

The Crucifixion in the Work of Joel-Peter Witkin

By

Erik Benitez Muñoz

Submitted to OCAD University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
Contemporary Art, Design, and New Media Art Histories

© Erik Benitez Muñoz, April 2014

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Copyright Notice

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

You are free to: Share – To copy, distribute and transmit the written work.

You are not free to: Share any images used in this work under copyright unless noted as belonging to the public domain.

Under the following conditions:

Attribution – You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

Noncommercial – You may not use those work for commercial purposes.

Non-Derivative Works – You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

With the understanding that:

Waiver — Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.

Public Domain — Where the work or any of its elements is in the public domain under applicable law, that status is in no way affected by the license.

Other Rights — In no way are any of the following rights affected by the license:

Your fair dealing or fair use rights, or other applicable copyright exceptions and limitations; The author's moral rights; Rights other persons may have either in the work itself or in how the work is used, such as publicity or privacy rights.

Notice — For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this MRP. This is a true copy of the MRP, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I authorize OCAD University to lend this MRP to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I understand that my MRP may be made electronically available to the public.

I further authorize OCAD University to reproduce this MRP by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

Signature _____

Abstract

The works of American photographer Joel-Peter Witkin demonstrate how Catholic faith can influence and challenge an artist's practice. Through an analysis of four photographs, *A Christ* (1987), *Crucified Horse* (1999), *Naked Follow the Naked Christ* (2006), and *Crucifix and Tapestry* (2010), I examine how Witkin represents the crucifixion by altering its iconography in creative ways. I compare Witkin's crucifixion imagery to works by Andres Serrano and Cosimo Cavallaro, artists who share some of Witkin's interpretations of the crucifixion, and to the work of Hermann Nitsch, whose practice is radically different. Witkin's crucifixions defy orthodox representations of the body not only by presenting a nude male body but also by shifting its affect – from devotion to eroticism. While these depictions of the crucifixion have been criticized for being blasphemous, this MRP seeks to analyze and explore how they may be understood as an alternative confirmation of the Catholic faith.

Acknowledgements

My deepest appreciation to Joel-Peter Witkin, for his inspiring and astonishing work and for kindly responding to my many questions; and to his wife Barbara Gilbert, who facilitated our correspondence. I like to thank the Graduate Faculty of CADN for their insightful and thought-provoking criticisms during the process of researching and writing this work. I am grateful to Michael Prokopow, the director of the Contemporary Art, Design, and New Media Histories Graduate Program, for his infectious passion for art. I also want to thank Jim Drobnick for his tremendous support and guidance during the final stages of my MRP and for seeing the potential of my project.

Dedication

To life... For giving me the opportunity to be better as a person every day.

To Gisa... For her pure love and our long conversations over the phone.

To Gus... For inspiring me to be a better artist and writer.

To Jeff... For his unconditional love and support.

To Blue Prince... For opening his arms and not letting me down when I felt like giving up.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Crucifixion in the Work of Joel-Peter Witkin	15
Conclusion	38
Bibliography	41
Appendix A: E-mail Correspondence with the Artist.....	47
Appendix B: Images	51

Introduction

When anyone devotes themselves to art, they don't only express their own view. They must also communicate to others what they believe in and what they live for.

—Joel-Peter Witkin¹

This Major Research Paper (MRP) examines how American artist and practising Catholic Joel-Peter Witkin incorporates crucifixion imagery into his work, thereby bringing the subject of religion and faith into a new, often challenging light. While the Church was often the commissioner and arbiter of religious imagery in centuries past, contemporary artists create their own representations irrespective of orthodox guidelines. Witkin creates photographs that express his own religious beliefs, and in this sense, his work can be seen as extending and challenging this history of representation. Witkin's work is unique in that it affirms his position on religion in a contemporary context not by copying religious themes or by following the norms set out by the institutions of faith, but by creating religious imagery to reflect issues pertinent to today's culture.

Controversy over Witkin's work has focused on his portrayal of marginalized people: those who are ignored or rejected by others in many societies. These portrayals include images of transgendered people,

¹ Joel-Peter Witkin, quoted in Otto M. Urban. *Joel-Peter Witkin: Vanitas* (Řevnice, Czech Republic: Arbor Vitae, 2011), p. 9.

hermaphrodites, amputees, dwarves, and the physically disabled.² In these works, Witkin transforms his models into the focal points of the photographic tableaux, making the viewer *acknowledge* them and their existence. What is interesting to note is that the controversy tends to be centred in the United States, rather than in Europe—and especially not in France where he is recognized and highly admired. Art collector Susan Rosenberg points out that “it is sad that [this recognition] is not happening in the USA, but [this] is indicative of what the USA stands for in terms of art.”³ It can be argue that this recognition is not happening because the homophobia of religious fundamentalism in the USA.

Despite his controversial reception in the United States, Witkin does not set out to create work with the intention of shocking the viewer but, instead, seeks to convey his “consciousness at that moment.”⁴ This MRP will undertake a close reading of his work to seek out what kind of beliefs he does profess, and how these beliefs are incorporated into his artistic practice. This is particularly relevant to four works in Witkin’s oeuvre: *A Christ* (1987), *Crucified Horse* (1999), *Naked Follow the Naked Christ* (2006), and *Crucifix and Tapestry* (2010). Each of these works presents an exercise in re-enacting the crucifixion of Christ. They differ dramatically from the

² “Transgender” refers to a person who changes their physical appearance to match their sexual orientation. For more on the topic of transgender, see *Trans(per)forming Nina Arsenault* by Judith Rudakoff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

³ *Joel-Peter Witkin: An Objective Eye*. Directed by Thomas Marino (Albuquerque: Independent Film, 2013, 120 min).

⁴ Joel-Peter Witkin, e-mail to the author, November 1, 2012.

common representation of the Roman empire's brutal and effective punishment of Christ, and alters it in startling ways. Furthermore, while Witkin affirms his Catholicism through focusing on the re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ, he also creates artwork that critiques institutionalized faith, which can be discerned, for example, through the images of a crucified slaughtered horse and a crucified man with an erection.

Melody D. Davis states in her book, *The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography* (1991), that critics in the late seventies thought that "the male nude did not belong in photography and that photograph the male nude was an attack and a mistake."⁵ One of the main reasons was the display of the penis, even though the ancient world celebrated it in art as well as in life. In the Western world since the advent of Christendom, the official doctrine mandated that the penis should not be displayed. For the ancient world and Christian world, the penis represented desire. Furthermore, "the sacred status of the penis and phallus that characterized the ancient world became, for Christians, a heresy."⁶ Davis further explains that for some people obscenity is signified by the visibility of male genitalia, though the same does not

⁵ Melody D. Davis, *The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), p. 3. For more in the critic of the male nude see Marcuse Pfeifer. *The Male Nude in Photography*. (New York: Pfeifer Gallery, 1979).

⁶ Davis, *ibid*.

pertain to the female body.⁷ Therefore, Witkin's work not only is challenging for presenting nude bodies, per se, but for intertwining religious imagery with erotic nude bodies, particularly the figure of Christ on the cross.

It can be argued that historical events as well as devotion have been catalysts in cultural production. Nonetheless Western art and religious images have traditionally been entwined and integral to one another within the history of Christianity. For hundreds of years after the death of Christ and following the establishment of Christianity across most of western Europe, the image of the crucifixion emerged as the central image of Christian art.⁸ As Emile Male writes in *Religious Art in France* (1984), "the artist was only the interpreter of Church thought."⁹ In 787, the fathers of the Second Council of Nicaea believed that the execution of religious art belonged to the artist while the composition would be determined only by the Catholic Church.¹⁰ Furthermore, as James Elkins writes in *The Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (2004), "for millennia, art has been religious, even in times and places when there was no word for 'art.'"¹¹

⁷ For more in the male nude, see Alasdair Foster, *Behold the Man: The Male Nude in Photography* (Edinburgh: Stills Gallery, 1988).

⁸ Margaret Walters. *The Nude Male: A New Perspective* (New York: Paddington Press, 1978), p. 72.

⁹ Emile Male. *Religious Art in France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 396.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ James Elkins. *The Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 42.

Although we live in increasingly secular times, artists such as Witkin nonetheless explore the enduring relationship between religion and art. Religious imagery is not simply based on matters of faith or conviction, but is also tied to and influenced by lived encounters and experiences, such as those experienced by Witkin during his childhood. In this MRP, I will demonstrate that art cannot be reduced to an image or an object, but that it involves multiple structures of feeling that invite an emotional and physical response. This is the case, for example, of votive images (“ex voto” or *retablos* in Spanish). These religious images or portarits, which were popular in Mexico City in the nineteenth century, were typically painted on sheets of tin and used to give thanks for a miracle received. The physical installation of a votive image thus required something of both the physical and the emotional.¹² Witkin's work, too, elicits an emotional response.¹³ While working in photography, Witkin incorporates elements of the diversity of the human condition as well as the theme of death in a way that is similar to votive representations, leading the viewer to emotional and visceral experiences.

¹² For more on the votive, see Gloria Kay Giffords. *Mexican Folk Retablos* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974).

¹³ The first time I saw Witkin's work, I encountered an emotional experience that I could not identify. I was drawn to the different subjects that he portrays, and the dark elements in his pieces made me question the intentions behind his work. As part of my Mexican heritage, I grew up experiencing the deep-rooted Catholic society that is part of Mexican culture. I personally do not practice any religion but I do recognize the power of iconic images such as those of the “ex votos” or of the crucifixion of Christ, which in some ways is the same power I felt while looking at Witkin's work.

The art historian Eugenia Parry was one of the first scholar to analyze Witkin's work—in a preface for some of Witkin's own publications and later in her book *Joel-Peter Witkin* (2001). Parry has written explanations of some of Witkin's earlier photographs and, in Thomas Marino's documentary *Joel-Peter Witkin: An Objective Eye* released in July 2013, has referred to him as a “spiritual reformer.”¹⁴ Recently, curator Anne Biroleau edited an exhibition catalogue for the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in which she explains the meaning behind Witkin's photographs in the Paris retrospective *Joel-Peter Witkin, Heaven or Hell* (2012).¹⁵ Little, however, has been said about the religious components of Witkin's work, and in fact, Jérôme Cottin, writing in the same catalogue, has suggested that the work “is neither Catholic nor Christian in their subject matter or context.”¹⁶ Even in his crucifixion images, with their overt Christian symbolism, the religious element remains undertheorized, which is why I have taken up the task of looking at Witkin's work with attention given to his religiosity as depicted in these particular photographs.

Reading Witkin through this lens positions his work not only within contemporary photographic practices but also as personal work that is injected with criticisms of contemporary visual and ideological issues. Witkin's work can be compared to works by one of his contemporaries, the Czech art photographer and

¹⁴ *Joel-Peter Witkin: An Objective Eye*. Directed by Thomas Marino. (Albuquerque: Independent Film, 2013, 120 min).

¹⁵ Anne Biroleau, ed. *Joel-Peter Witkin, Heaven or Hell*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2012).

¹⁶ *Idem.*, 43.

painter Jan Saudek, not in terms of religious imagery but in terms of technique. Saudek and Witkin both work in black-and-white photography, but Saudek finishes his works by painting directly onto the printed photograph, while Witkin manipulates his negatives before the first print. In this sense both artists work directly with their photographs, leaving a personal touch to their work. In terms of subject matter, Saudek uses the female figure most of the time, in all different shapes and sizes. His work has been called pornographic even though he does not see it that way, as he mentions in the documentary *Jan Saudek* (2007).¹⁷ In *The Girl I Loved* (1995), which was made in response to Witkin's work, Saudek photographed a nude girl whose body was burned in a fire at the age of eight months. His intention was to show that there still was beauty in a burned body.¹⁸ In terms of subject matter, there are similarities between Witkin's work and those of artists such as Andres Serrano, Cosimo Cavallaro, and Hermann Nitsch, whose "religious" works make up a contemporary historical moment of art practice. However, Witkin is the only photographer of his time who continues to implement the re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ.

Born in 1939 in Brooklyn, New York, Joel-Peter Witkin was one of the triplets born to Max Witkin, a Russian Jew, and Mary Pellegrino, a Roman Catholic. Witkin's early life was marred by tragedy, and this early experience marked a starting point of influences in his artwork. One of the triplets died before birth and the parents'

¹⁷ *Jan Saudek*. Directed by Adolf Zika. (Czech Republic: Zipo Film, 2007, 185 min).

¹⁸ Ibid.

differing religious beliefs resulted in divorce. In 1945, at the age of six, Witkin witnessed a car accident while on his way to Mass. As Witkin himself explained, he saw the head of a little girl roll toward him, only to stop at his feet. He was just about to lean down and touch the head when someone carried him away from the scene.¹⁹ Witkin's experience of these tragedies (the loss of a sibling and the decapitation of the little girl), along with the influence of religion in his life (namely, of growing up under the guidance of his devoted Catholic mother and his awareness of the role that religion played in his parents' failed marriage) constitutes a significant background to his work.

Witkin acquired a camera at a very young age and he recorded many moments of his life through that.²⁰ In Thomas Marino's documentary, he described his perspective as follows: "I see life as a photograph and always have, just as a painter sees life as a painting or sculptor as a sculpture."²¹ Witkin completed a bachelor's degree program in fine arts at Cooper Union in New York with a major in sculpture, and later returned to school to complete his graduate degree in photography at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.²² His training as a sculptor is evident in many of his works. For instance, in *Woman Masturbating on the Moon* (1982) he incorporates three-dimensional objects, including a large-scale sculpture of a moon. In

¹⁹ Joel-Peter Witkin. *The Bound House* (Sante Fe: Twin Palms, 1998).

²⁰ Eugenia Parry. *Joel-Peter Witkin*. (New York: Phaidon Press, 2001), p.126.

²¹ *Joel-Peter Witkin: An Objective Eye*. Directed by Thomas Marino. (Albuquerque: Independent Film, 2013, 120 min).

²² Eugenia Parry. *Joel-Peter Witkin*. (New York: Phaidon Press, 2001), p.126.

this work, Witkin not only uses common elements of photography, such as framing, lighting, camera angles, and exposure time, but also adds an element of printmaking. Before printing the photograph, the artist scratched the negative to produce a visual effect. This scratching technique is well known by printmakers as dry point and is a process by which lines are scratched into metal plates with either steel- or diamond-point needles. In Witkin's work, this process is done in the darkroom before printing the first copy, and the effect is the appearance of texture in the photograph, creating the illusion of an archived photo. This element also adds to the notion of the artist leaving a direct imprint on the work, in the sense that Witkin directly reworks the photograph. In the documentary by Thomas Marino, Witkin states that when he goes to the darkroom, he does not go in with any idea of what is going to happen or where he is going to scratch. The work that occurs is intuitive and in some cases does not succeed, and the end result will not be known until the first print is actually made.

Such a performative technique also applies to Witkin's conceptual approach., He brings together people, objects and scenes in order to bring together different symbols that are common in Christian literature, and then give them new meaning. In the case of the crucifixion of Christ, he not only confirms his own faith but also challenges it. This challenge emerges by creating new imagery which might at first glance be read as a mockery of the crucifixion, but which, as revealed through a close reading, is in fact the opposite.

The staging part of his photographs can be inferred because his figures exists

in an unreal space that is murky and theatrical. Curtains frequently bracket the subjects, underscoring a stage-like ambiance. Davis asserts that this theater leaves the viewer with an illusion, and that this illusion gives a sense of timeless and universal truths.²³ Witkin is a self-proclaimed visual priest, and thinks of himself as a Christ-like figure:

In order to know if I were truly alive, I'd make the invisible visible!
Photography would be the means to bring God down to earth—to exist for me
in the photographic images I would create.²⁴

Witkin's artistic practice is influenced by both his personal experiences as well as his religious beliefs, in addition to the history of religious representation in western art. While Witkin has created an extensive and diverse body of work, his crucifixions have been a recurring theme for twenty-eight years. Some of Witkin's works are reinterpretations of classical artworks, such as Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1484–86), Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), and Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the "Medusa"* (1818–19). Witkin brings his knowledge of the history of art into a contemporary context and has stated his desire to "[change] history and update history, updating the myth."²⁵

²³ Melody D. Davis. *The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991)

²⁴ Joel-Peter Witkin. *Joel-Peter Witkin: Forty Photographs* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1985). p.9.

²⁵ Joel-Peter Witkin. *Heaven or Hell*, at Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Rue de Richelieu, from 27th March to 1st July 2011, questions at the opening by Fanny Ginies, Baptiste Lignel, Mathieu Oui, and Bernard Perrine. YouTube

For instance, Witkin works with the Greek myth of Leda and the Swan, in which the God Zeus transforms into a swan to seduce and rape Leda.²⁶ Witkin updates this myth in his work *Leda Giving her Lover a Condom* (2011), in which Leda gives the swan (Zeus) a condom. In his work *Gods of Earth and Heaven* (1988), Witkin reinterprets *The Birth of Venus*, presenting the figure of Venus not as a woman but as a transgendered person.

Witkin's artwork also deals with death and dismembered body parts, which become even more prevalent following his enlistment as a photographer in the US army in 1961 at the age of twenty-two, volunteering for three years during the Vietnam War.²⁷ The presence of death during his early adulthood and the dismemberment he saw in the Vietnam War contributed to Witkin's use of cadavers in his work and to his respect for the deceased for the rest of his life. It is essential to state that the full cadavers and the body parts used in Witkin's work have only been used with the express permission of morgues. In addition, the cadavers (or "specimens" as Witkin refers to them) are those that no one claims; in other words, these cadavers have no identity.²⁸ Within Catholicism, these unburied bodies are deprived the opportunity to resurrect with Christ, and,

video, posted by "HLGfilms," April 12, 2012,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iYBIQN7vlw>.

²⁶ For more on Leda, see *Ancient Greek Cults* by Jennifer Larson (New York: Routledge, 2007).

²⁷ Eugenia Parry. *Joel-Peter Witkin*. (New York: Phaidon Press, 2001), p.126.

²⁸ *Joel-Peter Witkin: An Objective Eye*. Directed by Thomas Marino. (Albuquerque: Independent Film, 2013, 120 min).

therefore, their souls are denied everlasting life. Witkin's use of these bodies not only serves his art, but also gives these unknown bodies a place in the world and an immortality that was refused to them. Witkin constructs this change by making these bodies look like saints or martyrs, just as one would see in a Catholic church, with an expression of ecstasy towards heaven or with hands positioned as in prayer. This is the case in his work *Glassman* (1994), which is based on the iconic sculpture of Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (1645–1652). This modification can be seen by some viewers as an entry into heaven or, as it is known by many Catholics, as the entry to the kingdom of God.

Cadavers play an important role in Witkin's work and are part of the reason why his work is so well known.²⁹ It was in 1982 that he created *The Kiss*, in which the head of a man was used to portray a man kissing his other half, or even his twin. It was this work that solidified his reputation as an artist, which he discusses in the documentary by Thomas Marino. There was controversy over *The Kiss* because an art collector thought that Witkin had cut the head of the man in half, and for a long time people believed this to be the truth. However, as Witkin explains in the documentary, when he received the head from the University of New Mexico, it was already cut in half, for medical study. Furthermore, he makes

²⁹ For more on the role of cadavers, see Joel-Peter Witkin: *Masterpieces of Medical Photography: Selections from the Burns Archive*. Introduction by Stanley B Burns, M.D. (Pasadena: Twelve Trees Press, 1987).

clear that he would never mistreat a cadaver nor would he engage with anyone who did, and emphasizes that ethically he could not perform such an act.

Witkin has stated that “[w]hen anyone devotes themselves to art, they don’t only express their own view. They must also communicate to others what they believe in and what they live for.”³⁰ In this sense, Witkin communicates his religious beliefs throughout his work. In addition, he professes the same love for the abject and disenfranchised other that Jesus did, and this parallel is most obvious in Witkin’s signature motifs.³¹ Patrick S. Cheng has pointed out in *From Sin to Amazing Grace* that:

Jesus is constantly seen as transgressing the commonly accepted religious and legal boundaries of his day ... He touches and heals those who are considered to be unclean, including lepers, bleeding women, those possessed by demons, and the disabled.³²

Witkin may not heal people, but he also does not reject them, especially those portrayed in his work. On the contrary, his work represents and venerates those who are socially and culturally marginalized. Witkin is not afraid to showcase the physical diversity of humanity, and it is this diversity that has been the focal point for viewers as well as critics and religious groups. One of the reasons why Witkin

³⁰ Otto M. Urban. *Joel-Peter Witkin, Vanitas* (Řevnice, Czech Republic: Arbor Vitae, 2011), p. 9.

³¹ Jesus saw everyone as equals. He did not reject anyone based on their religious beliefs or their physical appearances. For more on the life of Jesus Christ, see *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1967), Vol. VII, p. 909.

³² Matt 8:1–4, Luke 17:11–19.

has received attention lies in the complex representation of these marginalized subjects, such as transgendered people, hermaphrodites, amputees, dwarves, and the physically disabled. As well, his work has been described as blasphemous and perverted because of his use of nude figures within the iconic imagery of the Church, which I will discuss below.³³

In the context of the history of religious iconography in works of art, as well as a contemporary context of photographic practice, the core of this MRP is an analysis of four works by Witkin, while considering a theoretical interpretation of his work in relation to the French literary theorist Gérard Genette. At the same time, I compare his work with the works of Andres Serrano, Cosimo Cavallaro, and Hermann Nitsch. By comparing the works of Serrano and Cavallaro, I demonstrate how their use of the iconic imagery of Christ's crucifixion relates to Witkin's intention of confirming and reinventing the imagery of the Catholic faith. I suggest that Nitsch uses the imagery of the cross for a different purpose, to imitate or search for the power that the crucifixion of Christ carries.

³³ Kristine McKenna, "Joel-Peter Witkin: Peering Over the Abyss: Sexual Deviants, Cadavers, Circus Freaks Populate Photographer's World," *Los Angeles Times* (January 1, 1989). http://articles.latimes.com/1989-01-01/entertainment/ca-224_1_joel-peter-witkin (accessed June 14, 2012).

The Crucifixion in the Work of Joel-Peter Witkin

This MRP explores the crucifixion photographs of Joel-Peter Witkin and their commentary on Catholic faith and imagery. Using concepts from the French literary theorist Gérard Genette, I will examine four major photographs by Witkin and follow how the image of the crucifixion developed over the course almost thirty years. By analyzing the works in a chronological order, I will show how each approaches the notion of the crucifixion differently, as well as comparing Witkin's work to similar representations by other contemporary artists.

Witkin's works have what the French literary theorist Gérard Genette, in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1997), calls a "paratext" of Christian iconography, in the sense that the iconic imagery of the crucifixion *frames* the four main photographs I have selected. In this case, the "frame" refers to the crucifixion of Christ that enacts a "paratext" in that Witkin's work is positioned within the limits or the re-enactment of religious text, specifically the crucifixion of Christ. Moreover, it seems that Witkin's work can also be considered a "metatext" according to Genette's terminology—in other words, it is also a commentary on the *text* of religion, or the perception of the crucifixion according to the institution of the Catholic Church. Witkin's commentary is on the representation of the crucifixion of Christ that has been portrayed for centuries. While Witkin displays his Christianity throughout his work, and considers the

crucifixion to be the most important event in all history,³⁴ the artist nonetheless presents commentary and critique through his subject.

My close reading of four works – *A Christ* (1987), *Crucified Horse* (1999), *Naked Follow the Naked Christ* (2006), and *Crucifix and Tapestry* (2010), all of which are gelatine silver prints of 16” x 20” – will explicate the Christian symbolism contained within them and how they exemplify Witkin’s intentions and beliefs.

In addition, Witkin’s images can be seen as erotic because the artist presents nude male bodies. In *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ*, Patrick S. Cheng defines “erotic” by quoting from *Uses of the Erotic* by Audre Lorde, an African American lesbian theorist and writer. Cheng explains that for Lorde the erotic was not a matter of pornography, but an intimate relationship with the other:

The erotic is the power that arises out of “sharing deeply” with another person. It is to recognize and honor desires ... It is also to recognize and honor the other, whether as friend, lover, or family member, as an embodied person. The erotic is to “share our joy in the satisfying” of the other, rather than simply using other people as “objects of satisfaction.”³⁵

In Witkin’s work, it is clear that the act of “sharing deeply” within his photographs is through the intimate representation of Christ; his

³⁴ Joel-Peter Witkin, e-mail to the author, November 1, 2012.

³⁵ Patrick S. Cheng. *From Sin to Amazing Grace* (New York: Seabury Books, 2012), p. 70.

connection with humanity comes through recognizing the crucifixion as hope for the world through that intimacy. In that sense, the erotic power that is portrayed in his artwork is not a sexual eroticism but instead a spiritual empathy and connection with Christ. Witkin mentions in the documentary by Marino that at some point in his life he was bisexual, which could explain the admiration for the male body that his photograph reveals. However, as I mentioned before, the admiration that Witkin has for Christ goes beyond a sexual desire to a spiritual connection. In addition, Cheng explains that an erotic Christ is about connections: “connections with each other; connections with the cosmos; and connections with God.”³⁶ He further quotes the lesbian feminist theologian Carter Heyward, who says that the grace of the erotic Christ takes the form of “justice love” and of sharing in “the earth and the resources vital to our survival and happiness as people and creatures.”³⁷ In the case of Witkin, the connection with the other is conveyed through the depiction of marginalized people and the reaffirmation of his beliefs through the re-enacting of the crucifixion of Christ.

In *The Erotic Arts* (1983), Peter Webb quotes Kenneth Clark, who explains the nature of attraction in art:

³⁶ Cheng, 78.

³⁷ Ibid.

All good nude paintings and sculptures are sexually stimulating ... No nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feelings, even though it may be only the faintest shadow—and if it does not do so, it is bad art or false morals.³⁸

Webb further points out that the nude is the prime erotic image and that every culture and period in the history of art would be represented in a survey of the treatment of the nude. Since the nude is the prime erotic image in the history of art, it is almost impossible not to see Witkin's male bodies as erotic.³⁹

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of the "homosocial" can be applied to the male body in Witkin's work. Homosocial is a term used to describe all male interchanges and negotiations that exclude women. Sedgwick elaborates that the term "desire" in its broadest sense is for her "the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged that shapes an important relationship."⁴⁰ Desire, in the case of Witkin, signals a powerful longing and empathy between men that is not necessarily a matter of love or erotic sexuality, but is instead a matter of admiration toward the body of Christ. In terms of the erotic, Witkin shares a deep relationship with Christ; and in terms of admiration, it is the body of Christ that represents humanity.

³⁸ Peter Webb. *The Erotic Arts* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1983), p. 103.

³⁹ I will further add that as a gay male I recognize the male nude in Witkin's crucifixions to exemplify "male desire."

⁴⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 2.

This MRP address Witkin's crucifixions in a chronological manner to demonstrate the persistent recurrence of the crucifixion throughout his artistic practice. Though there are other recurrent themes that are evident in the four artworks—such as the predominant depiction of the male nude body in a crucified position (with the exception of the second work in sequence which presents a horse, that is nevertheless male), the use of animal and insect motifs, the use of details of existing artworks as part of the background of his own work, and the use of human skulls—it is important to highlight the consecutive order of these artworks for the purpose of depicting how Witkin has developed from creating a peaceful meditation to a dramatic one and vice versa. However, it is also important to mention that there is a fifth crucifixion in Witkin's art practice, which was in fact his first attempt to re-enact the crucifixion of Christ.

That work is called *Penitente* (1982), which presents a naked man standing and simulating the crucifixion of Christ. The man, however, is wearing a mask, which gives the illusion that he has been beheaded, while his arms blend in with a black cross, making them look as if they have been chopped off as well. The man's expression is one of suffering, for the mouth is open as if he is screaming or calling for help, and on the bottom of the crucifix are the skeletal heads of two monkeys. In the background, two monkeys are positioned in the same manner as the crucified Christ. When Witkin rented the monkeys for his photograph they were identified with a number instead of a name. It was at this

moment that he made the conscious decision to display his crucified man with a number on his chest, transforming his picture into a tribute to the Jewish men, women, and children killed in the Holocaust.⁴¹ Since this photograph is a tribute to the Holocaust, I decided not to include it in this paper and to only focus on the Christian faith and not the Jewish faith. Nonetheless, even though it is a tribute to the Holocaust, Witkin incorporates Christian iconography with Jewish symbolism, which in fact is tied to his father's religious background.

The first of the four works I will discuss at length is *A Christ* (1987) [fig. 1], which presents a white nude male, whose body is lean, almost to the point of malnourishment, with a protruding ribcage. His head leans to the left and his eyes are closed. His knees drip with blood that runs down to his feet, which, along with his wrists, bear the signs of stigmata. The sides of his torso appear to be bleeding as well.⁴² This seemingly crucified body is shown in the middle of the composition. To the left is a dog, which is presented with a halo and dark, open wings on its back. The animal appears relaxed and with one leg dropped, as one might expect a dog sitting on a couch to look, and its head is turned towards the image of the crucified man in what appears to be a look of admiration.

⁴¹ As Eugenia Parry explains in her book *Joel-Peter Witkin* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2001), p. 36.

⁴² "Stigmata" is the term used by members of the Christian faith to describe bodily marks, sores, or sensations of pain in locations corresponding to the crucifixion wounds of Jesus Christ, such as the hands, wrists, and feet. See Stigmatization in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1967), Vol. XIII p. 711.

In *The Bestiary of Christ* (1991), Louis Charbonneau-Lassay mentions that Christian art has made the dog a symbol of fidelity. He explains that dogs are fidelity personified: “Since it is also the devoted guardian and defender of the flocks, Christian symbolism has made the dog the emblem of priest of all orders, who are appointed to be caretakers of Christ’s human flock.”⁴³ Furthermore, in the book created by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (2012) on the occasion of Witkin’s last retrospective show, *Heaven or Hell*,⁴⁴ the artist wrote an epilogue called “The Dog.” In it, he narrates the suffering of Christ before the crucifixion, and explains how a dirty street dog kept Christ company until he had risen: “the dog knew that Jesus was the God of men, animals, and the universe.”⁴⁵ For Witkin, the dog exemplifies the naturalness of devotion, uncluttered by rationality and human complexity. This portrayal of a dog’s simple devotion not only provides a model for how an aspiring viewer could relate to Christ, but also hints at how the artist may consider his own fidelity to the Savoir.

In *A Christ*, both subjects are in front of what appears to be a wrinkled fabric that serves as a background. The hue of the photograph is dark along the edges and bottom, and becomes progressively lighter towards the middle of the

⁴³ Louis Charbonneau-Lassay. *The Bestiary of Christ*, translated & abridged by D. M. Dooling (France: Parabola Books, 1991), p. 113.

⁴⁴ Joel-Peter Witkin, “The Dog,” in Anne Biroleau, ed. *Joel-Peter Witkin, Heaven or Hell*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2012), p. 213.

⁴⁵ Idem. 213.

knees where the man's blood appears. The depiction of blood here draws similarities to the representation of Christ, with the blood illuminating the body of the man, making him the full focal point of the composition. To create perfect symmetry in the composition, the darker part of the photograph where the dog is positioned is balanced with a dark section on the opposite side, making the work appear to have been scratched. According to Witkin, the title *A Christ* means that all of us are children of God.⁴⁶ Furthermore, in this image, what the artist particularly likes is the dog on the left wearing the halo, because for him this represents that in addition to the guardian angels⁴⁷ animals are our friends and protectors.⁴⁸

In this work the man presented in a crucified position that does not look as though he is nailed to a cross, nor does he seem to be standing. Rather, he appears to be floating, suspended in time and space. Even though he is in a crucified posture, he looks as if he is relaxed, satisfied and even enjoying the moment; this is further made clear by his facial expression, which looks as though he is in ecstasy, or perhaps in a mode of meditation. This expression is quite different from the common representations of the crucifixion where agony or pain is emphasized. While it is clear

⁴⁶ Joel-Peter Witkin, e-mail to the author, November 1, 2012.

⁴⁷ Angels in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* are assigned to protect and guide a particular person or group. Belief in angels can be traced throughout all antiquity. See Angels in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1967), Vol. I, p. 506.

⁴⁸ Joel-Peter Witkin, e-mail to the author, November 1, 2012.

through this work that Witkin uses Christian imagery, such as the crucifixion of Christ and the symbolism of the dog, he does so while also diverging from a traditional representation.

A similar use of the imagery of the crucifixion of Christ was made by American artist Andres Serrano. His *Piss Christ* (1987),⁴⁹ which was made in the same year that Witkin created *A Christ*, is a photograph of a plastic crucifix submerged in the artist's own urine and cow's blood. In 1997, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne unsuccessfully filed a suit to prevent the display of this photograph in Australia at the National Gallery of Victoria. Shortly thereafter, several people physically attacked the photograph and tried to remove it, which led to the cancellation of the show.⁵⁰ Similarly, on April 18, 2011, another accident occurred in the exhibition celebrating the collection of art dealer Yvon Lambert, in his contemporary art museum in Paris, where a man hammered and destroyed Serrano's work following an "anti-blasphemy" campaign by French Catholic fundamentalists in the southern city of Avignon.⁵¹ In *Male Desire: The Homoerotic in American Art* (2004), Jonathan Weinberg explains that it is the title

⁴⁹ Patrick T. Murphy, essays by Robert Hobbs, Wendy Steiner & Marcia Tucker, *Andres Serrano, Works 1983–1993*, exhibition catalogue (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1994), p. 63.

⁵⁰ Patrick S. Cheng, *Art, Censorship, and the Scandal of the Cross*, 99 Brattle (blog), January 5, 2011, <http://99brattle.blogspot.ca/2011/01/art-censorship-and-scandal-of-cross.html>.

⁵¹ Boris Horvat. "Piss Christ Art Piece Attacked in France." *CBS News*. April 5, 2013. http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-202_162-20054966.html

of *Piss Christ* that foments the controversy, rather than the artwork itself. He further states that “without the title the viewer would assume that the image was merely a sentimental depiction of Jesus, radiating the yellow glow of spiritual light.”⁵² Another exhibit, of a six-foot-tall chocolate sculpture of a nude, crucified Jesus Christ by Canadian artist Cosimo Cavallaro (2005) was cancelled after outcries by the Catholic League described it as “one of the worst assaults on Christianity sensibilities ever.”⁵³ The anatomically correct sculpture, called *My Sweet Lord*, was scheduled to be shown in a New York City art gallery during the 2007 Holy Week, which created a significant controversy in the media.⁵⁴ As suggested by Elizabeth Burns Coleman in *The Offenses of Blasphemy: Messages In and Through Art*, the responses were indignant because “the focus of the Catholic League [emphasized] the nakedness of Christ, the image was objected to on grounds of obscenity.”⁵⁵ Similarly, S. Brent Plate writes that blasphemy can be attributed to things that are unconventional:

Blasphemy is fundamentally about transgression, about crossing the lines between the sacred and the profane in seemingly improper ways. Blasphemy does not play by the established rules, does not respect the traditions of socially acceptable ways of ritualising, and may even poke

⁵² Jonathan Weinberg. *Male desire: The Homoerotic in American Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004) p. 185.

⁵³ Patrick S. Cheng. *Art, Censorship, and the Scandal of the Cross*, 99 Brattle (blog), January 5, 2011. <http://99brattle.blogspot.ca/2011/01/art-censorship-and-scandal-of-cross.html>

⁵⁴ For more on Cosimo Cavallaro, see cosimocavallaro.com.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Burns Coleman. *The Offenses of Blasphemy: Messages In and Through Art* (Clayton, Australia: Monash University, 2011).

fun at well-respected symbols and myths.⁵⁶

These instances of crucifixion imagery in contemporary art demonstrate a recurrent desire to present the image of the crucifixion as a celebration of faith, while challenging the way we perceive images and their underlying narratives. Although both Serrano and Cavallaro claim to be practising Catholics, both artists assert that their work targets not the Catholic faith but the institution of the Church. As Serrano has pointed out, many of his images deal with “unresolved feelings about [his] Catholic upbringing which help [him] redefine and personalize [his] relation with God.”⁵⁷ He has also stated that the Church is “oppressive, as far as dealing with women, blacks, minorities, gays, lesbians, and anyone else who does not go along with the program.”⁵⁸

We no longer exist in a time where an artist’s images are viewed as absolute truths determined by religious institutions, as the fathers of the Second Council of Nicaea believed in 787. On the contrary, we exist in a time when an image has to be deeply analyzed to discover what the artist is trying to say or achieve. At first glance, however, images of the crucifixion, such as those by Serrano or Cavallaro, and most importantly by Witkin, might be seen and perceived as a mockery of the

⁵⁶ S. Brent Plate, *Blasphemy: Art that Offends* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006), p. 43.

⁵⁷ Lucy R. Lippard. “Andres Serrano: The Spirit and the Letter,” *Art in America* (April 1990), p. 239.

⁵⁸ Christian Walker, Andres Serrano, *Art Papers* (September-October 1990), p. 38.

Catholic faith, and indeed many religious groups believe this to be the case. When these artworks are conventionally understood to be examples of blasphemy, they are discussed in this way in the media, which may be a result of them being viewed as offensive to religious believers.⁵⁹

A close reading of such works will allow the viewer to understand that Serrano and Cavallaro's works are similar to Witkin's tableaux in the sense that the three artists do not refute their Catholic faiths but rather engage in a metatext, a commentary on the way the institution of the Church influences and moulds our self-perception. In the case of Cavallaro and Witkin, both artists create re-enactments of the crucifixion, while Serrano uses the imagery of an existing crucifix object. Nonetheless, the three artists have used the imagery of the crucifixion of Christ. In Witkin's case, he comments on the way the body has been portrayed by the Church – as something sinful – and attempts to change this perception by transforming the perception into something more compelling. Without a thoughtful reading, a piece of artwork's meaning can be lost. However, through a careful examination, the artworks mentioned above can be viewed as a reaffirmation of the Catholic faith. In this sense, Witkin considers his work to be a complement to Serrano's.⁶⁰

Witkin's second work, following the creation of *A Christ*, is *Crucified Horse*

⁵⁹ See Robert Sharp, "Behzti is No Longer Taboo," *The Guardian*, 5 May 2010.

⁶⁰ Joel-Peter Witkin, e-mail to the author, November 1, 2012.

(1999) [fig. 2]. In this case, Witkin has replaced the image of Christ with a white, slaughtered horse; the head has been positioned towards the right side of the composition, with the neck slit open and the legs cut, which was done in order to place the horse in a position of crucifixion. According to the artist, the horse was sick and near death. Two veterinarians euthanized the horse before the photograph was staged.⁶¹ In the image, straps can be seen around the horse's back legs, torso, and upper (or front) legs, which secure the body to the cross. It seems likely that this was the only way to secure the horse to the wooden beams, as opposed to the actual use of nails. If one considers the weight of the horse, suspending it by nails would not have been sturdy enough to produce this image.

The straps add an element of restraint to the work. At the bottom of the image, where the horse's back legs are strapped, right in the bottom centre of the composition, Witkin displays a human skull that he sculpted himself. On the left side of the photograph is a tribute to Giotto di Bondone, an Italian painter (1266/7-1337), who brought back the practice of drawing from life after two hundred years.⁶² In this case, Witkin has carefully duplicated an image by di Bondone by painting a detail on his own canvas in the background of his work.⁶³ This tribute appears on the right side of the work right behind the horse and is of an image taken from a larger work that can

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Giorgio Vasari. *The Lives of the Artists*. Translated with an introduction and notes by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁶³ Eugenia Parry. *Joel-Peter Witkin* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2001).

be found in the Arena Chapel in Pauda, Italy, called *The Last Judgment* (1305–6).⁶⁴ On the right side is a Vietnamese Christian painting of the *Chosen and the Damned* (ca. 19th century); as Eugenia Parry notes, the Vietnamese painting represents heaven, not only because it is placed on the opposite side of the image of hell, but also because the tones are lighter, projecting a feeling of lightness when compared to the darkness (or “badness”) of hell, according to the Catholic faith. However, according to the artist, the principal symbol in this work is the horse, representing that even animals know who God is.⁶⁵ On the bottom of the photograph is also a depiction of Satan’s kingdom.⁶⁶ The representation of Satan’s kingdom in this piece can be seen as a representation of the duality in Catholic faith – namely, heaven and hell. I suggest that this particular notion of hell is the artist’s. In this instance, hell is presented at the bottom right of the work, in darker tones than the rest of the image. This part of the photograph casts hell in the shadows, making it confusing and difficult to distinguish the elements that represent it.

Witkin, who stages his images by duplicating details of other paintings (such as the one by Giotto di Bondone) and mixing them with other elements (like the horse or props such as skulls) to create new meaning, aims for the viewer to invest in what he has portrayed. In the case of the *Crucified Horse*, the image of a

⁶⁴ Giuseppe Basile. *The Arena Chapel and Giotto’s Intellectual and Artistic World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 277.

⁶⁵ Joel-Peter Witkin, e-mail to the author, November 1, 2012.

⁶⁶ Parry, *ibid.* Parry briefly mentions and explains the history behind some of the elements that compose several of Witkin’s artworks (though without detail).

curtain that one might encounter in a theatre is open, and conjures up the idea of the artist opening up his mind and his personal beliefs for the viewer to see, inviting the viewer to enter and complete the tableau. As Witkin has mentioned, “I work very hard to make my work and I empty my heart and soul to manifest my images. I expect the viewer to work just as hard to find out why it was made.”⁶⁷ For Witkin, the Vietnamese painting included in the work symbolizes how the Catholic faith can be seen as universal, in the sense that anyone can practice it anywhere and in that souls have no colour or race.⁶⁸

Like Witkin, other artists have used real animals in their work. One such example is the case of Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch, who both developed the *Orgien-Mysterien Theatre* in the 1960s and represents another example of an artist engaging with crucifixion imagery. Nitsch organized a six-day festival, “The Primeval Ritual” (1964), based on his main philosophy: reality is a stage and all five senses are required from the participants to form a total work of art. Nitsch’s practice moved from performative painting to being the performance (or *Aktion*, the actions that involve the body) itself when, tied to the wall of another artist’s apartment in Vienna as if crucified, blood was poured over him in a performance

⁶⁷ Joel-Peter Witkin. *Heaven or Hell*, at Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Rue de Richelieu, from March 27 to July 1, 2011, questions at the opening by Fanny Ginies, Baptiste Lignel, Mathieu Oui and Bernard Perrine. YouTube video, posted by “HLGfilms,” April 12, 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iYBIQN7vlw>.

⁶⁸ Joel-Peter Witkin, e-mail to the author, November 1, 2012.

piece.⁶⁹ This established the crucifixion as one of the major themes of the *Orgien-Mysterien Theatre*. For these *Aktions*, Nitsch used male and female bodies, blood, canvases, and the carcasses of bulls and sheep. The crucifixion was the main theme for his *Aktions*, in which male and female bodies were tied to crosses to display them in the crucified position. In some cases, animal carcasses were also crucified. In addition, blood from the animals was retained to be poured over the bodies, and was sometimes used as a pigment for the canvases. However, in order to maintain the grotesque effect that fresh blood can convey, Nitsch needed to incorporate other substances, as the natural blood from animals alone could not be sufficient for his purposes. This is why he also mixed tomato juice and pigment with the blood. As he has explained, the result “looked more bloodlike than blood.”⁷⁰

Despite the fact that Nitsch also used the imagery of the crucifixion, his intentions were radically different from those of Witkin. For instance, Nitsch’s purpose was to replace religion with art; as he explained, “to me, art is a kind of priesthood, since traditional religions have lost their spell.”⁷¹ Nitsch also stated that in painting, “we strive for a consequent sacralisation of art and for a thorough

⁶⁹ Hermann Nitsch. *Das Orgien-Mysterien Theater* (Germany: Residenz Verlag, 1990), p.8.

⁷⁰ Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson. *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁷¹ Hermann Nitsch. *Das Orgien-Mysterien Theater* (Germany: Residenz Verlag, 1990), p.10.

spiritualization of existence whereby man becomes the priest of Being.”⁷²

Nitsch’s theatre and use of animals depart from Witkin’s since Nitsch does not practise Christianity. On the contrary, he draws a separation between religion and art, and his use of animals is just a tool for his performances. As he has mentioned, “a lamb is merely a slaughtered, skinned, and disembowelled lamb, nothing else.”⁷³ By contrast, Witkin does not separate religion from art, but instead celebrates his beliefs throughout his artwork. Further, Witkin’s use of animals is a celebration of them and a reaffirmation, as mentioned above, that even animals can recognize God. Along the same lines, Nitsch uses crucifixion imagery as a method to extract the power that the crucifixion of Christ has had, and still carries, within art.

In my third example, Witkin’s *Naked Follow the Naked Christ* (2006) [fig. 3] frames another nude male, though one difficult to identify from the background due to the pale (and racially indecipherable) complexion of the body. The man is presented in what appears to be the position of the crucifixion of Christ, but in this case his arms are not fully extended to each side as they are in many other representations of Christ. Rather, the man’s arms are bent. The man’s feet are also not on top of each other as is typically suggested of the crucifixion; instead, his right foot is set in front of the left. Both his feet show stigmata, as do his ribcage and wrists. The face of the man is

⁷² Idem.

⁷³ Ibid, 190.

covered with a black oval, and two skulls that the artist rented for this image are placed on top of his head. This black oval invites the viewer to reflect on the presence of the nude body and on the future that is suggested by the skulls displayed on top of it—in other words, the skulls represent the certainty of death, commonly known as *vanitas*. The background near the top of the cross is framed by a white rectangle that ends below the figure's knees, and there is a black semicircle on either side of the image, with the one on the left side extending farther down, almost to the bottom of the photograph, beyond the one on the right side. These two black semicircles could be seen as abstract shapes, creating a “V” shape that frames the male body, making it the focal point of the composition. The man's body looks soft and lean, and most importantly, it is hairless. It is important to point out that Witkin was fascinated by the alleged fact that no hair had ever grown on his model's body. When the artist saw this naked, hairless man, he immediately thought of the name for this work. For Witkin, this image means that “we all (humanity) must be ‘nakedly honest,’ humble, and loving in order to follow Him.”⁷⁴

The figure is standing on a black cross, which bears the inscriptions “Nudum Sequi Nudum Christum,” a Latin expression that is translated as “naked follow the naked Christ.” It is necessary to explain here the distinction between “naked” and “nude,” because Witkin plays with the association of the word “naked” and the depiction of a male nude in this piece. In *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Form* (1972),

⁷⁴ Joel-Peter Witkin, e-mail to the author, November 1, 2012.

Kenneth Clark describes the distinction between “the nude” and “the naked” as a cultural attitude predicated on religious and societal perceptions of the body and sexuality.⁷⁵ Clark argues that a classical Greek perspective defines the nude, while the medieval Christian perspective is associated with the naked. While the Greeks recognized the body as an embodiment of sacred energy and form, separate from the individual person, Christians recognized it as the sinful state in which each individual lived. In Witkin’s case, the artwork’s title includes the word “naked,” which, according to Clark, is linked to shame in Christianity and suggests that the body should be covered in order to hide its immorality. But the body is presented uncovered in this work. The body is arguably presented as a male nude, or in other words, as the Greeks saw it, as being sacred. Through the word “naked,” the title itself suggests that Christianity has imposed shame on the body, but Witkin’s presentation challenges the perception that a nude body is profane, instead emphasizing the contrary, that the body is sacred. In this way, just as *A Christ* and *Crucified Horse* re-contextualize Christian imagery, in *Naked Follow the Naked Christ*, Witkin recasts the notion of the naked body as shameful into one that is sacred.

Accordingly, Witkin comments on how the notion of the naked body has changed and how it has been transformed in western society. He shifts the basic ideas that the Catholic faith has maintained for generations by re-enacting scenes of the

⁷⁵ Kenneth Clark. *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

body of Christ through his nude man, suggesting that the idea of a nude body is not sinful but, on the contrary, beautiful.

My fourth and final example, *Crucifix and Tapestry* (2010) [fig. 4], presents in the foreground a representation of the crucifixion, in profile. The body of the man in this image looks as if it has been burned or beaten, because of its dark surface. The man's legs have been amputated and his arms are not fully extended to each side of the cross, but are instead displayed above his head with his hands open. A cord or rope attached to the torso suspends the body and is tied to his arms. The head is facing down toward one side and the cranium looks swollen, as a consequence of being beaten. The man also displays what appears to be an erection. Toward the bottom of the foreground are shadows that resemble rocks that might be present where the crucifixion is taking place, and behind these shadows sits a house or a castle. In the foreground of the image, at the bottom of the crucifixion, symbols similar to those associated with astrology are displayed. I draw attention to this because according to Witkin, this work represents how the hatred of Christ is manifested in the faith's rejectors.⁷⁶ Gustav-Adolf Schoener in "Astrology: Between Religion and the Empirical," explains the relationship between religion and astrology which can be applied here:

Early Christianity rejected astrology because of its association with Paganism and other non-Christian religions. It wasn't until the Middle Ages, with the influence of Aristotelianism, that astrology and science would be

⁷⁶ Joel-Peter Witkin, e-mail to the author, November 1, 2012.

accepted by Christian doctrine and included in the teachings of Christian theologians like Hildegard von Bingen (d. 1179), Meister Eckard (1260–1327), or the Franciscan Roger Bacon (1214–94).⁷⁷

At the top of the photograph, in the background, a dark, cloudy sky is shown. The background depicts a landscape: on the right side of the composition there is a river with three boats, and on the left side is a barren hill surmounted by a castle. Above the castle is a figure that could be an angel, flanked with wings, with their face covered by a rectangular shape on which a pair of eyes is shown. Behind the angel there appears to be a circle that creates the shape of a halo, and the angel holds what seems to be a towel that is about to cover the erect penis. In the middle ground of the image, toward the right side, is the head of the bishop St. Denis in the process of being decapitated, a consequence of committing apostasy.⁷⁸ This image comes from Henri Bellechose's painting *Christ on the Cross with Martyrdom of St. Denis 'The Retable of St. Denis'* (1415), which hangs in the Louvre. On the right side of *Crucifix and Tapestry*, next to the main subject (the deformed body), an oversized fly is displayed. It is important to look at the Christian symbolism of the fly because this will give us a better understanding of what Witkin is trying to achieve here.

According to Louis Charbonneau-Lassay, the blowfly has a dreadful reputation in the symbolism of the ancients, and in Christianity, the blowfly has

⁷⁷ Schoener, *Astrology*, 30.

⁷⁸ According to Gregory of Tours, St. Denis brought the Gospel to Gaul and was the first bishop of Paris, c. 250 AD.

always been regarded as the antithesis of the honeybee, one of God's gifts:

The Middle Ages, and throughout the Christian era, the fly has been considered an emblem of lewdness and disrespect because it 'alights with equal impudence on a king's brow and on the bosom of a queen'. Ancient demonology, the study of demons or beliefs about them, has always placed a blowfly, symbolizing a demon, near the ear of a Christian who is undergoing temptation.⁷⁹

At first glance, the fly hints at the putrefaction of the body that is displayed in the middle of the photograph, with both subjects acting as focal points of the composition. Upon more careful examination, it is clear that the fly is positioned on top of the background. This is evident as the fly creates a shadow. Considering the relationship between the fly and Christian symbolism, it is evident that the main goal of the fly in this composition is to depict not only the decay of the body and to awaken the olfactory sense of decomposition, but also to cast a shadow on the clean and light background of the landscape. This shadow directs the viewer to the dark, cloudy, and turbulent sky. Most importantly, however, the fly presents a counterpart to God. In this case, St. Denis is shown because it is believed that he renounced his Christianity shortly after 250 AD.⁸⁰ This was the main motive behind his decapitation. As I have noted earlier, the fly, the head of St. Denis, and the burned or beaten body together represent the rejection of the Catholic faith, and of Christ in particular. In this way, Witkin shows "what the hatred of Christ

⁷⁹ Louis Charbonneau-Lassay, *The Bestiary of Christ*, 330.

⁸⁰ The Catholic University of America, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1967), p. 765.

looks like.”

From disturbing imagery of the crucifixion to peaceful ones, the four artworks by Witkin are self-reflexive, as they respond to their own contexts and histories. These concern the crucifixion of Christ, which becomes a frame while creating at the same time a paratext. The works also have the power to provoke—which they do, for example, by re-enacting the crucifixion with a nude man, a slaughtered horse, and a distorted body. These works engage with our values and perceptions, generating a metatext. They engage, at first glance, in a mockery of the traditional representation of the crucifixion of Christ, and challenge our values and perceptions. Through an analysis of the image and the artist’s intentions, however, different interpretations can be discerned that foreground the erotic, the sacred and inclusivity. These fresh expressions of meaning, furthermore, capture the different stages involved in the artist’s representation of the crucifixion over more than two decades.

Conclusion

The imagery of the crucifixion of Christ has influenced the artwork of many artists of varying practices. This can be seen in works of performance art, such as the work of Hermann Nitsch, in which the artist pours blood over bodies that have been situated on crosses to simulate the crucifixion of Christ. The imagery appears in works of sculpture as well, as in the work of Cosimo Cavallaro, who produced a life-sized sculpture of a crucified man made of chocolate. In photography, crucifixion imagery has been used by Andres Serrano, who submerged a plastic cross in his own urine and cow's blood, and, of course, in the work of Joel-Peter Witkin. While some of these artists are practising Catholics making comments on their beliefs (Serrano, Cavallaro, Witkin), others (Nitsch) attempt to capture and utilize the power of the imagery for divergent purposes. In both cases, however, their work is seen by religious groups as blasphemous because of the use of crucifixion imagery in unorthodox manners.

Despite the accusation of blasphemy, Witkin's work displays a nuanced and considered relationship to sanctioned crucifixion imagery. In his earliest crucifixion work, *A Christ* (1987), the image of the crucified man is peaceful. The image also becomes a metatext since Witkin presents a male nude in re-enacting the crucifixion of Christ, challenging the perception of the body within the framework of religion and the shame that is typically associated with nudity. By creating this awareness, Witkin updates the perception of the body from one that is sinful (as seen by Christians) to

one that is appealing.

In *Crucified Horse* (1999), the re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ is modified by depicting a slaughtered horse, a dramatic effect in its use of violence. Although the violence is not presented explicitly, it is insinuated in the splayed legs of the horse—the viewer is made to wonder what occurred before this scene. A metatext emerges as we ponder the relationship between God and his animal kingdom.⁸¹

The third work, *Naked Follow the Naked Christ* (2006), is another attempt to re-enact the crucifixion. This time the identity of the subject is hidden, and so too his race, inviting a scrutiny to emerge around the identity of Christ. As with *A Christ*, this re-enactment of the crucifixion moves away from the common representation of the crucifixion, because once again Witkin presents the viewer with a male nude. Again, the artist comments on the perception of the body according to the Church, from one that is sinful, to a body that can be embraced and admired. This conceptualization is carried through the serenity of the image.

Finally, *Crucifix and Tapestry* (2010) presents a distorted male body with an erection. The imagery has a theatrical or even grotesque feeling, with its presentation of a disfigured body. The work becomes a metatext as the artist lends image to what an aversion to Christ might look like.⁸² At first glance this work can be seen as a mockery or as blasphemous of the crucifixion of Christ, because of the re-enactment

⁸¹ Joel-Peter Witkin, e-mail to the author, November 1, 2012.

⁸² Idem.

of the crucifixion and because the male body is presented with an erection. The elements in this work, from the head of St. Denis to the oversized blowfly, symbolize an extreme dislike of Christ that is linked to images of blasphemy in history. In this way, the re-enactment of the crucifixion here can be seen as deliberately confrontational. Bringing focus to the traditional way that, for centuries, the Church and its artists have presented the crucifixion, we might compare Witkin's work to the example of Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1510–15). However, even though Grünewald's re-enactment of Christ shows the physical agony that Christ overcame in the act of crucifixion, the imagery still depicts a covered man and a decaying body, not a lean nude body as in Witkin's work.

Witkin thinks of the crucifixion of Christ as the most important event in all of history and as such has contends that much contemporary art represents the event with ignorance and mockery.⁸³ For Catholics, the crucifixion is the promise of salvation. Witkin believes that even if only one person had been alive on earth during the time of Christ, Christ, through His goodness and love, would have still lived out His passion and His death.⁸⁴

Arguably, Witkin's four works, *A Christ*, *Crucified Horse*, *Naked Follow the Naked Christ*, and *Crucifix and Tapestry*, reflect his passion for the crucifixion of Christ. Nevertheless, he presents a commentary on the ways in which the crucifixion

⁸³ Joel-Peter Witkin, e-mail to the author, November 1, 2012.

⁸⁴ Idem.

has been portrayed for centuries, and makes new statements regarding our perceptions of our corporeal selves. These works also serve as a comment on the representation of the nude male body in Christianity. Without an understanding of the context of these photographs and an analysis of the symbols (such as the fly's representation as the antithesis of Christ) in the four works in question, it would be difficult to discover the true intention and meaning of Witkin's artwork. By simply looking at the formal elements of the works, all could be read as blasphemous, as many critics and religious groups have claimed.⁸⁵ Witkin does not separate religion from art, but instead celebrates his beliefs throughout his artwork. For more than twenty-eight years, Witkin has depicted the crucifixion as a reminder of the love that Christ bestowed upon everyone, regardless of social status and physical appearance. Furthermore, Witkin's depiction of the crucifixion brings this message of Christ's love into a contemporary context that also includes sexuality and a reconceptualization of the body.

A close reading of Witkin's crucifixions is important because it brings to the fore several types of controversies, such as the presentation of the male nude in photography. This is complicated further by the virtual re-enactment of the crucifixion

⁸⁵ I confess that the first time I encountered Witkin's work, I was uncertain of its nature, though I was sure it possessed something meaningful. After a prolonged analysis of his work and through correspondence with the artist, I learned that his work not only spoke to the contemporary condition of humanity, but that it was also created with the same spirit of acceptance that Jesus had for the marginalized and disenfranchised.

of Christ, which contentiously mixes religion and art. Despite the accusations of blasphemy in his use of the male nude and unorthodox crucifixion imagery, Witkin does not aim to undermine the Catholic faith. On the contrary, his intention is to extend it and make it relevant to the contemporary world and his own experience,. His crucifixion works are in conversation with both art history and the politics of representation. Throughout his various versions of the crucifixion there is a constancy in how they express a personal religious symbolism that is deeply rooted in the artist's Catholic beliefs. In this way, Witkin's crucifixions both affirm and update the power of art to convey religious devotion.

Bibliography

- Basile, Giusepp. *The Arena Chapel and Giotto's Intellectual and Artistic World*.
London: Thames and Hudson, 1993.
- Beyst, Stefan. *Hermann Nitsch's Orgien-Mysterien Theater*, September 21, 2012.
<http://d-sites.net/english/nitsch.htm>.
- Burns Coleman, Elizabeth. *The Offenses of Blasphemy: Messages In and Through Art*. Clayton: Monash University, 2011.
- Cantor, Norman F. *The Encyclopedia of The Middle Ages*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1999.
- Clark, Kenneth. *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.
- Charbonneau-Lassay, Louis. *The Bestiary of Christ*. Translated & Abridged by D. M. Dooling. France: Parabola Books, 1991.
- Cheng, Patrick S. *Art, Censorship, and the Scandal of the Cross*. 99 Brattle (blog), January 5, 2011. <http://99brattle.blogspot.ca/2011/01/art-censorship-and-scandal-of-cross.html>.
- . *From Sin to Amazing Grace*. New York: Seabury Books, 2012.
- Davis, Melody D.. *The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography*. Philadelphia: Temple Univeristy Press, 1991.
- Diiorio, Gino. *Apostasy*. New York: Samuel French, 2009.

- Elkins, James. *The Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Elwell, Walter A. and Philip W. Comfort, eds. *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001.
- Foster, Alasdair. *Behold the Man: The Male Nude in Photography*. Edinburgh: Stills Gallery, 1988.
- Fuchs, Rudi. *The Labyrinth*. In Arnulf Rainer, exh. cat., New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1989.
- Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
- Giffords, Gloria Kay. *Mexican Folk Retablos*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974.
- Gowing, Lawrence. *Paintings in the Louvre*. New York: Stewart, Tabori, and Chang, 1987.
- Healy, Patrick. "Decius" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4. New York: Robert Appleton, 1908.
- Larson, Jennifer. *Ancient Greek Cults*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Lippard, Lucy R. "Andres Serrano: The Spirit and the Letter." *Art in America* (April 1990): 238–45.
- Male, Emile. *Religious Art in France*. Princeton: Princeton University Press,

1984.

Marino, Thomas, dir. *Joel-Peter Witkin: An Objective Eye*. Film. 2013.

Muller, Richard A. *Dictionary of Greek and Latin Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985.

Murphy, Patrick T. ed. *Andres Serrano, Works 1983–1993*. Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1994.

Nitsch, Hermann. *Das Orgien-Mysterien Theater*. Residenz Verlag, 1990.

Parry, Eugenia. *Joel-Peter Witkin*. New York: Phaidon Press, 2001.

Pfeifer, Marcuse. *The Male Nude in Photography*. New York: Pfeifer Gallery, 1979.

Rudakoff, Judith. *Trans(per)foming Nina Arsenault*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

Sharp, Robert. “Behzti is No Longer Taboo,” *The Guardian*, 5 May 2010.

Schoener, Gustav-Adolf. “Astrology: Between Religion and the Empirical.”

Translated by Shane Denson. *Esoterica: The Journal IV* (2002): 29–60.

Steinmueller, John E. and Kathryn Sullivan. *Catholic Biblical Encyclopedia*. New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1956.

The Catholic University of America. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 and 7.

- Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1967.
- Urban, Otto M. *Joel-Peter Witkin, Vanitas*. Řevnice, Czech Republic: Arbor Vitae, 2011.
- Vasari, Giorgio. *The Lives of the Artists*. Translated with an introduction and notes by Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Weinberg, Jonathan *Male Desire: The Homoerotic in American Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004.
- Walker, Christian. "Andres Serrano." *Art Papers* (September–October 1990): 38–41.
- Witkin, Joel-Peter. *Gods of Earth and Heaven*. Altadena, CA: Twelvetreestrees Press, 1991.
- . *Harm's Way: Lust & Madness, Murder & Mayhem*. Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 1994.
- . *Joel-Peter Witkin: Forty Photographs*. San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1985.
- . *Masterpieces of Medical Photography: Selections from the Burns Archive*. Introduction by Stanley B Burns, M.D. Pasadena: Twelve Trees Press, 1987.
- . *The Bound House*. Santa Fe: Twin Palms, 1998.

Appendix A:
E-mail Correspondence with the Artist
(October 7, 2012 to March 29, 2013)

Questions:

In a previous interview you mentioned that after creating *The Crucifix* you discovered certain connections or disconnections within yourself and your beliefs. Could you explain those connections/disconnections within yourself and beliefs?

Some scholars, like James Elkins, argue that religion and art have never been apart and that the two have always been hand in hand. I notice that the representation of the crucifixion is a reoccurring element in your work and I am wondering if it is your intention to show that Christianity is still present in contemporary art.

Is the reoccurring image of the crucifixion, in your art, meant to demonstrate the different aspects and interpretations of religion during that particular point in time? For instance, your *Christ* (1987), *Crucified Horse* (1999), *Naked Follow the Naked Christ* (2006) and *Crucifix and Tapestry* (2010) represent the crucifixion in four different times and in four different contexts. Could you explain the inspiration or motive for the production of these particular works?

In your piece, *Crucified Horse* (1999), there is reference to two specific works of art (the Vietnamese Christian painting of the “Chosen and the Damned” and attributes of Giotto) and *Crucifix and Tapestry*. Could you further identify these two pieces and explain the significance for referencing them within your work?

Answers (November 1, 2012):

1. As with my work, I have to make it—that is make the work, take all the risks, make a fool of myself, if need be, in order to “see what I feel.” That is the motivation for all art and for life itself.
2. Crucifixion is present in contemporary art but it is represented in ignorance or mockery. The only contemporary image of the crucifixion I admire is “Piss Christ.” To me the crucifixion is the most important event in all history. By it, the promise of salvation was kept. We are alive and we have hope because of the crucifixion. I depict forms of crucifixion because I must. I believe that even if one person was alive on earth during the life of Christ, Christ would, through His goodness and love, live out His passion and death.
3. When I create any image, it is based on my consciousness at that moment in time.
 - a. “Christ,” 1987. I believe to be “A Christ” which is a print I made with Pace/Editions.

The same model for “Crucifix,” 1987, was posed for this image. The title “A

Christ” means that all of us are children of God. In that image, I particularly like the dog on the left wearing a halo. Meaning that after our Guardian Angels, animals are also our friends and protectors.

b. “Crucified Horse,” 1999. Here I wanted to show that even animals know who God is.

c. “Naked Follow the Naked Christ,” 2006. I was in NYC when I met the man who had written to me to be a possible model—he never had any hair on his body. I had my 4 x 5 Linhof with me with film just in case I would decide to photograph him. The title occurred to me as soon as I met him. I told him my idea. In two days I had rented the skulls, built the cross and hired a calligrapher to make the lettering. This image means that we all must be “nakedly honest,” humble and loving in order to follow Him.

d. “Crucifix and Tapestry,” 2010. The intention of this photograph is to show what hatred of Christ looks like.

4. I chose those two pieces to represent that the Catholic faith is universal. That Souls have no colour or race.

Questions:

In your work, “Crucified Horse,” the horse appears to have been cut open from the neck. I know that some writers have made the mistake of assuming things just by looking at your work, as was the case of “The Kiss” where people thought that

you actually cut open the head of the man, so before assuming anything I wanted to know if the horse was actually open or is it part of your printing technique?

I was wondering if you could identify the image that appears in your work “Crucifix and Tapestry”

Answers (February 11, 2013):

1. The horse was sick and in need of euthanasia. Two veterinarians euthanized him outside of the set. They also opened the horse’s leg areas in order that the horse could be crucified. The skull on the bottom I made for the photograph.
2. The bishop figure for the image “Crucifix and Tapestry” comes from Henri Bellechose's great painting “Retablo of St. Denis,” 1416, which hangs in the Louvre.

Appendix B:

Images



Figure 1. Joel-Peter Witkin, *A Christ*, 1987, 16 x 20 in., black-and-white gelatin silver print. Photo: courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Joel-Peter Witkin, *Crucified Horse*, 1999, 16 x 20 in., black-and-white gelatin silver print. Photo: courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3. Joel-Peter Witkin, *Naked Follow the Naked Christ*, 2006, 16 x 20 in., black-and-white gelatin silver print. Photo: courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4. Joel-Peter Witkin, *Crucifix and Tapestry*, 2010, 16 x 20 in., black-and-white gelatin silver print. Photo: courtesy of the artist.