to suggest his own suffering and degradation.”\textsuperscript{131} In Freud’s thought, “a sadist is always at the same time a masochist, although the active or the passive aspect of the perversion may be the more strongly developed in him and may represent his predominant sexual activity.”\textsuperscript{132} Indeed, masochism “must be regarded as sadism that has been turned round on the subject’s own ego.”\textsuperscript{133} Looking more closely, the primary masochistic moment precedes the sadistic enjoyment: “…while these pains are being inflicted on other people, they are enjoyed masochistically by the subject through his identification of himself with the suffering object…”\textsuperscript{134}

This moral masochism comes under attack as a screen by Melody Davis in her book, \textit{The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography}: Working with Foucault’s assertion that power needs to conceal itself, she dispenses with Witkin’s ‘allegorical ideology’ as ‘hyperbolic fantasy,’ and a cover for his sadistic mastery.\textsuperscript{135} Davis finds the “real intent” of a crucifixion image such as \textit{Penitente} is “perverse enjoyment and deliberate, Sadean control on the part of the photographer.”\textsuperscript{136} Because Witkin relies on the ‘convincing’ and ‘instantaneous’ mimesis of photography for ‘visceral impact,’ Davis states, “his photographs damage in a way even the Marquis could not dream of….For Witkin, then, sadism is a goal inasmuch as there is an observer.”\textsuperscript{137}

For Davis, the ‘obfuscation of power’ in Witkin’s work is tied to sexual sadism as self-empowerment and control, in which the viewer becomes the ‘validating’ party:

\begin{quote}
This is the sadist’s sole religion—the violent yoking of God and Satan through…a power which in the sadist’s mind elevates him to a priest….Gilles Deleuze puts it simply: Sadism seeks in the other self-recognition as father (Deleuze 1971, 77). The photographed subject then becomes the masochistic body of mother. \textsuperscript{138}
\end{quote}

The issue, then, is not so much pleasure through pain, as presence through pain. We have returned to the parents, or to the introjected parental superego, ‘heir to the Oedipus Complex,’
as the underlying authority. “To each superego its abject,” states Kristeva, deconstructing the word “perversion” as *verse au père*, or a “deposit to the father’s account.”¹³⁹ Davis likens Witkin’s inversion of the universe, his preference for playing The Creator, to Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel’s theory that “by destroying or inverting all values” the pervert, (Chasseguet-Smirgel uses de Sade), attempts to create “an artful universe,” which is none other than “the less-conflict ridden path of pregenital gratification that stems from the primary narcissism of the infant.”¹⁴⁰ If we could flash back, it would be to a vision of Witkin *in utero* in his crudely drawn combined parent figure, attacking his father’s intruding penis. (*figures 58 and 59*)¹⁴¹

It is helpful here to consider Freud’s contention that the severity of the superego does not so much reflect the parents’ actual aggression towards the child, as the child’s necessarily repressed, accumulated aggressive impulses towards this authority which prevents “his first...most important satisfactions”:

By means of identification he takes the unattackable authority into himself. The authority now turns into his super-ego and enters into possession of all the aggressiveness which a child would have liked to exercise against it. The child’s ego has to content itself with the unhappy role of the authority—the father—who has been thus degraded. Here, as so often, the [real] situation is reversed: ‘If I were the father and you were the child, I should treat you badly.’¹⁴²

Returning once again to the sons’ remorse over killing the primal father, Freud posits that the superego was set up in identification with this father’s power, “as though as a punishment for the deed of aggression they had carried out against him, and it created the restrictions which were intended to prevent a repetition of the deed.”¹⁴³ Having treated the father badly, one is obliged to resurrect him:

Whether one has killed one’s father or has abstained from doing so is not really the decisive thing. One is bound to feel guilty in either case, for the sense of guilt is an expression of the conflict due to ambivalence, of the eternal struggle between Eros and the instinct of destruction or death.…¹⁴⁴

[and three pages later on p. 766] Henceforward a sense of guilt could be produced not only by an act of violence that is actually carried out…but also by one that is merely intended (as psycho-analysis has discovered). Irrespective of this alteration in the psychological situation, the conflict arising from ambivalence—the conflict between the two primal instincts—leaves the same result behind.”¹⁴⁵
“It is not, (as we ordinarily think) that we desist from aggression because we have a very
rigorous moral idea, but, rather, we have a rigorous moral ideal just because, or to the degree to
which, we have renounced aggression.” 146 In a return to the primal father, Freud envisaged
that the ‘superior being’, which became the superego, “once threatened castration, and this
dread of castration is probably the nucleus round which the subsequent fear of conscience has
gathered.” 147

Fear of the superego is initially experienced as fear of its anger, fear of the loss of its love, and
finally as fear of death. 148 The death instinct may be “rendered harmless by being fused with
erotic components,” and also “diverted towards the external world in the form of aggression.” 149
The internalized aggression of the all-knowing superego may thus transform into “a pure culture
of the death instinct,” 150 prompting reparation in the form of ‘moral masochism’—“in which the
ego turns its cheek’ to attacks of the superego.” 151

Freud observes that “atonement through pain” 152 is one of the most primitive means of making
reparation for perceived guilt. “Through a regression to pregenital organization, ...the love
impulses...transform themselves into impulses of aggression against the object...the first
outcome is interminable self-torment, and eventually there follows a systematic torturing of the
object, in so far as it is in reach.” 153 In the necessity of sin to morality and forgiveness,
Dostoyevsky is not far off. 154 In Mandan (figure 27), Witkin photographs a masochist who
regularly hangs by hooks threaded through holes in the flesh of his pectoral muscles, holes that
the male model has been enlarging for years. 155 He suffers pain willingly, yet is there anything
Christian about this image?

THE SAVING DEATH: LOSS AS SACRIFICIAL BOND

Anthony Julius observes in Transgressions, The Offenses of Art, “The Crucifixion is made
tolerable by the Resurrection and Ascension, the negativity of death itself negatived. It was a
saving death.” 156 As an example of “religiously subversive” art, he points to Francis Bacon’s
Fragment of a Crucifixion (1950) (figure 60), featuring a dead dog and unidentifiable winged
creature on a cross. “Bacon’s theme.....takes the Crucifixion in order to deny the strongest case
made in our culture for the redemptive nature of suffering and death. It is a disenchanted art, an art of subtraction: flayed bodies minus suffering, religious iconography minus faith. It empties the Crucifixion of significance."\textsuperscript{157}

Yet by subverting and deconstructing conventional depictions of crucifixion, Bacon disengages abjection from the traditional body of Christ to reach profound depths, generating a significant dialogue about crucifixion as futile or fruitful sacrifice. As Bataille observed, “Sacrifice is, etymologically, merely the production of sacred things.”\textsuperscript{158}

Sacred things are constituted by an operation of loss: in particular, the success of Christianity must be explained by the significance of the theme of the appalling crucifixion of the Son of God, which takes human anguish to the point of a representation of loss and unlimited decline.\textsuperscript{159}

Bacon’s pessimism and evocation of a “primal guilt,” drawing on the myths of Oedipus and Orestes for their crimes of patricide, incest, and matricide permeate his work with this anguish, his deconstruction and reduction of figures isolating and emphasizing their pathos all the more.\textsuperscript{160} Portraying this anguish for both Bacon and Witkin means a return to the primal and bestial, as in Bacon’s toothful screams modeled on chimpanzee mouths.\textsuperscript{161}

I’ve always been very moved by pictures about slaughterhouses and meat, and to me they belong very much to the whole thing of the Crucifixion. There’ve been extraordinary photographs which have been done of animals just being taken up before they were slaughtered; and the smell of death. We don’t know, of course, but it appears by these photographs that they’re so aware of what is going to happen to them, they do everything to attempt to escape….for Christians, the Crucifixion has a totally different significance. But as a non-believer, it was just an act of man’s behaviour, a way of behaviour to another.\textsuperscript{162}

The artist’s translation of moral loss as physical regression emphasizes its quality of lack. If human sacrifice represents for Bataille the only “true sacrifice,” then anguish and identification with the victim represent this loss in the extreme, as the loss of self.\textsuperscript{163} Because it was “resolved too quickly through the deliverance of death,” sacrifice demanded witnesses to its force. “It must be communicated from one man to another, it must be accumulated and laden like a storm, inscribing its point of night in the luminous order of things.”\textsuperscript{164}

For Kristeva, the most archaic concept of sacrifice was given new meaning through Christ. “…death—that of the old body making room for the new, death to oneself for the sake of glory,
death of the old man for the sake of the spiritual body—lies at the center of the experience.”  
This imaginary death excludes ritual other than Eucharist, transforming the conception of sacrifice with a glorious love, reconciliation and forgiveness.

The physical loss thus constitutes a bond between men, which in the case of Christ's crucifixion Kristeva softens into a "life-giving discontinuity, closer to nutrition...the offering of an acceptable and accepted gift." She points out that Eucharist as rite was meant to "destroy and supersede" the very concept of sacrifice.

Nevertheless, one should not forget that a whole ascetic, martyrizing, and sacrificial Christian tradition has magnified the victimized aspect of that offering [crucifixion] by eroticizing both pain and suffering, physical as well as mental, as much as possible.

In *The Masks of God*, Joseph Campbell describes the type of pagan human sacrifice against which Christianity offers its once and final sacrifice. Yet ancient cases of institutional ritual regicide posit a similar renewal or birth, directly predicated on ritual loss in the death of the king or his surrogates. Perhaps the most haunting, and explicit example of this connection is Campbell's description of the rekindling of holy fire following the death of the king among a number of African tribes:

The latter was ritually rekindled by a designated pubescent boy and virgin, who were required to appear completely naked before the new king, the court, and the people, with their fire-sticks; the two sticks being known, respectively, as the male (the twirling stick), and the female (the base). The two young people had to make the new fire and then perform that other, symbolically analogous act, their first copulation; after which they were tossed into a prepared trench, while a shout went up to drown their cries, and quickly buried alive.

In New Guinean versions of this human sacrifice, the couple are roasted and ceremoniously eaten, evoking for latter-day readers the roots of Eucharist as ceremonial incorporation of the sacrificial victim. For Campbell, “these rites are but the renditions in act of a mythology inspired by the model of death and life in the plant world.” In its conjunction of *Eros* with *Thanatos*, this fertility sacrifice controls and gives meaning and fruitfulness to death, whose symbolic concentration in this one act also channels aggression, maintaining social order within the community.
PROFANE AND SACRED: THE BESTIAL BODY

If, as Bataille claims, “sacrifice destroys that which it consecrates,” art symbolically restores that which it desecrates. Kristeva observes that “artistic style imposes itself as a means of countervailing the loss of other and of meaning,” that it fulfills a “psychic need to confront separation, emptiness, death.” By using animals in depictions of Crucifixion and Eucharist, Bacon and Witkin disturb the sanctity of the icon, forcing a deconstruction of its meaning—which crazily oscillates between the icon and their desecration and confusion of its reverential space as visceral and moral abyss. From this emerges a fresh engagement with the emotional significance of the icon as icon.

...separation has the sense of a definitive consumption; the consecrated offering cannot be restored to the real order. This principle opens the way to passionate release; it liberates violence while marking off the domain in which violence reigns absolutely.

A photographic ritual deconstructing ritual, Witkin’s animal crucifixions of horses and primates communicate Bataille’s “symbolic expenditure” of loss in art through their décalage from traditional compositions such as Grünewald’s scourged Christ. Where Bacon showcases a dead dog or slabs of beef, Witkin presents Crucified Horse (1999) (figure 38), as well as a host of primates: Saviour of the Primates (1982) (figure 53), Penitente (1982) (figure 47), Laökoon (1992) (figure 61), and Agonistes de l’Attente, (1990) (figure 62) the latter two deferring to Greek mythology. Of his use of animals in crucifixion, Witkin states:

When I decided to use a horse to represent Christian sacrifice, I was thinking of Dante who believed that animals and vegetation alike, possessed primitive souls and were surrogates of God. It was important to me that the horse be suspended against something that would help detach The Passion from western traditions. So I modified a painting of The Judgement by an Asian artist. As I see it, we’ve already had our chance with the great events of human history; most of us ignore or fail to understand them. I wanted a sacrifice of such magnitude to be seen as global. My crucified horse is an atrocity, an allegory of universal tragedy.

The horse, associated with death, the underworld, fertility and libido, traditionally performs the role of ‘conductor of souls’ between this world and the next, and horse sacrifice was widespread in antiquity to perform this function of transport and guide. Witkin’s horse is symbolically castrated, shorn of any power to transport; in fact, it was on its way to the slaughterhouse to be
turned into pet food, while the rhesus monkeys have number codes tattooed on them from the laboratory. While their bodies continue to serve man’s purposes—in this case, Witkin's—he has symbolically removed both horse and monkey from their habitual ‘useful’ contexts by crucifying them and documenting the act, forcing engagements with crucifixion and with animal personified as sentient being.

In contrasting his *Crucified Horse* (1999) with Holland Day's direct impersonation of Christ (1898), Witkin recalls that earlier in his career, he himself failed to communicate divinity in photographing a Jesus look-alike. “But several years ago, in Marseille, I invented Christ as a side show anomaly, composed of a severed human head joined to the body of a dog. These symbols succeeded in connecting Christ’s agony to all of human suffering.” The resulting image was *Dog on a Pillow*, Marseilles (1994) (*figure 63*). The amplification of shock value involved in replacing Christ with dogs, primates, and the ‘atrocity’ of a crucified horse has a strangely regressive logic. Compared with Pegasus, the winged steed of Greek mythology, Witkin's mutilated equine is indeed tragic.

Bataille observed, “Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane.” Where this ‘thing’ is profoundly of the same ‘nature’ as the subject, he argues, sacrifice destroys its status as object: “It is not necessary that the sacrifice actually destroy the animal or plant of which man has made a *thing* for his use. They must at least be destroyed as things, that is, *in so far as they have become things.*”

Witkin’s repetitive degradation of Christ’s already abjected body takes Bataille’s conception of loss in sacrifice to its logical conclusion, by merging ‘thingness’ with man, well and truly ‘abjecting’ man while ‘elevating’ beast. The Darwinist implications of the crucifixion scene in *Penitente* (1982) (*figure 47*), one of his best-known works, are immediate. Two rhesus monkeys on smaller crosses flank a crucified male human model. The two thieves crucified with Jesus, one of whom told the other that they ‘deserved their punishment,’ in the words of Saint Luke, have been transformed into primates. The monkey is a traditional symbol of the thief, the trickster—and in Christian iconography, of humanity degraded by sin. Witkin goes even
further in his *Saviour of the Primates* (1982) (*figure 53*), in which the crucified Christ is depicted alone—as a dead primate.

Beyond its Christian associations with transgression the monkey, particularly in Buddhist/Shinto cultures, functions historically as sacred mediator between man and deity, as guardian of equine health (in traditional Japanese ritual), as clown and scapegoat: “a human minus three pieces of hair,” 182 in a contemporary Japanese definition, and, most evidently, as reflexive symbol of the self. For Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, author of *The Monkey as Mirror*, “the monkey presses hard at the border line, constantly threatening human identity and forcing contemplation of such questions as ‘Who are we?’ and ‘How do we differ from animals?’” 183

If, as Leo Steinberg contends, depicting Christ naked was intended to emphasize his full humanity, *Penitente* and *Saviour of the Primates* engage a Darwinian view in the other direction. Male models who actually resemble the traditional Christ are scarce in Witkin’s oeuvre. The recognizably human crucified models in *Maquette for the Crucifix* (*figure 10*) and *Penitente* (*figure 47*) present an uncanny, even demonic aspect—the troubling face of Christ in the former resembles a carved African mask framed by a lank blond wig, and his arms are not quite superimposed on the Pisan-style crucifix at the base of this composition, giving him two sets of arms. While human and naked, Christ in *Penitente* is depicted with the top half of his head horizontally sliced off, the brain case missing. His arms end in stumps below the elbow, vestigial like those of a thalidomide victim. Christ wears a skull mask that Witkin has modified, 184 and he bares his teeth in a scream of agony, echoing the howling rhesus monkeys flanking him. String-like ‘appendages’ emanating from the body approximate dynamic scourge marks on the skin, as though Witkin had lashed the photograph itself. 185 Whether this creature is even deserving of redemption is at issue here; where Holbein depicted his Christ as a recently deceased human corpse to emphasize his humanity and abjection, the central figure of *Penitente* does not engage our empathy—although we may recognize and fear aspects of his bestiality in ourselves.
The elements separating man from primate in his capacity to reason and work, signified by the brain and the hands, are absent in *Penitente*. The bestial, brainless naked body, howling in pain, appears closer to the howling monkeys flanking it, themselves humanized in their pain. Although Witkin states that the image “in part is about the cruelty of crucifixion,” he goes further than this. He has stated that man is the sole living creature to have invented and to practice torture, an aptitude which effectively cancels, annihilates our greatest virtue: love. Is Witkin implying in *Penitente* that man’s superior brain capacity has not historically been used to advantage, has not elevated him in respect to primates? In response, Witkin states that “the use of primates relates to ‘immature humans’ which we all are and to nature’s being the host and victim of the history of mankind.”

Kristeva asks:

> Could it be superego voluntarism that maintains the image of an oblationary Father, or is it the commemoration of an archaic paternal figure arisen from the paradise of primary identifications? The forgiveness inherent in Redemption condenses death and resurrection and presents itself as one of the most interesting and innovative instances of trinitary logic. The key to the nexus seems to be primary identification: the oral and already symbolic oblationary gift exchanged between Father and Son.

The locus of the killing and devouring of the primal father by his offspring was ‘Darwin’s primal horde,’ which as its name indicates, Freud envisaged as closer to *primitive* and primate than to modern man. As we have seen, Freud conceived of the totem as a “common ancestor and primal father,” observing that “the father is represented twice over in the situation of primitive sacrifice: once as God and once as the totemic animal victim.” When God was worshipped in animal form, and animals worshipped as God, the relationship between man and animal was a more respectful one:

> …while the totem may be the first form of father-surrogate, the god will be a later one, in which the father has regained his human shape. A new creation such as this, derived from what constitutes the root of every form of religion—a longing for the father—might occur if in the process of time some fundamental change had taken place in man’s relation to the father, and perhaps, too, in his relation to animals….the beginning of a mental estrangement from animals and the disrupting of totemism owing to domestication.

In their depiction of primates on the cross, *Penitente* and *Saviour of the Primates* transform the Freudian reading of crucifixion and sacrifice. The assumption of the burden of original sin expressed in this particular sacrifice, and its transference to an innocent, fetishized body, is an important aspect of Witkin’s animal crucifixions. In a psychical displacement, the artist
simultaneously abjects and exalts the father in the form of a primate with whom man is genetically linked. If man is meant to identify with the totemic animal, if as Freud contends, “the sacrificing community, the god and the sacrificial animal were of the same blood and members of one clan,” then Witkin may feel he is redressing our systematic ‘processing’ of animals with this symbolic sacrifice. In parallel fashion in literature, Animal Farm and Lord of the Flies blur the dividing line between man and beast, addressing man’s deteriorating relationship with the animal kingdom. If as Freud postulates, religion protects against neurotic illness by removing an individual’s ‘parent complex,’ and thereby their guilt, then Witkin’s statement that all of the people in his work are aspects of himself correlates with the splitting of the ego that Freud associates with creative fantasy.

The bond commemorated by crucifixion is perverted by this apparent inversion of beast for man, which effectively forces an examination of crucifixion in its origins of theanthropic sacrifice, penance, and sacrament. According to Freud, totemic religion arose from a filial sense of guilt, comprising atonement, remorse and a covenant with the father for protection. At the hands of their supposedly evolved relations, primates have clearly not fared well in terms of a covenant for protection.

Witkin’s Christ in Penitente clearly evinces a spiritual, moral and physical lack. Beyond the missing braincase negating man’s potency and capacity to reason, Witkin makes other associations. The two rhesus monkeys exhibit numbers tattooed on their bodies. Across the model’s chest is written a number code similar to those born by the two monkey ‘thieves’—numbers which Witkin states came stamped on the monkeys from the laboratory, but which he himself added to the human model, finding it “very appealing visually.” Extending this fortuitous find potentially creates an association with the Holocaust for an artist of half-Jewish descent, and for viewers. Man’s recent historical inhumanity to man is thus presented as ‘evidence’ of our abjection in relation to primates who are not intelligent enough to conceive of genocide. In its meditation on Holocaust and inhumanity, Penitente makes a strong statement as the crucifixion revised for our times.

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6 Ibid., p. 11.


8 *Witkin email correspondence to the author regarding Crucifixion*, 17th June 2004.

9 In addition to *Helena Fourment*, which is based on Peter Paul Rubens’ portrait of his young wife entitled *Helena Fourment in a Fur Coat*, or *The Little Fur* (1638) (Celant, *Witkin*, p. 35), the series ‘Journeys of the Mask,’ in which models wear the black mask with white crucifix, also includes *The Phrenologist, San Francisco*, (1983) and *The History of Commercial Photography in Juarez, New York City*, (1984), both of which emphasize this conjunction of the sacred (the facial crucifix) with the profane (genital and anal orifices). Both images are available in Celant’s *Witkin*. Witkin discusses “all the aberrations of love” in relation to the image *Infantilism* (1985), part of *Maquette for the Crucifix* (1986) in “From the Material to the Spiritual” October, 1987 his preface to exhibition catalog *Joel-Peter Witkin: Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Sevilla*, January, 1989, Junta de Andalucia, Consejeria de Cultura, Seville 1989. p. 24.

10 Germano Celant’s 1995 catalog of Witkin’s Retrospective at New York’s Guggenheim Museum, *Witkin*, traces the artist’s influences in the artistic canon as well as his emphasis on the numinous in a general, rather than a religious sense.


13 Di Falco & Joly, p. 10.


16 *Witkin, Revolt Against the Mystical*, Celant, p. 52.

17 *Witkin, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Sevilla*, p. 22. Versions of the catalogue for this traveling European exhibit exist in Spanish, French and German. I touched on masochism in Chapter One, but discuss the role of masochism in identification more fully on pp. 80—83 of this chapter.


20 Ibid., p. 474.


24 Owen Edwards, “Joel-Peter Witkin,” *American Photographer*, November 1985, p. 40. This hyppeal depiction of Christ was meant to evoke compassion, hence the name ‘Compassion Cross’ (see page 57 of this chapter).

25 Ibid, p. 11.


27 Townsend, p. 45.


Gay, Thames and Hudson, London, 1989. Witkin draws a similar inspiration from the past, as Pierre Borhan observes in his Introduction to Disciple & Master, entitled “Joel-Peter Witkin: Disciple and Master,” p. 10: Witkin “creates his family by ‘working with’ Horst, Velasquez, Courbet, doctor Carl Lumholz, Félix Nadar and Adrien Tournachon, Arbus or Miró.”

Witkin “Revolt Against the Mystical,” Celant, p. 50.

Ibid.


Witkin, “Revolt Against the Mystical,” Celant, p. 50.

Van Deren Coke, Joel-Peter Witkin: Forty Photographs, pp. 8—9.


Ibid.


Ibid., Vol. 4, “Communion under both species,” p. 46.


Ibid.

Ibid., p. 501.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Witkin email correspondence with the author regarding Penitentes, 17 June 2004.

Witkin, “Revolt Against the Mystical,” Celant, p. 52.

Ibid.

Witkin, Joel-Peter Witkin: Photographs, Twelvetrees Press, p. 4.

Rachelle A. Dermer, "Photographic Objectivity and the Construction of the Medical Subject in the United States,” Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Boston, 2002, Ph.D., p. 147, footnote 276.

See also Melanie Klein’s discussion of identification of the head with the penis in violent children’s games, such that decapitation or biting off symbolizes castration. Melanie Klein, “An Obsessional Neurosis in a Six-Year Old Girl” The Psychoanalysis of Children, trans. by Alix Strachey, Hogarth, London, 1975, pp. 36—38. Analysis of attacks on her head, feet or nose by boy patients demonstrated to Klein that these body parts symbolized the penis, and furthermore, that it was not the “female penis which they were thus attacking but the father’s penis which had been incorporated in me or affixed to my person.” Klein, “Oedipus Conflict and Super-Ego” The Psychoanalysis of Children, footnote 1, p. 132.


Douglas, p. 160.

Bynum, The Resurrection of the Body, p. 56.

Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection: The Improper/Unclean,” Powers of Horror, pp. 3—4. Here I conflate Kristeva’s discussion of the corpse with Douglas’ conception of dirt as matter out of place, the corpse being Kristeva’s ‘utmost of abjection,’ the most defiling dirt, because it implicates the self as object.

Witkin, Celant, p. 34.


Elizabeth Grosz, "The Body in Question".

Richard Kearney, "The Body in Question."

Ibid.

Douglas, pp.121—22.

Kristeva, “Holbein’s Dead Christ,” p. 121.

Ibid., p. 128. See also Kristeva’s discussion of Holbein’s *Danse Macabre* series of woodcuts on p. 118 and pp. 123—24.


Cruz, p. 121. In the case of Saint Catherine of Siena, the head, an arm a hand, three fingers, a foot (with stigmata), a rib and a shoulder blade were delivered to various convents, cities and churches.


Withkin, *Disciple & Master*, p. 95.


Parry, Joel-Peter Withkin, 55 Series, p. 108.

Withkin, *Disciple & Master*, p. 95.

Parry, Joel-Peter Withkin, 55 Series, p. 108.

Withkin, Van Deren Coke, *Forty Photographs*, p. 15.

Withkin, “Revolting Against the Mystical,” Celant, p. 53.


Marsh, p. 217. That “both subject and photographer are caught within the complex power structure which surrounds the subject, the object and the gaze, ” is what most intrigues Marsh, over and above the professed intent of Withkin or his models.


Parry, Joel-Peter Withkin, 55 Series, p. 66.

Townsend, *Vile Bodies*, pp. 58—59. Townsend makes a side-by-side comparison between *The Crucifixion*, by the Master of Saint Francis (c. 1272—1285) and Withkin’s *Maquette for the Crucifix* (1986), though as I discuss later, a Cimabue crucifixion from the church of San Domenico, Arezzo, is more appropriate.

Caroline Walker Bynum discusses the tradition of depicting Jesus as female, “lactating and giving birth,” in “The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg,” in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 82.

Gerry Badger, "Towards a Moral Pornography,” *Creative Camera*, no. 6, 1986, p. 35.


Freud, “Instincts and their Vicissitudes” (1915) quoted in Laplanche, p. 91.


Davis, p. 126.

Ibid., pp. 127—28.


Withkin, *Disciple & Master*, p. 119.


Ibid., p. 762.

Ibid., p. 763.

Ibid., p. 766.


Ibid., p. 654.


Ibid., p. 83.


Ibid.


Ibid., p. 64.


Ibid., pp. 130—31.

Ibid., p. 131.


Ibid., p. 171.


Ibid.


Ibid., pp. 21—22.

Van Deren Coke, *Forty Photographs*, p. 16.

Ibid., p. 15.

Witkin, Van Deren Coke, p. 16.


*Witkin email correspondence to the author regarding primates*, 29 November 2003.


Freud, “Totem and Taboo” in Gay, p. 504

Ibid., p. 505.

Ibid., p. 497.

Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” in Gay, p. 441.


Witkin, Van Deren Coke, *40 Photographs*, p. 15.
CHAPTER THREE
CONCLUSION: CASTRATED AND REDEEMED

Witkin’s *Penitente* (1982) (*figure 47*) makes direct reference to masochism as penance. The title *Penitente* recalls the active Penitente sect, who practice ‘purification from sin through severe penance,’ established some two hundred years ago in the American southwest where Witkin lives. Rituals include self-flagellation and re-enactment of the Crucifixion itself, from bearing the cross through crucifixion including, up until recently, spikes driven through hands and feet.¹ The Penitentes, like the 19th century photographer Holland Day, experience crucifixion at first hand by ascending the cross themselves. Witkin engages with it by making crosses heavy enough to support adult male humans and ‘crucifying’ monkeys. Indeed, to achieve the realistic life-sized body casts photographed for his final image, Witkin put his live models through an ordeal resembling the penance of the Penitentes, although here the model’s hands are held to the cross by leather straps rather than being penetrated by nails.²

When Eric Love, Witkin’s “most frequently used model,” died of an AIDS-related disease in 1992, his brother Carl Love assumed the role for *Penitente*, which would involve some 80 hours of posing for the body-cast sculpture of Christ. Despite undergoing hypnosis in order to learn self-induced trances to remain motionless for long periods, Carl remembers the experience of being suspended on the cross—aided by rope supports for his arms and a small platform under his buttocks—as a “physically exhausting” process, impossible to sustain for longer than 15 minutes to a half-hour, during which he vomited and fainted several times. “Joel doesn’t go out of his way to make you feel comfortable,” Carl observed. “…You’re a tool, objectified.”³

Despite Witkin’s apparent preference for playing the Father rather than the Son, directing the willing other allows him both to inflict pain (as the Father) and to experience the Son’s guilt and
anguish vicariously.

Witkin has felt compelled to repeat the crucifixion theme for two decades now, in which this relationship of heavenly father to human son has been subsumed into a personal reinterpretation and active mastery of his dual religious heritage and passive early familial situation. His deconstruction and recycling of this religious icon for personal reasons is not unique: For Francis Bacon, painting the Crucifixion is “almost nearer to a self portrait,” and a “magnificent armature,” from which to suspend “all sorts of very private feelings about behaviour and about the way life is.”

If Bacon tends to transform his crucified figures into hanging slabs of meat because we are all “potential carcasses,” Witkin is more interested in a familial debt and regression to origins—of the species and of the individual. Freud’s conception of Christ’s ambivalent role as a ‘son-deity’ bears examining in relation to Witkin’s crucifixions:

The very deed in which the son offered the greatest possible atonement to the father brought him at the same time to the attainment of his wishes against the father. He himself became God, beside, or more correctly, in place of, the father. A son-religion displaced the father religion. As a sign of this substitution the ancient totem meal was revived in the form of communion, in which the company of brothers consumed the flesh and blood of the son—no longer the father—obtained sanctity thereby and identified themselves with him. Thus we can trace through the ages the identity of the totem meal with animal sacrifice, with theanthropic human sacrifice and with the Christian Eucharist....The Christian communion, however, is essentially a fresh elimination of the father, a repetition of the guilty deed.

The crucifixion as penance and sacrificial loss has been opened up for interpretation here, as a reexamination of the parent/child relationship and of individual guilt, as the lack associated with the marginalized body, whether human or animal—and by extension, physiological punishment visited on the viewer. Other Witkin scenes of crucifixion/martyrdom variously feature lack as masochistic culpability: Mandan (1981) (figure 27), as severe physical deformity—the thalidomide victim of Un Santo Oscuro (1987) (figure 54), and the phocomelic, crucified fetus of History of the White World (1997) (figure 42), and as that ultimate lack—the autopsied corpse in Glassman (1994) (figure 52), and the skeleton of a Saint Sebastian in Queer Saint (1999) (figure 64).
In *The Female Grotesque*, Mary Russo demonstrates how the irregular body of the freak, in departing from conventions of the perfection of the classically proportioned body, informs the monstrous gargoyle in architecture, correlating with Douglas’ perception of the interstitial danger of witchcraft residing in the margins of society: “If architecture inevitably involves the relationship between structure and detail, then it is unsurprising to find the grotesque architectural detail—the monster—located at the margins and joints of buildings.”

It is precisely on the margins of *Maquette for the Crucifix* (1986) (figure 10), an elaborate collage of photographs, drawing and text, that Witkin focuses his attention. He takes as model a thirteenth century crucifix type known as the School of Pisa, a painted wooden version of Byzantine gold and silver crucifixes which contained saintly relics in “small decorative receptacles at the lateral extremities.” In the Pisan crucifix, these receptacles were replaced by extensions to either side of the vertical shaft, featuring painted figures such as St. John and the Virgin, or narratives of the Passion on either side of *Christus Patiens*, the suffering and dead Christ. Chris Townsend draws comparisons between a thirteenth century crucifix painted by The Master of Saint Francis (figure 65) and Witkin’s *Maquette for the Crucifix*. In fact, Witkin’s positioning of four photographs at the extreme terminals of his crucifix is closer in spirit to Cimabue’s thirteenth century Crucifixion in the Church of Saint Domenico at Arezzo (figure 66). At top Cimabue depicts the Risen Christ above the plaque describing him as King of the Jews. At either end of Christ’s outstretched arms are the mourning Virgin and St. John, while blood drips from the stigmata in Christ’s feet in a symbolic cleansing of man’s sins.

In its emphasis on fragmented corporeality, *Maquette for the Crucifix*, New Mexico, (1986) returns to the preservation of sacred fragments which was the premise of the original Byzantine reliquaries on which Cimabue and the Master of Saint Francis base their crucifixes. The four photographs at the axes of his crucifix steal the show from his own Christ, a collage of screen-printed lead fragments deliberately superimposed over a painted Christ whose halo he assumes. Where this background figure is conventionally draped in the manner of Christs painted by Cimabue or the Master of Saint Francis, Witkin here as elsewhere depicts Christ...
naked. Steinberg’s emphasis on Christ’s sexuality as evidence of his humanity is relevant in this context, since several other elements of this icon place a strong emphasis on either androgynous, deformed, or ‘deviant’ sexual display.

At top, Witkin has replaced the traditional Risen Christ and the inscription King of the Jews with *Hermaphrodite With Christ, San Francisco* (1985) (figure 20) a portrait of an otherwise normal looking bearded man with a vagina instead of a penis. The symbolic lack of the castration complex is here exhibited as a real physical state, which is then deified by its position on the cross. If we compare this image with certain *ex votos* featuring a stylized stigma that actually resembles a vagina, the wound in Christ’s side has literally migrated. The very gender of the Risen Christ is ambiguous here, evoking a return to Christ’s own origins in the body of the Virgin Mary, and, given the executioner’s hood, less Jesus as Mother than, ironically, the phallic devouring mother goddesses of antiquity. From its exalted position on this crucifix, are we to equate resurrection with a return to Kristeva’s abjected maternal body from which the child never successfully separates, and from which there was no escape?

Indeed, echoing this first “ill-fated passion,” and replacing the Virgin on Christ’s right hand (viewer’s left) is *Infantilism* (figure 56), featuring a dominatrix suckling an adult male, both in leather and masks, while on Christ’s left, replacing St. John, is *Woman in A Blue Hat* (1985) (figure 67), featuring a seductively posed woman whose deformed body has restricted her to a wheelchair. At bottom, Witkin replaces the dripping blood of Cimabue’s crucifix with a variation on the human skull meant to depict the site of Adam’s burial, *Vase: Study for the Base of the Cross, San Francisco*, (1985) (figure 68).

These four photographs from 1985 refer to turning points in Witkin’s own spiritual search.

Witkin explains himself:

The image at top represents our confused ambition to understand faith. The small figure of a woman at right represents our non-functioning anatomy, a metaphor for what we have done to the world and to ourselves. The figure at the base is the dark triad of hatred, war and death, which aspires to encompass
life. The woman and her slave in the panel at left represent all the aberrations of love.\textsuperscript{18}

Effectively, we are physically lacking, handicapped, in our capacity as believers. Witkin's choice of a hermaphrodite to replace the traditional inscription of \textit{INRI}, King of the Jews, is provocative in view of the fact that his central figure of Christ is depicted naked, his manhood intact. Steinberg has shown that many fourteenth and fifteenth century crucifixes depicted Christ naked, the genitalia exposed to attest to potency under check.\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Hermaphrodite with Christ} is quite a rare image in Witkin's \textit{oeuvre}; more common are images of pre-op transsexuals featuring both breasts and penises (\textit{Helena Fourment}), confusing sexual identity through the multiplication of sexual characteristics rather than lack thereof. Like the ironically intended inscription 'King of the Jews' which it replaces, the hermaphrodite is the physical evidence of a highly unusual and unlikely natural condition (more so than pre-op transsexuals on female hormones). According to Witkin, it was the model himself who solicited the photographer in this case:

\begin{quote}
This man is rare, perhaps one in a million—even more….A true hermaphrodite is very rare—perhaps there are two in the world at any time. A real ‘H’ has both female and male organs, functioning. This is not an accident. God doesn’t make mistakes. All of us have spiritual problems to overcome*. *which in a physical world—take physical form.*\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Witkin's emphasis here is on the demographic rarity of the 'true' hermaphrodite, and on the link between that physical aberration and a divine plan. Given its position in \textit{Maquette for the Crucifix}, the hermaphrodite's wooden staff in \textit{Hermaphrodite with Christ} functions at once as crucifix, symbol of Christ's martyrdom, and as regal scepter and phallic symbol. The lack of this particular castration is thus transformed into spiritual potency and unity with the Divine. As in \textit{Still Life With Mirror}, a trauma now resolved preceding the taking of the image—there with the actual driving of the nails into the foot, here with an acknowledgement of the spiritual martyrdom this man must have endured as an Other since becoming cognizant of his difference in early childhood, where Freud locates the fear of castration at the hands of the father. Of the freak and the physically challenged, Chris Townsend observes:

\begin{quote}
For [Witkin] such people are contemporary saints, despised and rejected by society. Forced to live as beggars and marginal men, they bear the wounds of
\end{quote}
Christ. Witkin’s first response to physical difference and bodily pain is to say ‘it makes you holy.’ And from that inverting of values proceeds a personal spiritual project for the photographer. By a close identification with his subjects, by imagining himself as they are, he too becomes—in some way—sanctified.\textsuperscript{21}

The model in \textit{Hermaphrodite with Christ} has chosen to share his experience with Witkin and the viewer. Unlike the thalidomide ‘freak’ of \textit{Un Santo Oscurlo} (1987) (figure 54)\textsuperscript{22} he can pass in society; the mark of his difference, though external, is concealed. Yet with this private lack, the absence must be a constant presence, perhaps more so in that there is the assumption of ‘wholeness’ by others. The physical castration, the chopping off, implied by the executioner’s mask, the symbolic ‘wound’ and stigma of the man’s vagina, and the roughly severed tree branch/crucifix still retaining leaves, signify a mystical awareness which the model has attained through the ‘possession’ of this physical difference, this stigma (in this case a lack, not a mark.)

This sense of mystery is communicated to the viewer in a tangible way, observes Shauna Angel Blue, in her thesis premise of “hierophany,” literally, manifestation of the sacred. “There is actual exchange of energy, a ceremony, that happens between the Hermaphrodite and us, the viewer. In the subtleties of the symbols and the direct gaze of the model…we each become the other.”\textsuperscript{23}

This exchange reminds us of the symbolic bond of sacrifice that is at the heart of the Eucharist. “\textit{Redemption},” Kristeva observes, as “(repurchase, liberation) implies a substitution between the Saviour and the faithful….”\textsuperscript{24} Kristeva here chooses the “analyst’s literal reading” of “imaginary \textit{identification}”:

Identification does not mean delegating sins or shifting their burdens to the person of the Messiah. On the contrary, it calls for a total implication of the subjects in Christ’s suffering, in the hiatus he experiences, and of course in his hope of salvation…..man is…provided with a powerful symbolic device that allows him to experience death and resurrection even in his physical body, thanks to the strength of imaginary identification—and of its actual effects—with the absolute Subject (Christ).\textsuperscript{25}

If we each become—or perhaps recognize is a better term—the Other in ourselves, then redemption as substitution is an uncomfortable sensation in relation to Witkin’s work, his
elevation of the stigmatized body forcing an engagement with the abject and the uncanny. Nowhere in his Crucifixion imagery do we find a ‘clean and proper’ body in the Levitican sense.

Francis Bacon was similarly inspired by another of Cimabue’s crucifixions, whose inverted form reminded the artist of “a worm crawling down the cross.” 26 (figure 69) The embodiment of Levitican abjection, the worm is associated with death and earthly decay. Bacon’s association of the worm to the body of Christ, crawling down the inverted cross in the direction of Hell, is an absolute negation of resurrection, thereby blocking that which gives coherence to Christ’s bodily suffering. The right-hand panel of Bacon’s Three Studies for a Crucifixion (1962) was inspired by this reading of Cimabue. (figure 70) The primal scream issuing from the gaping, fanged mouth at bottom echoes that of Witkin’s howling Penitente trinity, while the vertically eviscerated carcass to which the head is attached is the visual equivalent of Witkin’s horizontally severed braincase in Penitente’s central Christ figure. Whether painting or photograph, both images feature a reductive process of dismantling and fragmenting the body to an elemental state—in Bacon’s case, liquefying to a puddle at the base of the cross, in Witkin’s, regressing to a primitive, less differentiated evolutionary state.

What Witkin considers a personal redemption through immersion in the profane is in fact an ancient way of approaching the mysticism of divinity, a role Douglas ascribes to the shaman and initiates in rituals of transition among primitive tribes. It is Witkin’s visual emphasis on the flawed body as the site of revelation that has earned him notoriety. By focusing on the freakishly deformed or maimed, the pregnant or obese, the dead and the unborn, Eleanor Heartney observes, “Witkin’s work stakes out the threshold between life and death, which for a Catholic believer provides the ultimate frontier between the human and the divine.” 27

One might argue that this marginal zone encompasses all that late 20th century American culture has lost in secularizing it. If the freak cannot be corrected by medical science at birth, his or her status as other is acknowledged only as a curt admonishment, “Don’t stare,” by parents to their children. The divine monster has been reduced to a physical disability, an
invisibility, as the thalidomide victim portrayed in *Un Santo Oscuro* (1987) has been reduced to begging on major highways in Los Angeles, \(^2\) far removed from the recognition, even carnivalesque celebration of other states of being as divine intervention.

The Other (specifically, death) is not representable in Freud’s lexicon, and in Kristeva’s definition of abjection, except as the absence of representation. A breakdown of logic, or an oscillation between coherence and incoherence, forms an approximate sign of this absence. “The self eroticises and signifies the obsessive presence of Death by stamping with isolation, emptiness, or absurd laughter its own imaginative assurance that keeps it alive….”\(^2\) We may venture that what was true for Holbein in his time is true for Witkin’s *Penitente or Saviour of the Primates* in ours. Stripped back to the essentials, almost the bare bones, Holbein’s hyperreal and claustrophobic *Dead Christ in the Tomb* (figure 43) returns the viewer to the “dynamics of primary identification at the foundation of idealization….The only thing then surviving is the meaning of the deeper workings represented by the cross: that of caesura, discontinuity, depression.”\(^3\) These “deeper workings,” in Kristeva’s lexicon, thus represent an ultimate test of this symbol of Christianity, *beneath* the transformation of death into infinite Love and supreme renunciation of the self for the other. In Witkin’s *primate crucifixions*, this *primary identification* encounters resistance, even abhorrence at being forced to confront, regress to, and identify with that which we have supposedly surpassed:

Witkin upends humanistic thinking, confronting us with capacities and appetites we prefer to keep hidden. His astonishing crucifixions…that use dead Rhesus monkeys with their laboratory numbers stamped across their chests, are more than evocations of cruelty. They are harrowing meditations on the mystery of it. If this is man and the work of man, what is left to hope for? \(^4\)

By appropriating and deconstructing the most powerful symbols of Christianity—the Eucharist, the Crucifixion—Witkin, like Bacon before him, does not empty the Crucifixion of significance, as Anthony Julius claimed of Bacon. Witkin demonstrates rather that it is impossible to transcend this grotesque body we inhabit, and that any redemption is impossible without acknowledging, even embracing, this lack. Witkin’s position does not admit of resurrection because man’s inhumanity to man and beast has made him undeserving of salvation at the present time. Rather, like Holbein’s Christ, we are suspended in desolation, sandwiched in the space
between, in order to accept and acknowledge our abjection, as Witkin titles such as *I.D. Photograph from Purgatory: Two Women with Stomach Irritations* (1986) (figure 71) or *Counting Lesson in Purgatory* (1982) (figure 72) attest.

As a child, Witkin “recalls having an early and vivid conception of purgatory,” to the point of inquiring “how many prayers were necessary to keep him out.”\(^3^2\) The eternal Barthesian death implicit in the photograph, coupled with Witkin’s ambitious voiding of time, begins to resemble the *aevum* of purgatory, which is not discretely measurable in the time of this world.\(^3^3\) That purgatory is also frequently identified with the pain of loss, of separation from the Creator, a “postponement of the beatific vision,”\(^3^4\) responds to Witkin’s vision. Where the soul in purgatory is separated from its body, though “weighed down with impurities and imperfections of varying degrees,”\(^3^5\) Witkin’s creations are burdened—and redeemed—by their imperfect bodies. Like Sisyphus condemned to pushing the rock uphill, purgatory as catharsis is a perpetual state for Witkin, who presents man’s moral abjection as a repetitive and vicious cycle from the womb. Both *I.D. Photograph from Purgatory* and *Counting Lessons in Purgatory* cycle back to associate guilt with the maternal body, the fetus yet condemned to do penance for Eve’s Original Sin, since it cannot be guilty of either venial or mortal sin, having never lived outside the womb. “…I believe that evil exists within us,” Witkin states, “There’s a choice between goodness and evil, and I think we’re drawn towards both.”\(^3^6\) This acknowledgement of imperfection correlates well with the existence of a space between:

> …purgatory is not a place of negative suffering, designed only to punish the soul, but a state of positive progress where the person is enabled to possess God by first truly possessing himself.\(^3^7\)

There exists, however, a distinct difference in Witkin’s vision of purgatory; his mute and passive souls are by no means ensured of salvation in their passage, nor do they accept their suffering joyfully. His purgatory is rather a tonic assumption of the abject.\(^3^8\)

By deconstructing and re-engaging with religious iconography in image after image, Witkin affirms his position as a literalist, affirming rather than subverting the logic of Christian
symbolism. If his imagery is graphic, monstrous and disturbing, so too were the torments at the origin of our religious icons, with which we may have disconnected. The difference, of course, is that Witkin does not present or allude to the certainty of redemption, which is what makes his work freshly traumatic. In his representation of suffering, confusion, and lack, Witkin’s imagery presents an actual physical severance in place of Kristeva’s “severance of representation.” In doing so, he forms a response to a question Kristeva poses: “Is it still possible to paint when one identifies not with desire but with severance, which is the truth of human psychic life, a severance that is represented by death in the imagination and that melancholia conveys as symptom?”

Through his work, Witkin compromises with reality, transforming this place of severance into desire—an attempt to represent the ambivalent coexistence of desire and hatred in one individual. The influence of parental authority on his work has been sublimated and mined for its fruitful imagery. As Freud observed, “we can never give anything up.” The artist in Witkin has trod the path of the neurotic in a perpetual return.

3 R. H. Cravens, "Joel-Peter Witkin" Aperture, no 133, Fall 1993, p 57.
4 See in particular Gerry Badger’s analysis of Witkin’s imagery as “a series of variations on the theme of transfiguration.” These includes Witkin as the “Lamb of God, who ‘taketh away the sins of the world.’” Further along, Badger writes: “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.” The obvious problem to Badger is that the perpetrator of all these punishments is Witkin himself, thereby testifying to atrocities perpetrated “by mankind upon mankind. That is Witkin’s despairing message, God is Dead. We are alone, probably without any redemption, only a brutalizing, and brutalized mankind, or perhaps (for I think the implication is there in the work), a brutalizing man.” Gerry Badger, “Towards a Moral Pornography,” Creative Camera, no. 6, 1986, p. 35.
5 Francis Bacon, David Sylvester, Interviews with Francis Bacon, Thames and Hudson, London, 1975, pp. 44—46.
9 Ibid., pp. 6—8.
12 Brown, p. 7, for the traditional cleansing qualities of Christ’s blood.
13 Witkin, Joel-Peter Witkin: Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Sevilla, January 1989, Junta de Andalucia, Consejeria de Cultura, Seville 1989, pp. 24—25. In a section entitled ‘El Crucifijo,’ Witkin describes the intensive labor involved in assembling this body of Christ as “a manifestation of faith.” (translation from the Spanish by the author).
14 Marie-France Boyer, *The Cult of the Virgin: Offerings, Ornaments and Festivals*, translated from the French by Jane Brenton, Thames & Hudson, London, 2000, p. 51. Other examples exist in which the wound is isolated and positioned vertically, as if to meld the Virgin Mary and her son Jesus into one suffering/castrated body.


Witkin has confirmed that this is a human skull. *Joel-Peter Witkin email correspondence to the author regarding skull in Vase: Study for the Base of the Cross*, 20 July, 2004.

16 Townsend, p. 51. Townsend speculates that *Maquette for the Crucifix* contains a personal narrative from Witkin’s life.


21 Townsend, p. 46.

22 Witkin, Townsend, p. 48. *Un Santo Oscuro* represents an attempt on Witkin’s part to photograph this victim of acute physical suffering “as clerics would have been depicted, mostly in seventeenth and eighteenth century Spain, as martyrs, and I told this man that he was a martyr to life.” The identification with suffering inherent in this attitude has put other critics in mind of Saint Francis of Assisi, drinking the pus of lepers to overcome his revulsion of them. (See Keith Seward, “Joel-Peter Witkin: Pace/Macgill Gallery,” *Artforum International*, vol. 31, Summer 1993, Reviews, p. 108).


26 Ibid., p. 134.


28 Townsend, p. 48.


30 Ibid., p. 135.


34 Ibid.


38 The transactional nature of Medieval purgatory as described by Jacques Le Goff, in which the living prayed (and paid) to speed the passage of their dead relations through purgatory, has an interesting counterpoint in Witkin’s imagery, calculated as it is to psychically influence and scar the viewer. A photograph may immortalize death in Barthesian terms, yet it reaches out repeatedly to wound the living. Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Scolar, London, 1984.

APPENDIX I

JOEL-PETER WITKIN EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE TO THE AUTHOR

29 November 2003—Joel-Peter Witkin email correspondence to Despina Metaxatos regarding his use of primates.

9 April 2004—Joel-Peter Witkin email correspondence to Despina Metaxatos regarding The Wife of Cain.

23 April 2004—Joel-Peter Witkin email correspondence to Despina Metaxatos regarding darkroom techniques.

17 June 2004—Joel-Peter Witkin email correspondence to Despina Metaxatos regarding crucifixion.

17 June 2004—Joel-Peter Witkin email correspondence to Despina Metaxatos regarding the Penitentes.

20 July 2004—Joel-Peter Witkin email correspondence to Despina Metaxatos regarding skull in Vase: Study for the Base of the Cross.
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Thurmer, R., (curator), Body of Evidence: The Figure in Contemporary Photography, Cleveland State University Art Gallery, Ohio, September 22—October 20, 1995.

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**AUDIOVISUAL**


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Blue, S.A. (Bastone), "The Sacred and the Sexual in the Work of Linda Connor, Joel-Peter Witkin, and Sally Mann," Graduate School of Columbia College, Department of Photography, Chicago, 2001, MFA.

Dermer, R.A., "Photographic Objectivity and the Construction of the Medical Subject in the United States," Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Boston, 2002, Ph.D.

DeWald, N., “Parthenogenesis and Revelation: Joel-Peter Witkin and the Masochistic/Grotesque,” Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park, 1994, MA.

IMAGE LIST

Unless otherwise stated, Joel-Peter Witkin's photographs are gelatin silver prints, frequently toned with selenium and sepia toners. His exhibited prints have been printed in editions of twelve (dimensions approx. 32 x 36cm.) or fifteen, (dimensions approx. 40.6 x 50.8 cm.) or the largest in special exhibition print editions of three (dimensions approx. 71 x 71cm.). Recently (Oeuvres Récentes), he has been printing formats up to 86 x 67.5 cm. (image size) in editions of twelve. Witkin also produces hand colored encaustic versions of some prints, which are unique states, as well as preparatory pencil or colored drawings for many images. I have tried to include various print dimensions from different exhibitions; where only one dimension is given, this does not preclude the image being printed in other formats.

Figure 1  
Sanitarium, New Mexico  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1983  
toned gelatin silver print  
3/3. 71 x 71.5cm.  
also 40.6 x 50.8 cm.

Figure 2  
Skeletons of a Man and a Male Gorilla  
Roger Fenton  
1861  
albumen or salted paper print  
dimensions unknown  
The British Museum, London

Figure 3  
Nature morte, Strasbourg  
Charles-David Winter  
c. 1850  
daguerreotype  
dimensions unknown  
Musée d’art Moderne et Contemporain, Strasbourg

Figure 4  
Studio de Winter, Paris  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1994  
toned gelatin silver print  
81.3 x 91.4 cm.

Figure 5  
Nu allongé sur un lit dans l’atelier de l’artiste  
Charles Nègre  
c. 1850  
negatif papier ciré (negative on waxed paper)  
dimensions unknown  
Photo RMN, Musée d’Orsay, Paris

Figure 6  
Nègre’s Fetishist, Paris  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1990  
toned gelatin silver print  
64.7 x 85 cm.

Figure 7  
Crucifixion  
F. Holland Day  
1898  
photograph  
dimensions unknown  

Figure 8  
Feast of Fools, New Mexico  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1990  
toned gelatin silver print  
40.6 x 50.8 cm. also lists 65 x 83cm. and 64.7 x 90 cm. edition of 15.

Figure 9  
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania  
Walker Evans  
1936  
photograph  
size of original negative: 8 x 10” (20.3 x 25.4 cm.)  

Figure 10  
Maquette for the Crucifix, New Mexico  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1986  
mixed media, collage, photograph and gilding on paper  
37.5 X 38cm.

Figure 11  
Las Meniñas, New Mexico  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1987  
toned gelatin silver print  
1/3. 71 x 71cm.

Figure 12  
Studio of the Painter (Courbet), Paris  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1990  
toned gelatin silver print  
40.6 x 50.8 cm. also 73 x 98 cm.
Figure 13  
**Teatro di Morte**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1989  
toned gelatin silver print  
dimensions unknown.

Figure 14  
**The Wife of Cain, New Mexico**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1981  
toned gelatin silver print  
36.6 x 37.6 cm.

Figure 15  
**Choice of Outfits for the Agonies of Mary, San Francisco**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1984  
toned gelatin silver print  
36.8 x 37.4 cm. also 73.6 x 72 cm.

Figure 16  
**Still Life, Mexico**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1992  
toned gelatin silver print  
78.7 x 101.6 cm. edition of 12.

Figure 17  
**Evisceration of Waited Moments—from American Morgue Chocolates series**  
Stephen Shanabrook  
1994  
Chocolates in box  
50 x 45 x 6 cm.  
Private Collection

Figure 18  
**Courbet in Rejlander’s Pool, New Mexico**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1985  
toned gelatin silver print  
2/3. 71.5 x 71.5 cm.

Figure 19  
**Apollonia and Dominetrix Creating Pain in the Art of the West, New York City**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1988  
toned gelatin silver print  
2/3. 71 x 71 cm. Also 40.6 x 50.8 cm. edition of 15.

Figure 20  
**Hermaphrodite With Christ, San Francisco**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1985  
toned gelatin silver print  
8/15. 36.8 x 37.6 cm.

Figure 21  
**The Shoe Fucker and the Woman Who Believes She’s Becoming a Camera, Paris**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1998  
toned gelatin silver print  
78 x 64 cm.

Figure 22  
**Star of David Dancer, from “Coney Island Freak Show”**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1956  
photograph  
dimensions unknown

Figure 23  
**Puerto Rican Boy, New York City**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1956  
photograph  
dimensions unknown

Figure 24  
**Three Kinds of Woman, Mexico**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1992  
toned gelatin silver print  
64.7 x 83 cm.

Figure 25  
**John Herring, P.W.A., Posed as Flora with Lover and Mother, New Mexico**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1992  
toned gelatin silver print  
77 x 92 cm., also 76 x 101.6 cm. edition of 12.

Figure 26  
**Testicle Stretch with Possibility of a Crushed Face, New Mexico**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1982  
toned gelatin silver print  
4/15. 37.8 x 37.8 cm. also 40.6 x 50.8 cm.

Figure 27  
**Mandan, San Francisco**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1981  
toned gelatin silver print  
3/15. 37.9 x 37.9 cm.

Figure 28  
**Ecce Homo from series “Contemporary Images of Christ”**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1975  
photograph  
dimensions unknown

Figure 29  
**Mother and Child (with Retractor, Screaming), New Mexico**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1979  
toned gelatin silver print  
8/15. 36 x 36 cm.

Figure 30  
**Amour, New Mexico**  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1987  
toned gelatin silver print  
7/15. 37.7 x 38.5 cm.
Figure 31
Abundance, Prague
Joel-Peter Witkin
1997
toned gelatin silver print
50.5 x 40.5 cm.

Figure 32
Journeys of the Mask: Helena Fourment
Joel-Peter Witkin
1984
toned gelatin silver print
3/3. 71 x 71 cm.

Figure 33
The Graces, Los Angeles
Joel-Peter Witkin
1988
toned gelatin silver print
3/3. 71 x 71 cm.

Figure 34
Australian Drag Queen
Joel-Peter Witkin
1982
toned gelatin silver print
dimensions unknown

Figure 35
Collector of Fluids, New Mexico
Joel-Peter Witkin
1982
toned gelatin silver print
37.5 x 38.5 cm. also 71 x 71 cm. edition of 3.

Figure 36
Man Without Legs, New York City
Joel-Peter Witkin
1984
toned gelatin silver print
1/15. 36.7 x 37.8 cm. also 71 x 71 cm. edition of three.

Figure 37
Corpus
Joel-Peter Witkin
1971—74
kinetic sculpture, plaster with tempera paint and nails
203.2 x 59.7 cm.

Figure 38
Crucified Horse, New Mexico
Joel-Peter Witkin
1999
gelatin silver print
74 x 60 cm.

Figure 39
Portrait of Joel Cynthia Witkin
Joel-Peter Witkin
1984
gelatin silver print
28.1 x 28 cm.

Figure 40
Isenheim Altarpiece
Matthias Grünewald
1515—oil on wood
central panel: 269 x 307 cm.
Musée d’Unterlinden, Colmar, France.

Figure 41
Still from film “The Passion of the Christ”
Mel Gibson, Director
Icon Distribution, Inc.
2004.

Figure 42
The History of the White World: Venus Preferred to Christ, Paris
Joel-Peter Witkin
1997
toned gelatin silver print
41 x 36.5 cm.

Figure 43
Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb
Hans Holbein the Younger
1521—22
 tempera on limewood
30.5 x 200 cm.
Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Kunstmuseum, Basel.

Figure 44
Le Table Servis (Set Table)
J.N. Nièpce
1825—29
Reproduction of glass negative plate coated with bitumen of Judeah
Dimensions unknown
Société Francaise de Photographie, Paris.

Figure 45
Lesson in the Kabala
Joel-Peter Witkin
1981
toned gelatin silver print
dimensions unknown

Figure 46
Face at the Window
Joel-Peter Witkin
1967
photograph
dimensions unknown

Figure 47
Penitente, New Mexico
Joel-Peter Witkin
1982
toned gelatin silver print
P/A 2 37.2 x 38.5 cm. also in 71 x 71 cm. edition of 3.

Figure 48
Head of a Dead Man, Mexico
Joel-Peter Witkin
1990
toned gelatin silver print
50 x 40 cm.
Figure 49
Woman With Severed Head, New Mexico
Joel-Peter Witkin
1982
toned gelatin silver print
3/3. 71 x 71 cm. also in 40.6 x 50.8 cm. edition of 15.

Figure 50
Double Portrait of Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve (‘The Ambassadors’) Hans Holbein the Younger
1533
oak panel
206 x 209 cm.
The National Gallery, London

Figure 51
Still Life with Mirror, New Mexico
Joel-Peter Witkin
1998
gelatin silver print
62.5 x 77 cm.

Figure 52
Glassman, New Mexico
Joel-Peter Witkin
1994
toned gelatin silver print
93 x 77.7 cm.

Figure 53
Saviour of the Primates, New Mexico
Joel-Peter Witkin
1982
toned gelatin silver print
6/15. 37 x 38 cm. also in 71 x 71 cm. edition of 3.

Figure 54
Un Santo Oscuro, Los Angeles
Joel-Peter Witkin
1987
toned gelatin silver print
7/15. 37.5 x 38.8 cm. also 71 x 71 cm. edition of 3.

Figure 55
Sander’s Wife, New Mexico
Joel-Peter Witkin
1981
toned gelatin silver print
6/15. 38.2 x 38.7 cm. also 40.6 x 50.8 cm.

Figure 56
Infantilism, San Francisco
Joel-Peter Witkin
1985
toned gelatin silver print
2/15. 37.5 x 38.1 cm. also
40.6 x 50.8 cm. edition of 15.

Figure 57
The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa, Cornaro Chapel, S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome
Gian Lorenzo Bernini
1645—52
life-size marble statue

Figure 58
A Light Not of This World, Paris
Joel-Peter Witkin
1999
lead pencil on paper
34.2 x 26.4 cm.

Figure 59
Intercourse, New Mexico
Joel-Peter Witkin
1998
ink drawing on paper
17 x 19.4 cm.

Figure 60
Fragment of a Crucifixion
Francis Bacon
1950
oil and cotton wool on canvas
139.7 x 108.6 cm.
Stedelijk van Abbesmuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands

Figure 61
Laokoön, New Mexico
Joel-Peter Witkin
1992
toned gelatin silver print
40.6 x 50.8 cm. also 76 x 73.5 cm.

Figure 62
Agonistes of the Eternal Wait, Portugal/New Mexico
Joel-Peter Witkin
1990
toned gelatin silver print
three units, 70 x 121.9 cm.

Figure 63
Dog on a Pillow, Marseilles
Joel-Peter Witkin
1994
toned gelatin silver print
82.5 x 74 cm.

Figure 64
Queer Saint, Paris
Joel-Peter Witkin
1999
toned gelatin silver print
72.8 x 57.4 cm.

Figure 65
The Crucifixion
Master of St. Francis
c. 1272—1285
oil on wood, gilding
92 x 70 cm.
The National Gallery, London

Figure 66
Crucifix, Church of San Domenico, Arezzo
Cimabue
Thirteenth century
Tempera and gold on panel
336 x 267 cm.
| Figure 67 | Woman in the Blue Hat, New York  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1985  
toned gelatin silver print  
3/3. 71 x 71 cm.  edition of 3. |
| Figure 68 | Vase: Study for the Base of the Cross, San Francisco  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1985  
toned gelatin silver print  
3/3. 71 x 71 cm. |
| Figure 69 | Crucifix, Florence, Museo dell’Opera di Santa Croce  
Cimabue  
Thirteenth century  
Tempera and gold on panel  
433 x 390 cm.  (shown inverted) |
| Figure 70 | Three Studies for a Crucifixion  
(right hand panel)  
Francis Bacon  
1962  
Oil and sand on canvas  
Three panels, each 198.1 x 144.8 cm.  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York |
| Figure 71 | ID Photograph from Purgatory: Two Women With Stomach Irritations, New Mexico  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1982  
toned gelatin silver print  
15/15 36.5 x 38 cm. |
| Figure 72 | Counting Lessons in purgatory  
Joel-Peter Witkin  
1982  
toned gelatin silver print  
71 x 71 cm, edition of 3. |

Reproductions of Joel-Peter Witkin’s photographs are primarily drawn from the following sources (cited in bibliography):


Figure 4
Figure 37 (side and frontal view)
Figure 52

Figure 53
Figure 72