



JOEL-PETER WITKIN

28 October 2005—30 January 2006

Joel-Peter Witkin, born in Brooklyn in 1939, is a pioneering figure in contemporary photography known for his strikingly theatrical and controversial images. Drafted into the U.S. Army in 1961, he served as a combat photographer in Vietnam until 1964. Upon returning to New York, he worked for City Walls Inc. as an official photographer, later completing his B.F.A. in sculpture at Cooper Union. Though awarded a poetry scholarship from Columbia University, he pursued graduate studies in photography at the University of New Mexico, where he received both an M.A. and an M.F.A.

Witkin's artistic language combines meticulous composition with deeply provocative subject matter. Often described as baroque surrealism, his work draws on classical art history, religious symbolism, and the traditions of vanitas and memento mori. He stages elaborate studio tableaux featuring figures who exist outside social norms, transforming them into allegories of mortality, transgression, and spiritual transcendence. His still lifes are carefully arranged using animal remains, antique props, and symbolic objects, echoing the structure of 17th-century Dutch paintings while subverting their meanings.

His photographs, both haunting and strangely tender, explore the boundaries between beauty and horror, life and death, the sacred and the grotesque. Through a distinctive process that includes sketching compositions in advance, then altering negatives by scratching, bleaching, and hand-coloring, Witkin creates images that feel timeless and unclassifiable. Their black-and-white palette and ornate presentation further evoke a dialogue with art historical predecessors such as Goya, Bosch, Blake, and Géricault.

"I do not intend to create something shocking, sensational or immoral. On the contrary, my work speaks about the beauty of life and its frailty, about morality and even about immortality." — Joel-Peter Witkin

Witkin's work has sparked ongoing debate about the ethics of representation and the power of photography to confront taboo. His images are held in major public collections, including:

Museum of Modern Art (New York, USA), Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, USA), Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, USA), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (USA), J. Paul Getty Museum

(Los Angeles, USA), The National Gallery of Art (Washington, USA), Victoria and Albert Museum (London, UK), Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris, France), Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris, France), Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam, Netherlands), Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid, Spain), High Museum of Art (Atlanta, USA), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, USA), Kansas City Art Institute (USA), Princeton University Art Museum (USA), George Eastman Museum (Rochester, USA), Akron Art Museum (USA), University of Arizona (USA), Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art (Japan).

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